AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

RECONFIGURING THE ABBASID COURT: THE CASE OF AL-AMĪN

by
JEREMY NICHOLAS RANDALL

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of History and Archaeology
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
January 2013

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

RECONFIGURING THE ABBASID COURT: THE CASE OF AL-AMĪN

by

JEREMY NICHOLAS RANDALL

Approved by:

N. M. El-Cheikh

Dr. Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, Professor — Advisor
Department of History and Archaeology

Dr. Samir Seikaly, Professor — Member of Committee
Department of History and Archaeology

Dr. John Lash Meloy, Professor — Member of Committee
Department of History and Archaeology

Date of thesis defense: January 17, 2013

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THESIS RELEASE FORM

I, Jeremy Nicholas Randall

☐ authorize the American University of Beirut to supply copies of my thesis to libraries or individuals upon request.

☒ do not authorize the American University of Beirut to supply copies of my thesis to libraries or individuals for a period of two years starting with the date of the thesis/dissertation/project defense.

Signature

18/01/2013

Date

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research would have not been possible without my advisor, Professor Nadia Maria El-Cheikh and my committee members, Professor Samir Seikaly and Professor John Meloy.

I would like to thank Professor Nadia Maria El-Cheikh for her help, time, comments, edits, and questions regarding this thesis and all the other work I have done at AUB. Her knowledge on the Abbasid court culture and Abbasid history has been an invaluable resource during the past several years.

I also want to thank Professor Samir Seikaly for his advice throughout the course of my studies at AUB. His insightful edits, revisions, and comments were essential and amazing. His sharp eye has driven me to continue improving my writing, step by step.

I would also like to thank Professor John Meloy for his comments and edits provided throughout the thesis writing process. His input helped tighten certain areas of the thesis and prevented me from getting even more lost in the process of writing this thesis.

I must thank my friends who have helped, guided, comforted me throughout this process. In particular, I want to thank Ghassan Moussawi for his help in editing the thesis with me and providing invaluable advice on the theory based works I consulted. I also want to thank Tylor Brand for his help with several of the chapters.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jeremy Nicholas Randall for Master of Arts
Major: History

Title: Reconfiguring the Abbasid Court: The Case of al-Amīn

The Abbasid court has been sparsely analyzed. In particular, the study of sexuality and gender within court culture has been limited to readings of *adab* and poetry. This thesis analyzes how Abbasid sources depicted al-Amīn's gender identity and his sexual practices and how modern sources present him. Abbasid writers did not classify al-Amīn's sexuality by his partners. Rather, I contend that early Abbasid society understood gender, sex, and sexuality differently from modern designations of him as a homosexual, as they reflect purely Euro-American constructs of a homosexual/ heterosexual binary. In lieu of such previously postulated ideas, I contend that Abbasid writers understood al-Amīn as involved in non-normative sexual practices but these actions did not destabilize his gender identity. Therefore, instead of imposing current interpretations of those categorizations, I analyze depictions of Caliph al-Amīn's gender identity and his sexual practices in the historical works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Jahshiyārī, and al-Mas'ūdī.

Two divergent patterns emerge in the reconfiguring of al-Amin's identity from the twentieth century onwards. On one hand, some modern writers treat al-Amīn and his court as involved in homosexuality. On the other hand, some writers have virtually erased him from the historical record altogether due to his sexual irregularities, while trying to normalize the peculiarities of his reign within a normalized Abbasid culture.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

ABSTRACT vi

Chapter

1. APPROACHING ABBASID SEXUALITIES 1

2. GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE ABBASID ERA AND ITS RECONFIGURATION IN THE PRESENT 7

   2.1. Constructions of Sexuality and Gender in Arab Middle East Historiography 8

   2.2. Abbasid Sex and Gender Construction 14

   2.3. Abbasid Understandings of Sexuality 20

   2.4. The Impossibility of Queer Abbasids in Modern Arab Historiography 24

3. IMAGINING A NON-NORMATIVE AL-AMĪN 31

   3.1. The Morally Decadent Rule of al-Amīn 33

   3.2. Sexual Practices of al-Amīn in Abbasid Historiography 38

   3.3. The Rise of the *Ghulāmiyyāt* and Perverse Sexuality 44

4. INTERPRETING THE ABBASID COURT IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES 49

   4.1. The Abbasid Court as Highly Sexual 49

   4.2. Al-Amīn as a Sexual Individual 53

   4.3. The Role of Nationalism in the Critiques of a Sexualized Past 58

4.4.Diminishing the Presence of al-Amīn…….....61

5. CONCLUSION 65

BIBLIOGRAPHY 69

CHAPTER 1

APPROACHING ABBASID SEXUALITIES

The study of pre-modern sexualities in the Arab Middle East is a growing field of study but rife with Western Orientalist readings. Scholarship on past sexual expressions, whether it be religious, cultural, or political often suffers from assertions of the superiority of Christendom and the "West" over that of Islam and the "East."[1] Orientalists who have long condemned the Arab world for sexual excessiveness now criticize the region for sexual repression.[2] More specifically, Euro-American gay rights movements, in their view of sexuality being a natural identity, have influenced much of the earlier literature and some recent works to posit an anachronistic gay identity that stretches across time and geographies.[3] Since the early 2000s, a number of scholars have documented and challenged the contradictions in Orientalist scholars' views regarding the Arab region. These works on pre-modern Arab sexual identities destabilized the assumption of homosexuality's universality by viewing non-normative sexualities within these cultures not as extensions of modern configurations, but as

[1] Said looks at how the entire superstructure of Orientalism condemns the East as inferior to the

[2] Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2006), 171; Jasbir Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 84/85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 124-125; Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 37.

[3] "The contributions in this collection reveal consistent patterns of Islamic homosexualities that can be traced over the course of centuries" "To say that male homosexuality flourished in Islamic societies would be an overstatement typical of orientalist discourse, but it would be no exaggeration to say that, before the twentieth century, the region of the world with the most visible and diverse homosexualities was not northwestern Europe but northern Africa and southwestern Asia." Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 5-6.

unique ones grounded in their cultural milieus.[4]

Scholars have not studied in depth how Abbasid-era historians understood sexual identities and gender variances or why modern appellations like "homosexual" or "gay" are imprecise designations.[5] The few exceptions include studies relating the sexuality of literary figures like the poet Abū Nuwās and about sexual practices depicted in Abbasid *adab*. Still little has been done on the interplay between Abbasid sources and their modern interpretations.[6] To fill this lacuna, I will analyze the Abbasid narratives pertaining to the Abbasid Caliph al-Amīn (r. 193–8AH/809–13CE) as well as modern sources devoted to him to understand how the latter position Abbasid sources in order to advance a homosexualized or heterosexualized identity upon Abbasid individuals and their environs.[7]

---

[4] Non-normative sexuality will be used throughout this paper to designate sexualities that fall outside the accepted practices of the time. It is a way to avoid using terms like 'gay,' 'homosexual,' or other terms that do not accurately sexual identities or practices from a given time period. Works like *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* ed. Kathyrn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* by Dror Ze'evi, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* by Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* by Afsaneh Najmabadi and *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* by Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpalki all destabilize the view of fixed sexual identities in Middle Eastern history. There are exceptions to this rule, such as Samar Habib's *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, which addresses the constructionist argument by dismissing it and argues for an ahistorical lesbian identity in Arab history. Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 18-22.

[5] An exception to this rule are the works of Everett Rowson. He has published an array of works on sexuality in medieval Islamic societies. Everett Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in *Body Guards*, ed. by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, (London: Routledge, 1991), 52. Everett K. Rowson, "Traffic in Boys: Slavery and Homoerotic Liaisons in Elite 'Abbāsid Society," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11:2 (August 2008):193-204. Everett Rowson, "Gender Irregularity as Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 45-72.

[6] Abū Nuwās has been the subject of several major works in English and Arabic. Some examples are Philip Kennedy's *Abu Nuwas: a Genius of Poetry* and his *The Wine Song in Classical Arabic Poetry: Abu Nuwas and the Literary Tradition*. Major works in Arabic are 'Abd al-Raḥman Ṣidqī's *Abū Nuwās qisṣat ḥayātihi wa shi'rihi* and Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī's *Nafsiyyat Abī Nuwās*.

In this thesis, I analyze how Abbasid sources depicted al-Amīn's gender identity and his sexual practices and how modern sources present him. Abbasid writers did not classify al-Amīn's sexuality by his partners. Rather, I contend that early Abbasid society understood gender, sex, and sexuality differently from modern designations of him as a homosexual, as they reflect purely Euro-American constructs of a homosexual/ heterosexual binary. In lieu of such previously postulated ideas, I contend that Abbasid writers understood al-Amīn as involved in non-normative sexual practices but these actions did not destabilize his gender identity.

Two divergent patterns emerge in the reconfiguring of al-Amin's identity from the twentieth century onwards. On the one hand, some modern writers treat al-Amīn and his court as involved in homosexuality. On the other hand, some writers have virtually erased him from the historical record altogether due to his sexual irregularities, while trying to normalize the peculiarities of his reign within a normalized Abbasid culture.

I utilize three chronicles to analyze al-Amīn's depiction in early Abbasid historiography. Al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* [*History of Prophets and Kings*] provides a detailed account of al-Amīn's reign and eventual fall.[8] I will also be looking at al-Mas'ūdī's (d.345/956) chronicle *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawhar* [*Fields of Gold and Mines of Jewels*] as it contains anecdotes which flesh out al-Amīn as a sexual and 'normal' masculine person. I also analyze al-Jahshiyārī's [d.942] *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa-l-kuttāb* [*Book of Ministers and Writers*], which provides a

---

[7] Michael Cooperson, "al-Amīn, Muḥammad," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Third Edition, ed. by Gudrun Krämer, et al. (Brill Online, 2013).

[8] Abū Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1964), Translation of the section concerning the reign of al-Amīn appears in Al-Ṭabarī, *The War Between Brothers*, trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), xiii. C.E. Bosworth, "al-Ṭabarī, Abū Djarīr b. Yazīd," in *Encylopedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011).

detailed history of court life through its focus on political leaders, officials, and cultural figures.[9] To better understand wider societal perceptions of non-normative sexualities, Qusṭā ibn Lūqā [d. 300/912-913], a Christian doctor and translator from Ba'albak, wrote a medical treatise on non-normative sexual practices.[10] The famed doctor al-Rāzī likewise produced an understudied treatise on the causes and cures of passive male sodomy.[11] Alongside those two works, I also use *Risālat al-qiyān* [*The Epistle of the Singing Girls*] by al-Jāḥiẓ (160-255/776-869).[12] The *Risālat al-qiyān* does not deal extensively with the reign of al-Amīn or non-normative sexualities but the brief interruptions of the text's trajectory provide glimpses of contemporary court attitudes towards sexual non-normativity and deviance.

These sources reflect early Abbasid society's depictions of gender, sex, and sexuality and how these particular gender and sexual categorizations applied to al-Amīn. Even though poetry held pride of place in the Abbasid court, I will not use it unless included within the chronicles due to the problematic relationship between it and wider societal understandings. Khaled el-Rouayheb argues that poetry relied on certain standards of beauty in order for the poems to be accepted by its readers but also

---

[9] Kennedy notes that al-Jahshiyārī's history should be taken with a grain of salt because of his treatment of the first century of the Abbasid Caliphate as little more than court intrigue. As my goal is not to answer whether or not al-Amīn engaged in non-normative sexual acts or not, the historical validity of al-Jahshiyārī's chronicle is less important than his role in framing al-Amīn's persona. Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 217. Muḥammad b. 'Abdūs al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa al-kuttab* (Abu Dhabi: National Library Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage Cultural Foundation, 2009). See Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120.

[10] D.R. Hill, "Ḳusṭā b. Lūḳā," in *Encylopedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011). Paul Sbath, "Le livre de caractères de Qosṭâ Ibn Loûqâ," *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte* 23 (1941), 103-104.

[11] L.E. Goodman, "al-Rāzī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011). Franz Rosenthal, "Ar-Râzî on the Hidden Illness," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 52:1 (1978): 45-60.

[12] Al-Jāḥiz, *The Epistle on singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, trans. Alfred Felix Landon Beeston (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980), 1.

explains that many scholars view poetry as too subjective a category to reconstruct the attitudes of the poets themselves.[13] In his article entitled "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," Everett Rowson analyzed the ways in which *adab*, particularly, the *mujūn* [libertine] poetry style functioned within its own understandings of morality in order to be amusing for its readers. These styles are known for not often coinciding with wider societal understandings of sexual norms because they depicted overtly sexualized relationships.[14] Outside of its cultural framework, poetry can easily be misinterpreted as grounded in reality, so other forms of literatures such as contemporary chronicles and medical treatises are more compelling since they attempt to capture understandings and practices of sexuality that are more faithful to the time.[15] Poetry does have utility in excavating ideas about beauty and desirability but it becomes much harder to discern its application towards specific individuals unless supported by extra information directly commenting upon the poem and the individuals described within it. Therefore, a poem reproduced in a chronicle, while of questionable veracity, can be accepted with less reservation than a freestanding poem because the historian places it within his narrative.

From there, I then analyze several twentieth and twenty-first century sources to demonstrate how recent ideas about gender and sexuality have influenced an understanding of al-Amīn's sexual identity. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid's book, *al-Ḥayat*

---

[13] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 76-80.

[14] "Persons who lived irregular lives," Rowson claimed, "might be tolerated, in varying degrees; but even the most respectable, or indeed sanctimonious, individual with literary ambitions could be expected to compose or reproduce poems and stories describing the most outrageous behavior, and even attributing it to himself." Despite tempering his argument by explaining that *adab* relied on collective understandings of what was transgressive to form the pun, this genre of literature is a poor reporter of facts and general attitudes. Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender," 52.

[15] J. W. Wright Jr, "Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire in Early 'Abbāsid Poetry," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature,* ed. J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 1-2.

al-jinsiyya ʻind al-ʻarab: min al-jāhilīyya ilā awākhir al-qarn al-rābiʻ al-hijrī [*The Sexual Life of Arabs: From the Jāhiliyya to the End of the Fourth Century After Hijra*], has been considered the standard work on sexuality in early Arab societies since its original publication in 1958.[16] In this work, al-Munajjid attempted to uncover the reasons behind the supposed sexualized nature of the Abbasid Caliphate. Ḥabīb Zayyāt's posthumous article published in 1956, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām" [The *Ghulāmiyya Woman in Islam*], analyzed the institution of the *ghulāmiyyāt* [boyish girls] in the Abbasid court. It is important because the article demonstrated how modern understandings of sexuality have been employed to reconfigure the *ghulāmiyyāt* tradition.[17] Finally, I examine two more recent works, Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd's *al-Mutʻa al-maḥẓūra: al-shudhūdh al-jinsī fī tārīkh al-ʻarab* [*Forbidden Pleasure: Deviants in Arab History*] and Ṣaqr Abu Fakhr's *al-Dīn wa-al-dahmā' wa-al-damm: al-ʻarab wa-istiʻsā' al-ḥadātha* [*Religion, Demagogues, and Blood: The Arabs and the Intractability of Modernity*] to see how the modern depictions of Abbasid sexuality becomes increasingly informed by contemporary Euro-American sexual constructs.[18]

[16] Other authors writing on sexuality in Arab speaking countries often cite the work. For instance, ʻAbd al-Ṣamad al-Diyyālmī in *Sūsyūlujiyyat al-jinsāniyya al-ʻarabiyya* [The Sociology of Arab Sexuality] (Beirut: Dar al-ṭalīʻa, 2009), 11. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayāt al-jinsīyya ʻind al-ʻarab: min al-jāhilīyah ilā awākhir al-qarn al-rābiʻ al-hijrī* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-jadīd, 1975), 7.

[17] Ḥabīb Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," *al-Mashriq* (March-April 1956): 153-192.

[18] Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd, *al-Mutʻa al-maḥẓūra: al-shudhūdh al-jinsī fī tārīkh al-islām* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis lil-kutub wa al-nashr, 2002). Ṣaqr abū Fakhr, *al-Dīn wa al-dahmā' wa al-damm: al-ʻarab wa al-istʻṣā' al-ḥadātha* (Beirut: al-mu'assasa al-ʻarabīya lil-dirāsāt wa al-nashr, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE ABBASID ERA AND ITS RECONFIGURATION IN THE PRESENT

The study of sexuality in the West has undergone several paradigmatic shifts in recent decades as reflected by the two dominant schools, the essentialist and the social constructionist. The essentialist school unquestioningly grounds sexual desires, acts, and identities in biology and nature.[1] It was not until the 1960s that sociologists like John Gagnon challenged the essentialist school's assumptions about the naturalness of sexuality. In 1976, Michel Foucault popularized social constructionist theory in historical scholarship with his landmark work, *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault, in the first volume of his series on sexuality, countered the repression hypothesis which contended that the West repressed sexuality from the Victorian era onwards by arguing that the West instead medicalized its understanding of sexuality. In place of the dominant attitudes towards the innateness of categorizations of sexuality, Foucault argued that, "homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."[2] Foucault's argument was that homosexuality was not innate but something that one learned; sodomy, on the other hand, remained an act. Social constructionism views sexuality as a byproduct of society, culture, and history; it

[1] Sigmund Freud regarded sexual orientation as a biological fact with sharp divisions between heterosexual and homosexual and Alfred Kinsey later adapted Freud's theory to create a spectrum of sexual desires and practices that implied a level of fluidity between those previously stark categories. Steven Epstein, "A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality," *Sociological Theory* 12 (1994): 190-1.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.

extends the newly created homosexual identity to the entirety of the individual. The creation of a homosexual identity as the Other to heterosexuality resulted in the erasure of identities that do not correspond to one or the other. The default becomes homosexual for any practice of non-normative sexual practices. Social constructionism created a space where people who committed acts deemed homosexual by modern standards do not need to be necessarily categorized as homosexuals themselves.[3]

2.1 Constructions of Sexuality and Gender in Arab Middle East Historiography

While the ahistorical homosexual has been challenged, most studies on sexualities in the Middle East adhered to the problematic "pre-modern homosexuality" that contends there was an idealized past free of the supposed sexual strictures of the modern Middle East. Works like *Islamic Homosexualities* by Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe from 1997 show little conceptualization of cultural or temporal differences.[4] Murray and Roscoe contend for varying iterations of sexual practices within the designation 'homosexual' and argued that, "The possibilities for expressing homosexual desire, pursuing homosexual relations, adopting 'non-heterosexual' identities, and joining networks of those similarly inclined or employed existed in various times and places in the Islamic world."[5] This effort to depict a localized homosexuality within the region came from European and American men projecting their own sexualized imaginings upon the region.[6]

---

[3] "Historians argued that the very meaning of same-sex behavior has changed throughout history. A lesbian or gay identity is a historical, not a natural, fact." Steven Seidman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (New York: W. W. Norton: 2010), 25.

[4] Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 166.

[5] Murray, *Islamic Homosexualities*, 7.

[6] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 165-166.

Works on sexuality in the Abbasid era are problematic or limited in scope. Often, essentialist thought directs the attitudes towards sexuality in the Abbasid era. Literature, as a means to understand Abbasid sexualities, was the common route taken in analyzing the Abbasid era.[7] Everett Rowson's edited volume from 1997, *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, presented convincing arguments for the idea of a type of non-normative eroticism in Abbasid literature. Nevertheless, a surviving strand of essentialism persists as reflected, for instance, in Samar Habib's recent work, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*. While acknowledging the dominant position of constructionist thought in understandings of sexuality, Habib argued for eternal manifestations of queer female identities. At the root of this disjuncture from current theory is Habib's desire to unearth 'queer woman' within a wider Arab context.[8] Even though Habib used under-utilized sources on female non-normative sexual practices in the monograph, her imposition of an anachronistic lesbian identity dampens the quality of her research because she forces these women to conform to her own designations of lesbianism.[9] By focusing on the existence or lack thereof a homosexual identity, these authors remained unable to articulate the complexities of sexual identities and expressions in early Islamic societies and reflected their contemporary positions on such issues.

Some monographs, like Khaled el-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800,* have managed, however, to destabilize the idea of a

---

[7] Such as, for instance, James Bellamy ,"Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1979), 23-42.

[8] "This text [*Nuzhat al-albab*] reveals that there can be no doubt as to the existence of female homosexuality, *at least* as a category, in the premodern Arabian imagination." Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, 4.

[9] Ruth Roded, review of *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, by Samar Habib. *MELA Notes* 82 (2009): 33-34.

universal homosexual. El-Rouayheb applied the constructionist view to Middle Eastern history in the Ottoman period by stating that, "They [constructionists] claim that the concept of homosexuality (and heterosexuality) was developed in Europe in the late nineteenth century, and that though its meaning may overlap with earlier concepts such as 'sodomite' or 'invert,' it is not, strictly speaking, synonymous with these."[10] By deploying social constructionist thought to sexuality in early Ottoman Syria, el-Rouayheb problematizes the image of an eternal homosexual.[11] Following el-Rouayheb's arguments, I contend that modern conceptions of homosexuality and gay identities cannot be directly applied when analyzing sexual desires, practices, and identities of the past. The application of modern understandings of homosexuality and gay identities risks de-contextualization and simplification and do not accurately reflect historical designations. For example, the people of the early Abbasid era did not use terms like *mithlī* [gay] or *shādh* [deviant] but rather they utilized their own terms such as *lūṭī* [sodomite], *ma'būn* [receptive partner in anal sex], and other words to understand sexual acts and identities within their cultural framework.[12] These words connote and denote different ideas and meanings than current words. Therefore, there are incongruities when words like *mithlī* or *shādh* are used to describe individuals from the Abbasid era.

---

[10] Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 5.

[11] Dror Ze'evi published around the same time a similar work, *Producing Desire*, which tackled the change in sexual discourse on a larger scale across the Ottoman Empire. Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 160.

[12] Massad in *Desiring Arabs* traces the shift in meaning of the word *jins* to eventually connote sexual practices and the incorporation of *shudhūdh* to mean deviance. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 53. Sahar Amer likewise looks at the deployment of various words to describe same-sex activities in the premodern era and the creation of words to conceptualize new ideas related to sexuality. Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (2009): 224.

The changing sexual discourse presented by el-Rouayheb only touched upon the impact of the West upon the region. Joseph Massad has brought Foucauldian ideas on incitement to discourse and Said's *Orientalism* to analyze the trajectory that sexual discourse in the Arab region took from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Massad argued in *Desiring Arabs* that Western discourses of homosexuality and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) movements, which relied on the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality were responsible for the "creation" of subjects that otherwise did not view themselves in that manner. Massad contended that, "by inciting discourses about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary."[13] The creation of a heterosexualized world, while rooted in the present extends to the past. Arab writers reevaluated history like the Abbasid Caliphate of Caliph al-Amīn through a heterosexual and homosexual binary. Massad's argument accounted for the influence of Western thought on Arab understandings of sexuality but he denies agency to non-heterosexual locals by classifying them solely as native informants.[14] Furthermore, at times, he contorted the work of Arab authors to serve his argument.[15]

For the purposes of this thesis, I seek to clarify why I refrain from using certain designations. I will not use "gay" or "homosexual" unless the authors that I cite use such terms. If such terms appear, they represent only one form of the spectrum of

[13] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 383.

[14] Sahar Amer, "Joseph Massad and the Alleged Violence of Human Rights," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (2010): 652-3.

[15] Massad cites Qasim Amīn's *Les Égyptiens* as an example of a local voice resisting European encroachment. He barely mentions Amīn's more famous works such as *The New Woman* and *The Liberation of Women*, both of which counter his argument of Amīn as someone who rejects Western impositions of gender. Massad, 55-56.

identities and constructs that "homosexual" can be understood to mean. Terms like "gay" and "homosexual" erase the cultural and societal differences and denote fixity rather than fluidity because they force sexualities that do not always align with homosexuality and gay to appear when they do. Lionel Cantú's work, *The Sexuality of Migration*, which analyzes sexual identity construction amongst Mexican-American immigrants, is relevant to understanding the limitations of applying those terms to individuals that do not themselves view their actions as complementing "gay," "homosexual," or other such terms. He explains that:

> Because sexual identities are fluid and are shaped by structural and cultural influences, there is no monolithic 'natural' label that can be used to categorize a group of men who engage in homosexual relations and have a variety of identities. Therefore, terms such as 'gay,' 'homosexual,' and even 'MSM' [men who have sex with men] as used within this text denote unstable categories and are adopted for ease of presentation.[16]

As sexual identities and sexualities stem from society and are not rooted within the essence of the person, designations such as "homosexual" and "gay" alongside various other terminologies are anachronistic and reductionist. These sexual categories are not static entities but rather ones that change, appear, and disappear due to societal currents. Additionally, sexual constructs cannot be disentangled from power and ethnicity, which likewise have an influence on identity constructs. [17]

Academic discussions on the pre-modern Arab Middle East now account for the difference of sexuality but the equally unstable categories of sex and gender have yet to be discussed widely. Sex and gender also need to be understood as deriving from

---

[16] Lionel Cantú, *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22.

[17] "Sexuality is understood as a dimension of power that permeates all social relations and institutions… Sexual identities, explicitly 'gay' identities, are linked to capitalist development and urban migration. Yet the effects of globalization are missing from this equation." Cantú, *The Sexuality of Migration*, 37.

culture, history, and society.[18] It becomes possible to understand how gender functioned in the early Abbasid court by destabilizing the universality of Euro-American gender constructs. In the case of the Abbasid era, gender was relegated through a complex hierarchy tied to sex but not entirely dependent on it.

I utilize the theories of Judith Butler to frame sex and gender as social constructions in order to move away from the fixed gender identities placed upon individuals like al-Amīn and his retinue. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler incorporated, challenged, and broke away from the philosophies of Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and others by making sex and gender cultural, rather than biological behavioral phenomenon.[19] Butler claimed that, "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders."[20] Sex and gender are not rooted in the body but from ideas created by society but do not necessarily act in tandem with each other.[21] Once gender is understood as cultural production, it necessitates an inquiry to how Abbasid court society in the third/ninth century viewed gender because it elucidates attitudes towards sexuality and sex. Within the Abbasid court, eunuchs exemplified Butler's view on the discontinuity between sex and gender as they were socially male by sex but their gender allowed them to function

---

[18] In *The Social Construction of Sexuality* Steve Seidman explains that, "The idea that nature has created two distinct, opposing genders – men and women – has been basic to modern Western culture. This notion is promoted in law, science, and popular culture, and it is part of the common beliefs of probably most Americans and Europeans." Seidman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality*, 36.

[19] Butler challenges Simone de Beauvoir's belief in the construction of gender, while believing in the innateness of women as a sex. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12

[20] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.

[21] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 111-112.

in spaces like the harem that were generally closed to males.[22]

In moving away from the essentialist reading of gender, Butler introduces the way performativity sustains gender. Butler argues that gender is constructed via performativity, which she defines as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[23] Gender's nature relies on repetitive performance to unite various actions around a gender identity. People view gender as innate to the individual without realizing that its continued existence depends on signifying various acts as gendered.[24] Utilizing Butler's theory of gender performativity allows for a more accurate portrayal of the intersections of gender, sex, and sexuality in Abbasid historical sources.

2.2 Abbasid Sex and Gender Construction

How the Abbasids understood normativity for sex and gender makes it possible to understand the societal forces that shaped not only those two constructs but also that of sexuality. It remains difficult to fully understand what the peoples of the earliest Islamic era believed in because of the problematic nature of the sources. The earliest sources on the early stages of Islam date to centuries after the fact and scholars perceive them to be more of a commentary on contemporary events than a retelling of the past. Tayeb el-Hibri argues strongly that subsequent dynasties left a heavy imprint upon the

[22] The institution of the harem developed during the Abbasid era and the permissibility of males entering the presence of the Caliph's concubines, wives, and family seemed to become increasingly restricted. Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 160-161.

[23] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

[24] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

narration of the earliest days.[25] It remains difficult to discern the original kernel of the historical event without accruements.[26] The status of women fell to such a level during the Abbasid Caliphate that women, both slave and free, were stripped of power so that the word 'woman' was replaceable with 'slave,' 'object for sexual use,' and other terms that relegated women to the level of objects for male sexual pleasure.[27] Ahmed's argument on the erosion of women's rights under early Islamic dynasties plays a part in the changing attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Increasingly, women came to be viewed as purely sexual objects for men, which likewise codified proper sexuality as a man expressing dominance over a passive woman.

Zubayda, mother of al-Amīn and the only wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd was an exception to the standards of the era for women. Her privileged position allowed her to retain power in the court and to have a voice separate from males. Zubayda, unlike most women of her time, wielded political power and carved out a larger role within the court. Legally speaking, women possessed few rights but they could find ways to gain power. In *Two Queens of Baghdad* by Nabia Abbott explained that:

> Among her [Zubayda's] many slave girls there were said to be a hundred who were expert at chanting the Qur'ān in successive relays of ten so that the hum of their voices issued from her palace all the day long. She was the first to organize units of girls and page boys, the uniformed and mounted *shārīyah*, to do her bidding and run her errands.[28]

---

[25] Tayeb el-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21-22.

[26] Leila Ahmed argues that pre-Islamic Meccan society was a matriarchal system transitioning towards a patriarchal one. Women retained public positions of power during the earliest stages of Islamic society. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 41-47.

[27] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 67.

[28] Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 160.

The retinue of slaves under Zubayda demonstrated that some free women had a higher status than male slaves. The inversion of power structures existed as a remnant of earlier power vested in women and the effects of a society supported by slavery. Lacking traditional power, slaves functioned as property to be bought, sold, and traded and provided women an ability to have economic powers they would not otherwise have had due to their exclusion from other venues for economic power.

The power that the *qiyān* had over men complicates the idea that women of lower statuses had no agency. According to al-Jāḥiẓ, the *qiyān* used their wiles to ensnare and, then, to control men. Al-Jāḥiẓ warned his readers in *Risālat al-qiyān* that, "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 her victims, in order that they may fall into her toils."[29] It was not surprising that the *qiyān* found ways to resist being completely passive objects and to gain more freedom than elite women utilizing the very characteristics that relegated them to a lower societal position to consolidate their power. These women needed policing that kept them in their proper societal place, therefore the Abbasid court made use of a masculine gender that posed no threat to the chastity of slave women: the eunuch.

The Abbasid court, much like its rival Byzantine court, utilized eunuchs as conduits between the public world of men and the closed one of women.[30] Unlike women confined to the harem or men forbidden to enter harems, eunuchs could enter

[29] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle of the Singing Girls*, 31-32.

[30] Nadia Maria el-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48 (2005): 237. Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 164-165.

both as they pleased.[31] Eunuchs had this capability because the modification to their genitalia created a new gender. Al-Masʿūdī emphasized their alterity within the confines of the court by commenting that "The people talked about them and remembered the difference between those with total castration and those that have been ripped and that they are men with women and women with men. This issue though comes from the corrupted words of the speakers."[32] The status of eunuchs became a pertinent issue due to the rigidity of permissible social interactions between the sexes. Al-Masʿūdī's view that eunuchs retained their male sex rather than becoming female implied that early Abbasid society believed sex was static and immutable. In contrast, eunuchs demonstrated that gender was socially constructed. Al-Masʿūdī's words suggested that most of society believed in the flexibility of gender categories.

Gender fluidity in this context was linked to how male gender identity rested on the signification that the beard held, rather than the penis, in the Abbasid case. Al-Masʿūdī explained that "Eunuchs are men despite a lack of the sexual organ… and their inability to grow a beard… to claim that they are women changes the act of the Creator, the Great and the Almighty, because he created them men and not women and male not female."[33] According to al-Masʿūdī, the sex of eunuchs was fixed male at birth. Eunuchs retained their male sex identity despite lacking the two main physical markers of an adult male gender identity alongside having feminized personalities.[34] Castration

[31] David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), 17-19.

[32] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-Jawhar,* ed. Charles Pellat, et al (Beirut: al-Jāmiʿah al Lubnānīyah, 1966), 5:152.

[33] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 5:152.

[34] El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 245.

provided eunuchs a degree of mobility not matched by other genders.[35] The lack of a penis resulted in a different gender categorization much like the beard separated a male youth from an adult male.[36] In viewing the sexual categorization of eunuchs as contentious, it likewise changed the permissibility of sexual relations with them.

Eunuchs could pass as regular males at times despite their gender categorization. Mas'ūdī related a dialogue between the Caliph Mahdi (r.158/775-169/785) and a Bedouin: "'Who am I?' He [the Bedouin] said, 'Yes, I remember that you are one of the eunuchs.'Al-Mahdī said, 'It isn't so.'"[37] As the dialogue continued and the Caliph revealed his identity, the incredulous Bedouin found it easier to believe that Mahdi was a eunuch than a Caliph.[38] The dialogue reinforces the idea that genders in the Abbasid era had ambiguous boundaries. Eunuchs represented a divergence from dominant iterations of masculinity because the signifiers of their gender identity were not always intelligible to people outside the court.

As an idea, manliness entailed several concepts in Abbasid society that distinguished it from other gender variants. The expansive fourth/tenth century *adab* work from al-Andalus, *al-'Iqd al-farīd* [*The Unique Necklace*] by Ibn 'Abd al-Rabbih explained that:

> Rabī'at al-Ra'y said, 'Manliness consists of six traits, three of which are practiced when one lives in a settled society, and three others when one is

[35] The status of eunuchs was a delicate matter that showed some discrepancy with these stratifications. While generally regarded as within a male paradigm, they were at times viewed as approaching the qualities of women more so than men. For further information on this matter, "The Effeminates of Medina" by Everett Rowson provides a detailed assessment of the roles of societally acceptable gender transgressions in early Islamic society. Everett Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111(1991): 671-693.

[36] Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender," 58.

[37] Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:168.

[38] Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:168. H. Kennedy, "Al-Mahdī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011).

> travelling. As for the latter, they are: offering food, having good manners, and showing pleasant companionship; as for the former, they are: reciting the Qur'ān, abiding in mosques, and being graced with sexual chastity.[39]

The construction of masculinity necessitated various acts, in other words a certain performativity, that delineated the way that an adult male should act in society. Caliph al-Amīn fulfilled all those mentioned in the above passage except perhaps the one related to sexual chastity. In explaining manliness as proper actions, Rabī'at al-Ra'y deployed a flexible definition of masculinity. These traits reflected proper societal interactions but failing to meet one of them could potentially destabilize a person's projected masculinity.

The articulation of masculinities during the Abbasid era was filled with variances and shifts but similar significations existed across a spectrum of sources. Nadia el-Cheikh explored conceptions of the ideal husband in her article, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse." The traits that establish proper masculinities were amongst other things: "lineage, money, generosity and piety."[40] The importance of a man's religiosity did not preclude the importance of physical attractiveness. Male beauty was a necessity and a woman could reject those that did not match her aesthetic ideals.[41] This linkage of proper masculinity to piety and beauty made non-normative gender performances reprehensible.

Definitions of masculinities also relied on physical and temperamental signifiers. Al-Rāzī looked at the physical signs of masculinity when he analyzed men who failed to fulfill their masculine roles. Physical traits indicating proper masculinity

---

[39] Ahmad ibn Muḥammad b. 'Abd Rabbih, *Unique Necklace*, trans. Issa J. Boullata (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2009) 126.

[40] Nadia Maria el-Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45:2 (2002): 191.

[41] El-Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," 192.

according to al-Rāzī are: "limbs hard, dry, and large, much hair, a strong pulse and breath, prominent (*ẓuhūr*) joints, thick bones and similar properties peculiar to persons of a hot and dry temper, such as courage, quickness of speech and anger, and the like."[42] These characteristics codified gender normativity for men and failure to fulfill them classified someone as closer to femininity than masculinity. Traits like strength embodied masculinity, while softer characteristics denoted femininity. Yet, a man with feminine traits never fully lost his designation as a male.

2.3 Abbasid Understandings of Sexuality

Al-Jāḥiẓ in *Risālat al-qiyān* delineated acceptable limits of male sexual desire through his analysis of singing girls and the deviation from normative sexual desires. Early Abbasid society viewed sexual relations between an adult male and either his wife or female slave as appropriate venues for sexual expression[43] For same-sex attractions, al-Jāḥiẓ claimed that, "If this passion is felt by a male for a male, it is only derivative from this fundamental carnal instinct. Otherwise, it could not be called passion when the carnal instinct is absent. Furthermore, you do not find passion likely to be fully developed at the first encounter, before association is linked to it, and habit implants it in the heart."[44] Al-Jāḥiẓ argued that male sexual desire arose from instincts that normally drove males towards females who were created for the pleasure of men.[45] Misdirected desire did not necessarily lead to a non-normative sexuality because al-

---

[42] Franz Rosenthal, "Ar-Râzî on the Hidden Illness," 54.

[43] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, 17: "Moreover, noble ladies used to sit and talk to men, and for them to look at each other was neither shameful in Pre-Islam nor illicit in Islam."

[44] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ,* 29.

[45] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, 15. "But of all things subservient to his use, the closest to his spirit and the most akin to his soul is the feminine creature; since she was created for him 'that he might find solace in her', and between him and her were ordained love and sympathy."

Jāḥiẓ argued for the repetition needed to cement the act within the individual. Sexuality, for al-Jāḥiẓ, was a floating construct that did not organize itself in a systematic manner to form an identity.

Qustā ibn Lūqā in his medical treatise, *The Book of Characteristics*, noted that, "For the sexual desires of people; some of them prefer women, others prefer *ghilmān* over women, and others prefer both equally."[46] This appears to be a description of the modern classifications of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality but that is a reductive, anachronistic reading of the text. Ibn Lūqā was rather arguing that men had a range of sexual partners without any semblance of an identity attached to their sexual acts. These sexual inclinations are grouped in a similar manner to people that prefer various types of music.[47] Sex only existed as a source of pleasure, not as the grounding of a person's nature. Furthermore, Ibn Lūqā only briefly accounted for adult males focusing their sexual desire upon a male of equal status. Unequal power relations based on gender allowed an adult male to retain his dominant role over his sexual partner when the other partner was female or *ghulām*.

Men, who deviated from sexual norms like those who enjoyed *ghilmān* and penetration, have certain markers of their irregularity. According to Ibn Lūqā, "Amongst people are those that sexually desire to be penetrated. They are designated as 'penetrated by force' because they are penetrated. One enters this group by enjoying plucking one's beard and by liking to bite one's nails."[48] The kind of man that desired penetration also engaged in acts that displayed an effeminate nature, which indicates

---

[46] Sbath, "Le livre de caractères de Qosṭâ Ibn Loûqâ," 112. *Ghilmān* is the plural of *ghulām* or young boy. Rohi Baalbaki, *al-Mawrid* (Beirut: Dar el-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1995), 803

[47] Sbath, "Le livre de caractères de Qostâ Ibn Loûqâ," 133.

[48] Sbath, "Le livre de caractères de Qosṭâ Ibn Loûqâ," 112.

that gender identity and sexuality, in this case, were interlinked. Eunuchs, due to their gender identity, saw their sexuality limited to a penetrative role.[49] Al-Amīn's depictions did not align with Ibn Lūqā's categorizations, which represented an effort to find the root causes of such inclinations.

In a similar work, al-Rāzī dealt with a more severe aberration from the gender and sexuality norm: the *ma'būn*, who is an adult male who desired to be penetrated.[50] Ibn Lūqā focused mostly on men who maintained their dominant role with the exception of a minor exception but al-Rāzī focuses on men who reject their dominant position in the sexual act. *Ma'būn* attracted far more condemnation because they upset the gender hierarchy through their sexual practices. Al-Rāzī diagnosed a person as suffering from being a *ma'būn* via physical markers around the genitalia and a feminine appearance.[51] Instead of relegating the desire to be a *ma'būn* to an identity, al-Rāzī demonstrated that various same-sex attractions, even at their most transgressive by societal standards were not innate. Rather, it was a cause for medical concern and treatment. The deficiencies in physical masculinity for the *ma'būn* could be rectified according to al-Rāzī and these changes would lead to proper sexual desires.

While same-sex inclined individuals were viewed as pitiable individuals not conforming to gender norms in medical literature, same-sex sexual acts received condemnation across the major religious groups in early Abbasid societies. Scriptural and legal attitudes towards sodomy varied from light punishment to death. Ibn Lūqā wrote that, "They don't know that the punishment in the third book of the Torah

[49] Everett K. Rowson, "Traffic in Boys," 197.

[50] Rosenthal, "Ar-Râzî," 45.

[51] Rosenthal, "Ar-Râzî," 55-56.

[*Leviticus*], is to burn in fire the active and the passive partners together."[52] The severity of Judaic punishment for sodomy carried over to Christian sentiments as both shared *Leviticus* as part of their holy book but the lack of any detailed punishment for sodomy in the Qur'ān left it open to interpretation from the four developing Sunni legal schools.[53] These schools suggested a range of punishments due to the difficulty in designating the exact nature of sodomy as a sexual crime. Moreover, the gender that each person performed in the act changed the type of punishment, if any, which would follow.[54] Furthermore, questions lingered about the possibility of relations with male slaves, the extent that *liwāṭ* [sodomy] could be a subdivision of *zinā* [adultery], and other issues due to the undecided violation that *liwāṭ* entailed.[55] Ibn Lūqā attempted to articulate the complicated relation between gender categorizations and various manifestations of proper sexuality.

A plethora of traditional sayings of the Prophet corroborated injunctions against sodomy in Islamic theology during the Abbasid era in reaction to the ongoing dilemma of the actual punishment for *liwāṭ*. James Bellamy argued that the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth)* in particular warned against a common form of same-sex interactions: that of an adult man penetrating a young beardless man. [56] Such *ḥadīth* and, by extension, Islamic jurisprudence organized laws regarding sexual acts around the various genders

[52] Sbath, "Le livre de caractères de Qosṭâ IbnLoûqâ," 112.

[53] Camilla Adang, "Ibn Ḥazm on Homosexuality. A Case-Study of Ẓāhirī Legal Methodology," *al-Qanṭara* 14(2003): 9. See also Rowson, "Traffic in Boys," 198.

[54] Mohammad Mezziane, "Sodomie et masculinité chez les juristes musulmans du IX^{e} au XI^{e} siècle," *Arabica* 55 (2008): 281-283.

[55] Adang, "Ibn Ḥazm on Homosexuality," 7.

[56] "Some of the hadith, in particular those against sodomy with beardless boys, seem to be in response to the sudden appearance of pederasty as a literary theme in Abbasid poetry." Bellamy, "Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature," 40.

involved rather than the participants' sex categorizations. In these sexual relations, a person with male genitalia could be a beardless youth, a free adult male, a slave, or a eunuch. The *ḥadīth* rarely condemned other same-sex acts but that did not mean they were any less reprehensible. Rather, they were less of a threat to licit sexual relations. *Ḥadīth*s that castigated sodomy did not exist in a vacuum but rather stemmed from various condemnations of lust, which upset societal order. Likewise, the possibility that these *ḥadīth*s originated from backlash in the halls of power cannot be denied. The rise of *ḥadīth*s dealing with same-sex relations was part of the development and articulation of society's attitudes towards sexuality. As time went on, subsequent societies grappled with punishments, sanctioned, and tolerated aspects of sexual acts outside the normative designation.

2.4 The Impossibility of Queer Abbasids in Modern Arab Historiography

The Arab Middle East North Africa region did not exist in a bubble separate from the developments and new ideas originating from elsewhere, but under colonialism, a far larger influx of Western thought permeated society. In the 19th and 20th century, the Arabic speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire began systematic changes in science, politics, and culture in the face of European advances.[57] This new era, the *Nahḍa* [the awakening or Renaissance], saw society incorporate useful aspects of European thought and later writers viewed it as a moment when new ideas transformed the region.[58] At the same time, Europe began medicalizing sexuality and in

[57] Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 263-4. Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West* (London: John Hopkins Press, 1970), 59-60.

[58] Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals*, 27. Rifā'a Rafī' al-Ṭahṭāwī stated that, "So they [Islamic countries] needed Western countries to acquire what they did not know." In *An Imam in Paris*, trans. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 105.

that process, created new identities that did not exist before the 19th century in Europe, such as the homosexual.[59] Those medicalized identities arrived in the Arab world in the guise of scientific understandings but were, in actuality, European constructs.[60] Throughout this process, Arab society engaged with European concepts to create a particular understanding of gender and sexuality that broke away from past norms.

Attitudes towards sexuality began to shift in the early nineteenth century when Ottoman subjects interacted with Europeans to a greater extent. Al-Ṭahṭāwī's *Takhlīs al-ibrīz fī talkhīs bārīz*, a work based on his time in Paris from 1826 to 1831, demonstrates how European mores influenced attitudes towards sex. French poetry, as noted by al-Ṭahṭāwī, lacked a pederastic genre, which he viewed as a shameful form of poetry.[61] His unease reflected the influence of European constructs of gender and sexuality shaping his viewpoints. Pederastic poetry exemplified for Western Orientalists the backwardness of Arabs. Western interpretations of sexual behavior reoriented al-Ṭahṭāwī's understanding of sexuality and gender. Over the ensuing decades, the already passé style of pederastic poetry disappeared and extant poems became questionable material for a forward-looking society.[62] During that time, the words to understand gender and sexuality did not equate fully with equivalents in French and English. The inability to describe with ease the poetry's backwardness necessitated the creation of new words to define how it was backwards. Journals like *al-Muqtaṭaf* disseminated Arabic terminology informed by French and English terms and eventually these permeated across the disciplines. A century after the time of al-Ṭahṭāwī, the Arabic

[59] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 30.

[60] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 53.

[61] Al-Ṭahṭāwī , *An Imam in Paris*, 187.

[62] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 35.

lexicon had incorporated words reflecting Western ideologies. Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Munajjid, as a writer for *al-Muqtaṭaf*, expanded the usage of these terms to analyze the Abbasid past. His work encapsulated many of the trends towards analyzing al-Amīn.

As part of the transformation of understandings about sex and sexuality in the Arab Middle East, the role of new words coined in the twentieth century played a large role. The resignification of *jins* as a word connoting sex and the sexual began in the 1950s. Salāḥ al-dīn al-Munajjid used *jins* and its variants only to connate sexual terms and not ones related to previous definitions of nations and peoples. Al-Munajjid, critiquing the cursory overview that the Arab world received in Western works like *Histoire de la vie sexuelle* [*History of the Sexual Life*] written by Richard Lewinsohn in 1957, sought to rectify this in his work.[63] The response to Richard Lewinsohn demonstrated that the Arab world did not exclude itself from debates surrounding sexuality and its history during the modern period but rather it sought to define itself within their framework. Orientalist scholarship provided a foundation for Arab scholars to interrogate their past and its development but it relied on an unequal distribution of power where the outside European scholar carried greater weight in his analysis of the Abbasid era. Arab writers needed to either confirm or deny the ideas of Western scholars.

The application of Western constructs of gender, sex, and sexuality to the past represented a rupture but most writers did not question the foreign nature of those ideas. Al-Munajjid engaged with those new ideas advanced in recent years as part of the Arabic tradition rather than as an intervention. There was no questioning in *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya* of the universality of those constructs. Al-Munajjid explained that the types of

[63] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 12

sexuality he wrote about happened across varying times and places.[64] The projection of these concepts into the Abbasid period and other times was a way to configure the Arab world as part of a globalized trajectory. Al-Munajjid placed Arab sexualities within a European framework, which flattened differences between the regions. Nevertheless, he also forced the non-normative practices of the Abbasids and others to conform to twentieth century understandings of sexuality.

The grounding of sexuality within a European context was not exclusive to al-Munajjid but part of a wider project of historicizing past sexual practices within a modern framework. Twentieth and twenty-first century writers often treated sexual identities as universal categorizations but they often framed it more to the culture rather than to individuals. The status of sexually non-normative individuals remained tenuous because homosexual, gay, and queer identities, originally conceived in the Euro-American cultural sphere remained foreign to these writers. Gayatri Gopinath, in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, tackled how non-normative sexual identities remain impossible amongst the South Asian community and its diaspora. She defined "impossibility" as, "a way of signaling the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora."[65] The existence of queerness or homosexuality is not denied, but is viewed as a foreign identity. In striving to create a heterosexual identity, non-normative sexualities become impossible considerations for individuals in the diaspora. I extend this construct to the Arab Middle East in which being a "homosexual" implies a sort of failing of being

[64] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 12.

[65] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.

purely Arab.[66] It remains impossible; rather, homosexual and gay are Western identities that do not reflect sexualities expressed in the Arab world. This does not mean that writers always embraced a constructionist viewpoint, but rather that these identities, which were universalist in their writings, appeared in Arabs tainted by outside influences. Individuals, like al-Amīn, who do not fit within the heterosexualized identity propagated by society, remain categorized as outliers in order to avoid destabilizing the heterosexuality of the wider Arab region.

For the Middle East, I argue that "impossibility" relied on universalizing heterosexual coupling to render those outside of it impossible. To pursue the idea of "impossibility" further, Gopinath expanded the theory by delineating the ways in which impossibility sustained itself. Gopinath explained that, "The rendering of queer female diasporic subjectivity as 'impossible' is a very particular ideological structure: it is quite distinct from, but deeply connected to the fetishization of heterosexual female bodies and the subordination of gay male bodies within dominant diasporic and nationalist discourses."[67] This 'impossibility' was not centered solely in the bodies of women but to the 'impossibility' of imagining non-normative sexual practices as more than a symptom of cultural porousness and corruption by outsiders. The wider community projected idealized heterosexual relationships that erased homosexuality, in particular,

[66] A similar idea occurs in Indian nationalism. Gopinath wrote that, "the battle between SALGA and the NFIA that continued throughout the 1990s makes explicit how an Indian immigrant male bourgeoisie (embodied by the NFIA) reconstitutes Hindu nationalist discourse of communal belonging in India by interpellating 'India' as Hindu, patriarchal, middle class, and free of homosexuals." Gopinath, 17. Massad, in *Desiring Arabs*, seems to contend the same point by constantly referring to all self-identified homosexuals or gays in the Middle East as being native informants. Massad wrote on how many Arab scholars, past and present, often attribute homosexual characteristics to Abū Nuwās, while also claiming he is Persian. Massad, "*Desiring Arabs*," 92.

[67] Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 19.

female homosexuality.[68] Males who projected a non-normative identity became a threat to the stability of the constructed heterosexual male and female couple. Same-sex sexual interactions between males were a liability to the community's desire to be distinct from Euro-American societies because female sexuality functioned as an extension of male desire.[69]

In constructing a nationalist identity, nation-states solidified the dominance of heterosexual identities. Nationalism, in its European form, entered the Middle East when colonized states gendered the nation as a woman and later rendered it as familial units.[70] Therefore, heterosexuality became a way of envisaging the nation-state. Lamia Zayzafoon wrote in *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* that, "Hence, if French, German, and British nationalism criminalized homosexuality, it was because homosexuality constituted a challenge to the bourgeois construct of the family… Like European nationalism, Tunisian nationalism is produced from a heterosexual and bourgeois point of view."[71] As an idea, nationalism depended upon an imagined past. Homosexuality problematized that past by making some figures unacceptable. Therefore, the demands of a shared past needed reconciliation with transgressive figures. Modern writers reconciled persons like al-Amīn by limiting their threats to heterosexualized imaginings of the past.

---

[68] Amer brings up the erasure of female non-normative sexualities in the modern period in her article on medieval sexualities. Amer, "Medieval-Arab Lesbians," 233.

[69] "The implication is that if sex between men occurs in the Muslim and Arab worlds, it is a foreign vice the West has exported to infect and undermine Middle Eastern culture." Joseph A. Boone, "Modernist Re-Orientations: Imagining Homoerotic Desire in the 'Nearly' Middle East," *Modernism/Modernity* 17 (2010): 564.

[70] Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

[71] Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005), 107.

The designations of heterosexual and homosexual remain a modern construct rooted in Euro-American societies. Recent writers in the Arab Middle East continue to support the notion of two distinct sexual identities reigning triumphant over dissonant modes of understanding sexuality. This chapter sketched out the creation of this sexual binary and how it came to influence scholarship. From there, a brief look at how the Abbasids viewed sexuality places Caliph al-Amīn within a proper framework rather than an anachronistic viewpoint. The deployment of universalized identities provides a way to see how al-Amīn and his retinue face scrutiny in writings from the Arab world. Abbasid historians viewed non-normative sexualities as part of wider society but modern writers engaged with these works to create a heterosexual court with only occasional and aberrant appearances of homosexuality

CHAPTER THREE

IMAGINING A NON-NORMATIVE AL-AMĪN

Al-Amīn ruled over a resplendent court in a period of cultural and political transition. During the period of his rule, various gendered castes such as *jawārī* [slave women], *qiyān* [singing girls], *ghulāmiyyāt* [boyish women], eunuchs, and *ghilmān* [young men] gained prominence. The gender identities of individuals within these groups were contentious, specifically in relation to questions about the permissibility of sexual relations with them, bearing in mind that court society did not seriously contest their sex categorizations. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which the histories of al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, and al-Jahshiyārī used and relied on gender and sexuality to typecast Caliph al-Amīn as an 'ineffectual' ruler. These works incorporate material about the reign of al-Amīn and display some of the narrative styles that dominated later works.[1] In addition, these historians used and focused on the gender and sex categories of his partners in order to critique him.

Al-Amin's reign, which lasted only several years until the civil war (195/810-198-813) between him and his brother al-Ma'mūn (r. 198/813-218/833), left Baghdad in ruins and the caliphal position tarnished.[2] The major memory of al-Amīn's reign in Abbasid histories was the civil war that led to his downfall. His downfall is considered a dramatic event that became central to the account of his reign in Abbasid

[1] The fourth major work from around the same time is one by al-Ya'qūbī but I found little on the reign of al-Amīn that is useful for this survey.

[2] Michael Cooperson, "al-Amīn, Muḥammad." Tayeb el-Hibri, "The Regicide of the Caliph al-Amīn and the Challenge of Representation in Medieval Islamic Historiography," Arabica 42 (1995): 335. Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

historiography.[3] Abbasid historians showed reticence to call him Caliph and instead, used his given name Muḥammad or the title "*al-makhlū'*" [the Deposed].[4] Abbasid historians depicted al-Amīn as an unjust and immoral ruler in order to justify his downfall and extol the successful reign of his successor al-Ma'mūn.[5] No historian ever supported al-Amīn over his brother, despite the suggestion of a concealed sense of pity for al-Amīn within some of these histories.[6] The condemnation of al-Amīn was starker because he appeared weaker in every respect compared to his father, the celebrated Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170/786-193/809).[7] For example, a prominent character flaw that appeared in the works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī was al-Amīn's non-normative sexual proclivities. Abbasid historians contrasted al-Amīn's sexual non-normativity with his father's and brother's practice of what they regarded as proper sexual roles.

One of the primary ways by which the Abbasid historians marked al-Amīn as different from his father and brother was his perceived degeneracy. Unlike his son, Hārūn al-Rashīd was an emblem of piety and just rule, a caliph who properly carried out his role. His reign functioned as the swan song of the idealized Rashidūn era.[8] Hārūn al-Rashīd's court was replete with material pleasures, but his personal piety preserved the purity of the caliphal office. Al-Ma'mūn, while not reaching his father's level of piety,

---

[3] El-Hibri, "Regicide of the Caliph al-Amīn," 335.

[4] El-Hibri, "Regicide," 364. Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans*, 130.

[5] Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 130.

[6] El-Hibri, "Regicide," 335. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 73.

[7] Mas'ūdī showed praise for Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn but found al-Amīn's attempts to change succession hilarious. Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albay: State University of New York Press, 1975), 132, 134.

[8] El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 21-24.

successfully maintained the moral standing of the Caliphate.[9] The controversy of the *mihna* [a religious inquisition] instigated by al-Ma'mūn did not dominate the history of his reign until later on.[10] The subtext seems to imply that al-Amīn's lack of morality merited his downfall.

3.1 The Morally Decadent Rule of al-Amīn

For contemporary historians, al-Amīn's inclination towards hedonism was considered or depicted as one of his many weaknesses. His actions, as depicted in the histories, went against the attributes traditionally linked to masculinity in *adab* literature.[11] Al-Amīn's incapacity to fulfill his role as Caliph likewise extended to his choice of squandering state money on personal diversions instead of maintaining the support of the elites and troops with sufficient salaries. Al-Ṭabarī construed al-Amīn as unfit to rule when he recorded the words of a minor figure called Ḥumayd who said that, "When Muḥammad [al-Amīn] became ruler, he sent out to all the countries asking for entertainers and bringing them to him and paying them salaries. He competed in purchasing fast brown-colored horses."[12] Kingship was predicated on cultivating alliances with elites and performing religious duties; however, al-Amīn did not fulfill them and instead chose a life of decadence. Al-Amīn's frivolity led him to exclude himself from taking counsel from traditional members of the elite.[13] In addition, his dereliction of caliphal duties turned the very people invested in stability against him.

---

[9] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 11:774.

[10] El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 98-99.

[11] El-Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," 191-192.

[12] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk,* 11:951.

During his reign, al-Amīn linked himself with people considered to be of ill repute, which implied that he sought pleasure over piety. For example, one of the most important figures at al-Amin's court was his boon-companion, the celebrated poet Abū Nuwās, a poet of Arabic and Persian heritage, who represented the ethnic and cultural mixture of the era.[14] Abū Nuwās reflected the urbane culture of the Abbasid court, much like Baghdad represented the eastward tilt of the Abbasid Caliphate. The tensions between religious and secular cultures manifested themselves in the repeated arrests and releases of Abū Nuwās by various Caliphs.[15] Abū Nuwās appears to have been sexually attracted to a female slave named Janān in his youth, in fact he was more attracted to male youths.[16] The histories depicted Abū Nuwās as a foil to the less resolute al-Amīn.

Al-Jahshiyārī alluded to al-Amīn's moral weakness many times; his pardon of Abū Nuwās was interpreted as a failure on al-Amīn's part. Al-Jahshiyārī described how the camaraderie between al-Amīn and Abū Nuwās continued even when the latter had been imprisoned. This was made clear when he wrote that, "He [al-Amīn] ordered him to swear not to drink nor to corrupt. He did so and he [al-Amīn] released him."[17] Abū Nuwās violated his oath as he continued to produce his famed decadent poetry. In addition, al-Jahshiyārī depicted al-Amīn as a leader who bent the moral precepts of his office. By forgiving Abū Nuwās' public transgressions, al-Amīn brought his own morals into question alongside the appearance of condemning such acts. In addition,

---

[13] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk,* 11:951.

[14] Philip Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas*, 2-3.

[15] Philip Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas,* 23.

[16] Philip Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas*, 7-9.

[17] Al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā'*, 417.

unlike his father, as he was depicted in Abbasid histories, al-Amīn did not relegate morally transgressive pleasures to the private sphere.[18]

Al-Amīn's warm relationship with Abū Nuwās did conform to the proper behavioral protocol associated with a caliph. Their continued relationship demonstrated that al-Amīn had more interest in pleasure than in piety. Al-Jahshiyārī wrote that, "Abū Nuwās was forgiven by Muḥammad and he favored him [Abū Nuwās.]"[19] Al-Jahshiyārī described how al-Amīn kept Abū Nuwās in his retinue despite the poet's moral failings. Al-Amīn as Caliph did not have the freedom to be morally weak due to the religious nature of his office. In contrast to his father who jailed the poet when he was Caliph, al-Amīn was made to appear morally inferior by the act of releasing him.[20] Clearly, the inclusion of Abū Nuwās within al-Jahshiyārī's narrative was to highlight al-Amīn's inability to uphold the religious precepts of his office.

Much like al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī, al-Mas'ūdī focused on al-Amīn's proclivity for pleasure. He related a series of Zubayda's dreams from before the birth of al-Amīn in which ghosts came to foretell her son's unfortunate life and his misdirected desires.[21] For example, one ghost said that, "A king of pleasure, great destruction, many disputes, and little fairness."[22] In the final dream, another ghost described the reign of al-Amīn thus: "His speech discounted, his battles lost, and his desires forbidden. He is

[18] Al-Jāḥiẓ spoke of the distinction between private and public acts to the extent that one could be a heretic, but as long as one was outwardly a believer it was ok. Al-Amīn, in this case, did not fulfill that role. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle of the Singing Girls*, 26-27.

[19] Al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā'*, 415.

[20] Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas*, 23-24.

[21] These series of dreams happened three times and in each one three ghosts appeared before Zubayda. The quotes selected here are the most relevant for my analysis. The other ghosts and their appearances were similar in tone to those selected above. Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:262.

[22] Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:262.

miserable and preoccupied."[23] The ghost stories as related by al-Masʿūdī, were a barely concealed means of expressing the historian's displeasure towards al-Amīn's frivolity. In spite of his condemnation of al-Amīn's love of pleasure, it seems that al-Masʿūdī avoided directly mentioning al-Amīn's sexual desires. The overall critique here was al-Amīn's inconsistency and untrustworthiness rather than his non-normative sexual predilections. Al-Masʿūdī alluded to al-Amīn's non-normative sexual practices by merely describing them as "forbidden," the focus on al-Amīn's inability to rule was, nevertheless, much more delineated. These dreams framed the reign of al-Amīn as one doomed to failure by foretelling the flaws that would overwhelm the future Caliph.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī who critiqued al-Amīn for his non-normative sexual inclinations, al-Masʿūdī highlighted al Amīn's masculinity. His representation of al-Amīn as masculine was in stark contrast to the effeminacy usually attributed to individuals who engaged in non-normative sexual acts. Al-Amīn's putative bravery and his strength were regarded as a reflection of his masculinity, which also displayed some of the rashness that proved to be his downfall. For example, al-Masʿūdī recorded al-Amīn as masculine, by using the example of his courage and strength when he killed a lion by ripping out its organs.[24] His actions contrasted with that of his courtiers who cowered in fear. This particular depiction of al-Amīn implied that despite his contravention of certain gender practices, al-Amīn was nevertheless a whole 'man'. Thus, al-Masʿūdī could emphasize the masculine nature of al-Amīn by stating that, "Muḥammad [al-Amīn] was in the end strong, intense, courageous, glorious, and handsome; yet he was handicapped in judgment, weak in planning, and not mindful of

[23] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:262.

[24] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:269.

his position."[25] Al-Masʿūdī tempered his praise of al-Amīn's masculinity by insinuating that al-Amīn lacked self-control. The suggestion that al-Amīn had issues with judgment did not directly address his sexual transgressions. Al-Amīn's interest in pleasure did figure as part of his general dereliction of his duties as head of state. Al-Masʿūdī, however, never explicitly criticized al-Amīn for his sexual tendencies within *Murūj al-dhahab*, although his ousting was construed as being in part at least, the product of stark lack of judgment.

The idea that al-Amīn consorted with the wrong kinds of people also appeared in al-Masʿūdī's work. Instead of gaining support from traditional elites, al-Amīn found backing from libertines. The network of allies that al-Amīn had in his final days gave more credence to the idea that he was immoral. This was demonstrated when al-Masʿūdī mentioned that the famed decadent poet Ḥusayn b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk composed poems saluting al-Amīn. This poet, a friend of Abū Nuwās, supported al-Amīn for some time after the rise of al-Ma'mūn.[26] In the final days of al-Amīn's reign, Ḥusayn b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk proclaimed that, "Trust in God, king, for God will provide patience and assistance in all things. He will grant us victory and aid."[27] As argued by al-Masʿūdī in *Murūj al-dhahab*, al-Amīn's relations with miscreants during the final days of his caliphate represented the culmination of his trajectory as a Caliph who was given over to pleasure and decadence. Employing Ḥusayn was used by al-Masʿūdī to imply that only the perverse supported al-Amīn's reign not virtuous people.

---

[25] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:268-269.

[26] Charles Pellat, "(al-)Ḥussayn b, al-Ḍaḥḥāk" in *Encylopaedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011).

[27] Al-Maʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:282.

3.2 Sexual Practices of al-Amīn in Abbasid Historiography

In order to supply a moral excuse for the coup d'état that would complement their depiction of al-Amīn as unfit to rule, Abbasid historians emphasized his poor choices specifically, as manifested in his sexual tendencies. In contrast to al-Masʿūdī who attacked al-Amīn's circle of friends and acquaintances as immoral, al-Ṭabarī attacked al-Amīn's sexual proclivities in a more direct manner. Al-Ṭabarī recounted that, "Ḥamīd bin Saʿīd said that when Muḥammad became king and al-Ma'mūn wrote to him in support, he purchased eunuchs, at much cost. He spent day and night with them, eating and drinking with them... He named one group *al-Jarādiyya* and the other, Abyssinians, *al-Ghurābiyya*."[28] Similar hierarchies existed for slave women within the court but al-Ṭabarī stressed al-Amīn's sexual irregularity. The practice appears irregular because al-Ṭabarī found it noteworthy to record the groupings. Such interactions suggested that al-Amīn neglected his role as Caliph and had excessive interest in eunuchs.

In his history, al-Ṭabarī argued further that al-Amīn broke from established norms by removing women from his court after he became Caliph. Al-Ṭabarī wrote that, "He refused both free women and slave women and they were sent away."[29] The removal of women from the court occurred around the same time al-Amīn was dallying with *ghilmān*. Those interactions implied that he was having sexual relations with males rather than females.[30] According to Abbasid conceptualizations of sexual practices, such

[28] The choice of names for the two groups of eunuchs was a racial one. The first group referred to eunuchs of Slavic origins and the latter were of African origin. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 210-211. Al-Ṭabarī, *The War Between Brothers*, 225. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 11:950.

[29] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 11:951.

actions were less reprehensible than other possible sexual practices with other males because al-Amīn maintained his active and masculine role. Even though the text suggests that al-Amīn lost interest in female sex partners, he did not forfeit his dominant adult male position.[31] Al-Ṭabarī's text, in effect, raised questions about al-Amīn's incapacity for moral judgment.

In addition, al-Ṭabarī linked al-Amīn's sexual irregularity with his inability to act as ruler. The poem that al-Ṭabarī cited intermingled lines proclaiming the loss of the Caliphate and transgressive sexual acts. Such additions, in all probability, were included as evidence of al-Amīn's misrule.[32] However, it was al-Amīn's vizier who received the harshest criticism in al-Ṭabarī's work because he committed many more transgressive sexual acts. Al-Ṭabarī quoted a poet from Baghdad named ʻAlī bin ʻĪsā who said that, "The caliph's active homosexuality (*liwāṭ*) is a marvel, even more marvelous than it is the vizier's passive homosexuality (*ḥulāq*). One of them buggers; the other gets buggered: such, by my life, is the difference of the cases."[33] The description of both acts as "amazing" delineated that same-sex actions, whether active or passive, were outside accepted sexual practices. Yet, the passive role was more condemned than the active one. The poem shamed al-Amīn's aide more than the Caliph probably to rescue some residual dignity of the Caliph and his throne.[34]

---

[30] Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 130.

[31] Abbasid conceptualizations of sexuality treated the acts of a male who was the receptive partner as a far more serious violation of sexual mores than the acts of one who was the active one. See the earlier discussion on Ibn Lūqā and al-Rāzī.

[32] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 11:804.

[33] Al-Ṭabarī, *The War Between Brothers*, 58.

[34] The reign of al-Amīn and his subsequent regicide casted a long shadow on Islamic historiography during the Abbasid era. The overall tone of histories from the era depicted a negative image of al-Amīn. El-Hibri, "Regicide," 337-340.

Al-Amīn's inability to uphold established gender and sexual norms provided ample fodder for al-Ṭabarī. If true, the need to condemn his actions became obligatory because the public knew of al-Amīn's acts. Al-Ṭabarī stated that, "If only the two [al-Amīn and Faḍl, the vizier] would make use of each other, they could manage to keep the affair quiet. But one of them plunged into [the eunuch] Kawthar, and being covered by donkeys did not satiate the other."[35] The poet accused al-Amīn of violating sexual mores but the poem implied that sexual acts only mattered if they became public knowledge. Al-Amīn did retain the more masculine role, which preserved some of the Caliph's honor when compared to the vizier. Interestingly, the poem suggested that al-Amīn and Faḍl could have engaged in sexual relations with one another as a means to avoid knowledge of such acts becoming public and by extension open to condemnation.

The poem that appeared in the history of al-Ṭabarī was also found in al-Jahshiyārī's work. In the latter, it took on a more strident tone reflecting the worsening of al-Amīn's image. Al-Jahshiyārī condemned al-Amīn so much that it appeared hyperbolic. He recounted that, "The Caliphate is lost to the cheating of the vizier and the foolishness of the prince and the ignorance of the advisor. Bakr the advisor and the vizier Faḍl both want the doom of the prince and immorality."[36] The poem retained the same opening lines, however, minor changes in word choice reflected how al-Jahshiyārī wanted to delegitimize further al-Amīn by including stronger language. Al-Amīn's sexual practices figured as part of the weakness of his rule thus rendering him even more immoral. After the same opening lines decrying the fall of the Caliphate, al-Jahshiyārī denounced al-Amīn in far stronger terms than al-Ṭabarī. Al-Jahshiyārī

[35] The sense of this translation implies that al-Amīn maintained his dominant position in the sexual act with Kawthar, while Faḍl preferred to take the submissive position. Al-Ṭabarī, *The War Between Brothers*, 58.

[36] Al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā'*, 412

proclaimed that, "Women of conscience are repulsed by the sodomy of the strange Caliph and more surprising is the prostitution of the vizier."[37] This verse compared the vizier to people like the *qiyān* and slaves boys who sometimes engaged in prostitution.[38] Al-Jahshiyārī's claims that al-Amīn practiced *liwāṭ* and made women wary of him and therefore, made his moral degeneracy more obvious. Despite the poem's calumny, al-Jahshiyārī never recounted a situation in which al-Amīn practiced *liwāṭ* again. It seems probable that al-Jahshiyārī wanted to highlight such misconduct by the Caliph and his vizier to justify al-Ma'mūn's seizure of power.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī, Al-Mas'ūdī implied that al-Amīn's love for a slave girl was a catalyst for his eventual downfall even though it did not contravene appropriate sexual practices. Instead of shaming al-Amīn for non-normative sexual acts, al-Mas'ūdī targeted al-Amīn for his normative sexual tendencies that led to bad decisions. After his beloved concubine Naẓm died, al-Amīn felt extensive grief. Al-Mas'ūdī wrote that, "Al-Amīn was in awe of Naẓm, the mother of his son who was called 'The Speaker of the Truth' and he wanted to end his covenant with al-Ma'mūn and have his son succeed him."[39] Al-Amīn's grief over the death of Naẓm culminated in al-Amīn proclaiming Mūsā, not al-Ma'mūn, the heir apparent. This change in the caliphal order of succession was a *casus belli* for al-Ma'mūn against al-Amīn over the caliphal throne.[40] Yet, the feelings that al-Mas'ūdī attributed to al-Amīn betrayed a peculiarity of al-Amīn. The choice of words used here was not any of the usual words

[37] Al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā'*, 412

[38] Rowson, "Traffic in Boys," 195.

[39] Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:268.

[40] El-Hibri, *Reinterpeting Islamic Historiography*, 207.

for love, but rather, *mu'jibān*, implying a state of wonder, joy, or admiration.[41] If al-Mas'ūdī is correct, al-Amīn was in love with his concubine to the extent that he violated the order of succession. The love al-Amīn had for Naẓm paralleled the passionate love that al-Jāḥiẓ attributed to the *qiyān*.[42] According to al-Jāḥiẓ, such love made men sick physically and mentally.[43]

Following the death of Naẓm, al-Mas'ūdī argued that al-Amīn engaged in politically transgressive acts such as violating the order of succession. However, unlike the claims of al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī, al-Mas'ūdī claimed that al-Amīn did not completely reject normative sexual practices. It is important to note that after al-Amīn's death, Lubāba, one of his former wives, made a brief appearance in *Murūj al-dhahab* where al-Mas'ūdī recorded her lament for a marriage that was never consummated. He quotes her saying "I cry for the knight who made me a widow before my wedding night.'"[44] Al-Mas'ūdī raised two important points here. Firstly, al-Amīn maintained propriety and engaged in socially normative protocol by having a wife. Secondly, the anecdote made it known that his marriage was never consummated. Even though this could be relegated to the fact that al-Amīn was betrothed to Lubāba too late to consummate the marriage, another reading is possible. The possibility that al-Amīn chose not to consummate the marriage, could be thought of as an indirect way for al-Mas'ūdī to imply that al-Amīn had other sexual inclinations. Earlier historians like al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī did not include Lubāba, which could mean that al-Mas'ūdī included her as an attempt to normalize al-Amīn. Lubāba, the former wife illustrates

[41] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874).

[42] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, 30-31.

[43] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, 27-29.

[44] Al-Ma'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:297.

how al-Amīn maintained normative practices and how outside forces dashed his attempts at normalcy. Her inclusion hinted at al-Masʿūdī's attempt to shift critiques of al-Amīn away from earlier accusations of sexual non-normalcy.

Al-Masʿūdī quoted the same derogatory poem that al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī included but he edited the language directed towards the caliph and vizier. Interestingly enough, al-Masʿūdī did not include the sexual acts found in other versions nor made mention of *liwāṭ* in the poem. Rather, al-Masʿūdī reported in plainer language that the caliph's acts were weird [*uʿjūba*] and those of his vizier were weirder [*aʿjab*] still.[45]Al-Masʿūdī's main complaint in the poem was the placement of Mūsā as next in line to the throne, rather than al-Amīn's breaking of sexual norms.[46] Al-Masʿūdī's rendition of the poem downplayed the sexual non-normative practices seen in other variants. Instead, he focused on how al-Amīn broke the covenant with his brother by selecting Mūsā as the heir apparent. This poem aligns with al-Masʿūdī's tendency to stress the poor decision-making of al-Amīn. Al-Masʿūdī's rendition of the poem continues his theme of al-Amīn acting rashly out of normative love for a woman. However, even here al-Amin's behavior was transgressive since the implication is that his love for his concubine was excessive.

As argued above, al-Amīn's sexual inclinations were problematic for historians; in contrast, Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Maʾmūn practiced proper sexual attractions. Their normative practices were used as a means to stress the transgressive nature of al-Amīn's sexual practices. Abbot explained that Hārūn al-Rashīd had over two hundred slave

---

[45] Lane defines *uʿjūba* as "a thing at which one wonders," but gives the similar *ʿajab* as "strange, extraordinary, or improbable. Likewise, *aʿjab* means "more, and most, wonderful or admirable or pleasing" but can also be used in a negative sense. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon.* An English translation of *Murūj al-dhahab* chose to translate *uʿjūba* as peculiar and *ʿajab* as even stranger. Mas'udi, *The Meadows of Gold*, 146. Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:271-272.

[46] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 271.

women and numerous concubines that bore him children.[47] While both caliphs engaged in frivolity, Hārūn al-Rashīd's reign cemented his reputation as a great leader with normal sexual desires. Likewise, al-Amīn's sexual practices were also contrasted with Ma'mūn's normative sexual desires. Al-Jāḥiẓ recounted that:

> Ma'mūn once looked at Sukkar and said, "Are you free or bond?"... The latter [Zubayda] realized what Ma'mūn intended, and wrote back, "You are free." Thereupon he married her [Sukkar], giving her a dowry of ten thousand dirhams, and took her off in private straight away and lay with her; then he let her go and ordered the money to be paid to her.[48]

This anecdote replicated standard sex roles of the era. In this case, al-Ma'mūn saw a woman he desired and acquired her. The role of the slave woman as property fits with standard practices of the era. Not surprisingly, there was no condemnation of al-Ma'mūn's sexual appetite. His actions were seen as natural and did not contravene any moral boundaries except that he needed to receive permission from Sukkar's owner, Zubayda, before pursuing her. In exercising his power over lower status females, al-Ma'mūn exemplified standard sexual practices. The sexual normativity of Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn served as a contrast to the sexual irregularities of al-Amīn.

3.3 The Rise of the Ghulāmiyyāt and Perverse Sexuality

Although al-Mas'ūdī never explicitly claimed that al-Amīn engaged in non-normative sexual practices, he did detail the bizarre tastes of the young caliph. The most famous story about al-Amīn's sexual predilections concerned the *ghulāmiyyāt*, young slave women dressed in the style of boys.[49] Al-Mas'ūdī related:

---

[47] Abbot, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 138.

[48] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ*, 21-22.

[49] The translation of al-Mas'ūdī's work noted that the fashion Zubayda copied came from the style of boys. Mas'udi, *The Meadows of Gold*, 391.

> When it [the throne] reached her son, leader of the Believers, he [al-Amīn] showed preference for the eunuchs and elevated them in their position like Kawthar and others amongst the eunuchs. Then, Umm Ja'far [Zubayda] saw the intensity of his passion for them so she took beautiful slave girls, dressed them in turbans on their heads, and placed kerchiefs on the temples and nape of the neck and she dressed them in outer garments with full-length sleeves.[50]

Zubayda started this tradition to draw al-Amīn away from the eunuchs by teaching him normative sexual desires.[51] These slave girls masquerading as eunuchs engaged in complex performative acts. The style of dress served to blend masculine qualities with feminine ones. Their masquerade created another gender, while preserving their sex as female. For example, much like the eunuch remained male as a sex category, the female slave dressed as a male youth remained a woman. The acts of the *ghulāmiyyāt* exemplified how gender depended on social norms. Al-Mas'ūdī's narrative suggests that the *ghulāmiyyāt* in their guise of eunuchs were able to redirect al-Amīn's desires towards a proper sexual outlet.

Al-Amīn in al-Mas'ūdī's text appeared to favor the *ghulāmiyyāt* because they had even less social restrictions than other slave women. Al-Mas'ūdī claimed that, "They enticed his [al-Amīn's] heart towards them. He showed them off in private and in public."[52] The *ghulāmiyyāt* remained female but their masculine appearance allowed them to participate in the court. Al-Amīn, depicted in the histories as beholden to pleasure over statecraft, found the novelty of page girls entrancing. Al-Mas'ūdī suggested al-Amīn was beholden to novelty because the alterity of *ghulāmiyyāt* made them unique. Their difference from other women, that is their transformation into 'men,' made them enjoyable for al-Amīn.

---

[50] Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 5:213.

[51] "She sought, instead to wean him from his young eunuchs by a novel counter-attraction." Abbot, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 212.

[52] Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab,* 5:213.

The ubiquity of the *ghulāmiyyāt* in the court and the homes of the elite undercut their alterity. It also underscored the fluid culture of the Abbasid court that allowed non-normative gender expressions to gain normalcy. Al-Mas'ūdī further explained that, "Amongst the people in private and public, it became popular to have many slave girls and dress them in outer garments with full-length sleeves and girdles and they were called the *ghulāmiyyāt*."[53] The increasing popularity of these women-men across various strata of society implied various genders could exist within the court as long as they did not challenge sexual normativity. As described by Mas'ūdī, the *ghulāmiyyāt* never destabilized sex boundaries in their playful impersonation of eunuchs. This was made possible by the fact that they retained enough female characteristics to leave the status of their sex unquestioned. Zubayda, in working within the society's established set of sexual mores, sought to correct al-Amīn's non-normative sexuality by creating a trend amongst the elite.

If the otherness of the *ghulāmiyyāt* symbolized the sexual alterity present in al-Amīn's court, their masculine appearances did not dampen their popularity in subsequent years. The novelty of the *ghulāmiyyāt* persisted due to their ability to upend gender boundaries of the time. Later on, al-Qāhir (r. 320/932-322-934) would summon *ghulāmiyyāt* to his side as related by al-Mas'ūdī: "He [al-Qāhir] was moved by delight, joy, and happiness. He called out in a loud voice, 'O page, a goblet to the description of the *ghulāmiyyāt*!'"[54] These women were not solely a ploy to lure al-Amīn back to normative sexual practices but something that appealed to the senses of the court. Over time, the *ghulāmiyyāt*'s alterity diminished and they became a normative gender

[53] Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 5:213.

[54] D. Sourdel, "al-Ḳāhir Bi'llāh," in *Encylopedia of Islam,* Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill, 2011). Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 5:213.

expression within the Abbasid court.[55]

As stated earlier, the word *lūṭī* [sodomite], which was used by al-Amīn's contemporaries, as evidenced by its usage in the works of al-Jāḥiẓ was rarely directed towards al-Amīn.[56] Instead, he was mostly described as a person with non-normative sexual desires. Al-Amīn's inclinations challenged normative sexual practices. However, they did not destabilize his gender identity because he continued to reinforce his own masculinity. If anything, outside of a handful of *ḥadīth* and literature, it appears that there was extreme reticence to describe any person as a *lūṭī*. Non-normative sexualities existed but they emerged in fictional accounts rather than histories. In later years, writers like al-Mas'ūdī saw less need to focus on his possible sexual practices and instead focused on his ineffectual rule.

Court historians, often working under the patronage of their rulers produced histories that gave a narrative arc for the Caliphate in which al-Amīn figures an antagonist. It has been argued that al-Amīn's depiction in contemporary sources was unfairly negative, but it must be remembered that al-Ṭabarī, al-Jahshiyārī, and al-Mas'ūdī needed to justify the rise of al-Ma'mūn. Therefore, there is no certain way to distinguish what was a myth versus a fact.[57] Abbasid historical narrative was embellished with stories that heightened the narrative structure of overall history. El-Hibri explained:

> This resemblance is perhaps suggestive of a dim historical connection between the tales of the *Nights* and the popular caliphal anecdotes that ornament various medieval chronicles. But whereas dismissal of the historical reality of the stories

[55] Rowson, "Gender Irregularity as Entertainment,", 46.

[56] In a debate between the admirers of the *ghilmān* and the admirers of slave girls, the word *lūṭī* is used with some frequency. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1987). 67.

[57] El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 12.

> of the *Nights* has become almost instinctive, critiquing the veracity of anecdotes in the chronicles calls for more justification.[58]

This conflation of Abbasid history with literature strengthened the moral trajectories found throughout the works. Historians weaved together a historical narrative that formed the skeleton of the story and added fictional accounts that fleshed out the story. Al-Amīn's portrayal as a historical figure, while embellished, also displayed how an element of society viewed him. Al-Amīn broke with convention and, according to the histories, succumbed to pleasure over statecraft. Whether his desires were directed towards males or females depended on the author of the specific text. Both the *ghulāmiyyāt* in their masculine configuration and the eunuchs' femininity never destabilized the boundaries between male and female as it pertained to sexual roles. The difference in tone that al-Mas'ūdī used possibly arose from the fact that it became less necessary to depict al-Amīn as a deviant since more time had passed between the civil war and the time of authorship. In later years, the peculiarities of al-Amīn's reign became symbolic of decadence in the Abbasid Caliphate and a marker of his supposed sexual perversion.

[58] El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 17-18.

CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETING THE ABBASID COURT IN THE 20th AND 21st CENTURIES

The change in attitudes towards sexuality during the *Nahḍa* in the nineteenth century resulted in new ways of approaching the Abbasid Caliphate. New moral precepts rendered many of the practices of the Abbasid unacceptable. Influenced by this new attitude, different readings of the Abbasid court appeared in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These works looked at the Abbasid era as a time of lots of sexual activity. In the later twentieth century and early twenty-first century, these views became more strident. Historians attempted to understand why the Abbasid era was so sexual according the mores of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

4.1 Reading the Abbasid Court as Highly Sexual

The first comprehensive work on sexuality in the early Islamic eras authored by Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Munajjid's, *al-Ḥayāt al-jinsiyya 'ind al-'arab* [*The Sexual Life of Arabs*] in 1958.[1] Al-Munajjid explained that certain sexual practices became prevalent during the Abbasid period, as a result of a decrease in religiosity, which allowed sexuality to flourish. Al-Munajjid claimed that, "the influence of religion weakened amongst the aristocratic class and the literati."[2] Al-Munajjid's argument suggested that the decadent elite no longer followed religious precepts. His work analyzed how a certain group became open to what he categorized as *liwāṭ*, *suḥāq*, and prostitution.

In al-Munajjid's opinion, foreign slave girls changed the direction of sexual desires in the Abbasid court. He wrote that, "They came from many countries to

[1] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 7. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 101.

[2] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 77.

Baghdad, some from nearby and others from far away. They were from India, Sind, Rome, and Africa. They brought with them their ways in sexual love or they taught their different ways and influenced the feelings of men and eroticism."[3] Accordingly, sexual perversity, which had no basis in local society, was imported and the elite class was receptive to foreign decadence.

The Tunisian thinker Hichem Djaït developed this analysis further as he attempted to understand how cultural shifts sexualized the Abbasid era. In his 1974 *La Personnalité et le devenir Arabo-Islamiques* [*Personality and the Arab-Islamic Becoming*], he portrayed early Islamic history and its impact on the modern era through his Arab nationalist views.[4] Hichem Djaït distinguished between two competing worlds, the profane and the secular that existed during the Abbasid era. He argued that:

> In the first century AH, the Arab aristocracy enjoyed life and knew love, in Medina for example or around certain Umayyad caliphs. Under the Abbasids, the cultivated locales were engaged in all the subtleties of emotion and pleasure, such as poets versed in libertinage. The *kitāb al-aghānī,* which reflected the secular world and its pleasures, seems to forget, ignore, or feign ignorance of the principles of the religious world.[5]

The Abbasid period represented a shift in culture that saw moral precepts fall to the wayside. Djaït, like al-Munajjid, created a division between the propriety of the religious sphere and its secular counterpart. He localized libertinage in the court where literary production also took place. Libertinage included homosexuality and it appeared within certain locales, however, there was no mention of individuals who practiced it. In this configuration of the Abbasid era, individuals who practiced this supposed

---

[3] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 78-79.

[4] Hichem Djaït, *La personalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 69.

[5] Djaït,*La personalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques*, 147.

libertinage did not warrant being named. The time of al-Amīn with its flourishing culture of *qiyān* and concubines became symptomatic of moral decadence.

In 1997, *al-Jawārī wa-l-qiyān* [*The Slave Women and the Singing Girls*] by Sulaymān Ḥuraytānī took certain moments and expanded them to the entirety of the Abbasid Caliphate in a way that al-Munajjid's work did not. The court culture during the reigns of Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Amīn became the prototypical memory of the Abbasid era in twenty and twenty-first centuries texts. Ḥuraytānī wrote that, "perverse sexual relations spread by starting to appeal to men widely and publicly. It led to sodomy and women withheld themselves from men. Sapphism was rampant among women including the wives of Caliphs and concubines."[6] Ḥuraytānī broke from the usual mode of thinking that linked the rise of the *jawārī* with male homosexuality and instead argued that the numerous *jawārī* created lesbian spaces. Effusive sexuality, as he argued, created environments for people to reject normative sexual practices and search for more transgressive practices. Accordingly, sexual deviance was not limited solely to men. The effect of men seeking same-sex pleasures led to women mimicking men in their sexual practices.

The trope of a decadent Abbasid upper class reappeared in Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd's *al-Mut'a al-maḥẓūra* [*Forbidden Pleasure*] published in 2000. In his work, he suggested that the availability of women and the concomitant loosened sexual strictures were responsible for the spread of sodomy. Maḥmūd explained how the upper class came to reject "routine pleasures" of the *jawārī* and instead began to engage in same-sex behaviors.[7] The idea that sexually available women amongst the upper classes drove

[6] Sulayman Ḥuraytānī, *al-Jawārī wa al-qiyān wa ẓāhirat intishār 'andiyyat wa manāzil al-muqayyinīn fī al-mujtama' al-'arabī al-islāmī* (Damascus: Dār al-ḥaṣād, 1997), 88.

[7] Maḥmūd, *al-Mut'a al-maḥẓūra*, 124.

men to find other sexual pleasures appeared in al-Munajjid's *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya* but became more provocative in Maḥmūd's argument. *Jawārī* represented overly sexual figures who contested the standard morality of the era. Yet, their ubiquity eventually undercut their appeal. Maḥmūd criticized al-Amīn for being a major proponent of the *ghulāmiyyāt* because these women were temptations to illicit sexual relations. While concubinage was licit in Abbasid Islamic law, Maḥmūd limited licit sexual relations to married couples rather than including it. Much like his views on homosexuality were influenced by Western values, it seemed that the West also affected his understandings of normative heterosexual practices.[8] The heterosexual unit found in matrimony became the only acceptable outlet for sexuality.

The idea that literature functioned separately from wider cultural shifts appeared in Ṣaqr Abū Fakhr's *al-Dīn wa-al-dahmā' wa-al-damm: al-'arab wa-isti'sā' al-ḥadātha* [*Religion, Demagogues, and Blood: The Arabs and the Intractability of Modernity*], published in 2007. Abū Fakhr differentiated literary tropes from actual practices but viewed literature as a reflection of societal mores. The popularity of more traditional styles reflected a longing for a past. Abū Fakhr explained that, "the types of relationships between men and women in the desert were different from love practiced in cities and civilizations. It was now possible to let go of these older glorified ideas concerning virginal love which authors repeated, one after another."[9] In describing the major poetic style *'udhrī* [virginal] as an ideal based in the past, Abū Fakhr separated

[8] Maḥmūd described male-female anal intercourse as the "lesser sodomy," while Abbasid practices permitted such sexual acts. Maḥmūd, *al-Mut'a maḥẓūra*, 7. Hugh Kennedy, "Al-Jāḥiẓ and the Construction of Homosexuality in the Abbasid Court," in *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, ed. April Harper and Caroline Proctor (New York: Routledge, 2008), 183.

[9] Ṣaqr abū Fakhr, *al-Dīn wa al-dahmā'* 181.

literary production from reflecting fully on the actual practices of the day.[10] Abū Fakhr's extrapolation hinted that the urbanized population in the main centers of Iraq was practicing sexual acts not congruent with past mores. Al-Amīn was not named as part of this cultural shift, but he and his court represented the break from the earlier idealized era. The continued representation of the Abbasid court as a sexualized space compared to moral standards of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries figures heavily in recent works analyzing the era. Such accounts often rely on separating court culture from mass culture. These analyses focus on how the rise in normative sexual pleasures during the Abbasid Caliphate opened the possibility for non-normative ones to appear.

4.2 Al-Amīn as a Sexual Individual

Some modern writers did not just configure the court as a sexualized space but also determined the individuals responsible for the increased sexualization of the Abbasid court. Al-Amīn and other figures from his time often feature as key to the new court order. Al-Munajjid employed modern understandings of sexuality in his discussion of non-normative sexualities during the time of al-Amīn. In particular, al-Munajjid focused on two rulers responsible for non-normative practices arguing that, "There were two amongst the Abbasid Caliphs who had the greatest influence in raising the matter of *ghilmān* and passion for them, namely, al-Amīn and al-Mu'taṣim."[11] Al-Munajjid minimized the presence of non-normative sexualities amongst the Abbasid elite by limiting it primarily to two caliphs. It was problematic to portray the caliphs as

[10] Some authors like Ṣadīq Jalāl al-'Azm argue that *'udhrī* was anything but virginal. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 118. *'Udhrī* is normally construed as representing pure, chaste love and was a major style during the Umayyad Caliphate. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Umayyad Poetry," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A.F.L. Beeston et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 426. Some authors like Ṣadīq Jalāl al-'Azm argue that *'udhrī* was anything but virginal. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 118.

[11] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 85.

sexual deviants since they exercised religious authority. Therefore, al-Munajjid tried to preserve the sanctity of the caliphal position by limiting non-normative sexuality to al-Amīn and al-Mutʿaṣim.

The image of al-Amīn's court as a nexus of immorality in al-Munajjid's writing simultaneously blamed al-Amīn for his sexual tendencies and portrayed him as a victim of wider societal problems. In describing the court, al-Munajjid explained how al-Amīn was initially drawn towards the *ghilmān* only to be swayed towards the *ghulāmiyyāt*:

> He [al-Amīn] was corrupted by his father's associates and his educators. Thus, as a boy, he was drawn to the *ghilmān* and shunned women sending requests for *ghilmān* from all places. His mother Zubayda tried to stop his pleasure and brought him shapely *jawārī* and made them *ghulāmiyyāt.* Afterwards, she cut their hair and stuck out their hips for they met his approval. He collected the *ghulāmiyyāt* over *ghilmān* and filled his palace with them and found pleasure with them.[12]

In this passage, al-Munajjid came closest to defining al-Amīn's sexuality but focused on how others affected him rather than giving him agency. Instead of arguing for the possibility that al-Amīn was innately 'homosexual' or inclined to non-normative practices, al-Munajjid believed it was something he learned as a child. The idea that he could be taught to enjoy *ghilmān* and then be drawn to *ghulāmiyyāt* represented the foundation of al-Munajjid's view on sexuality. It was the mutability of sexual desires. Therefore, al-Munajjid implied that al-Amīn's peculiar tendencies were not innate. In addition, Zubayda's ploy of the *ghulāmiyyāt* reinforced the idea that normative sexual desires could be taught.

Nevertheless, in a way that undermined his own argumentation, Al-Munajjid described how al-Amīn continued his transgressive sexual practices after his mother's intervention. After describing the rise of the *ghulāmiyyāt* tradition, al-Munajjid claimed

[12] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 100.

that, "he [al-Amīn] became famous for his love for his *ghulām* Kawthar."[13] In Abbasid chronicles, al-Amīn's friendship with the eunuch Kawthar raised questions about the nature of their relations. Nevertheless, outside of a handful of statements against al-Amīn, their relationship was rarely described as sexual. Al-Munajjid's categorization of the relationship as romantic alongside the flexible word of *ghulām* heightened the instability of gender norms, which this relationship posed.[14] The word love categorized the relationship in a different manner from Abbasid works. Likewise, al-Munajjid avoided accusing al-Amīn of engaging in sexual relations with Kawthar.

Ḥabīb Zayyāt, in his 1956 article "al-Marā'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-'islām" in *al-Mashriq*, argued that, "in *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, the Prophet cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men."[15] Zayyāt was deploying prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth)* to argue for a strict binary between the sexes and genders. The engagement with Western gender constructs placed the *ghulāmiyyāt*'s gender performance in an ambiguous state. Even though the *ghulāmiyyāt* were understood in Abbasid society to be women, Zayyāt could not accept their gender ambiguity despite analyzing their court performance as a means to preserve a heterosexual set of male desires. This binary made it possible for al-Amīn to be transgressive. As a result, if the *ghulāmiyyāt* were considered illicit, so was any sexual action with them.

Even though the *ghulāmiyyāt* were in violation of gender religious strictures, Zayyāt portrayed the category of *ghulāmiyyāt* as not very different from the *qiyān* for the purpose of court usage. These women were not solely there for the impersonation of the eunuchs but also served as entertainers that rivaled their normative counterparts.

---

[13] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 100.

[14] *Ghulām* could mean a boy or a eunuch. Rowson, "Gender Irregularity As Entertainment," 48.

[15] Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," 156.

Zayyāt claimed that, "One of the most famous of al-Amīn's *ghulāmiyyāt* was ʻArīb, the rakish singer poet who found favor with the caliph."[16] Zayyāt stressed that al-Amīn remained somewhat normative despite labeling al-Amīn as a propagator of *ghulāmiyyāt* in society. ʻArīb was emblematic of the wider moral decay of the Caliphate through her designation as immoral. Zayyāt's negative opinion of the *ghulāmiyyāt*'s gender designation did not seem to extend to ʻArīb.

The gender fluidity of the *ghulāmiyyāt* made them more controversial and more transgressive in the twentieth century because there was greater reticence towards gender fluidity. The Abbasids welcomed the *ghulāmiyyāt* as a pleasant diversion without dwelling upon the possible transgressions their gender performance could symbolize. When talking about the practice, it was not centered on al-Amīn but on the problematic masculine outfits. No longer were the *ghulāmiyyāt* sexual lures who remained proper outlets for male sexual desire in Abbasid society. Zayyāt wrote that, "al-Amīn, al-Mutawakil and al-Qāhir loved *al-ghulāmiyyāt* and perhaps al-Mutawakil after al-Amīn was the most strongly attached of the caliphs to these masculine outfits."[17] Even though al-Amīn was the primary propagator of the *ghulāmiyyāt* tradition, he functioned as only one part of a much larger machination. Other caliphs, like him, took part in spreading the *ghulāmiyyāt* in the court. Likewise, the original meaning of their performance was lost to twentieth century understandings of gender.

Similar to al-Munajjid, al-Ḥuraytānī described al-Amīn's tendencies towards *ghulāmiyyāt* as a means to direct his sexual desires towards proper sexual outlets. Al-Ḥuraytānī dispensed with al-Masʻūdī explanation that Zubayda started the *ghulāmiyyāt* trend to lessen al-Amīn's interest in eunuchs (*khadam*). He, instead, wrote that Zubayda

[16] Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," 186.

[17] Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," 190.

dressed up the slave girls in the style of *ghilmān* without mentioning al-Amīn's interest in eunuchs.[18] This interpretation changed the nature of their existence. This new interpretation of the *ghulāmiyyāt* erased the difference of sexual relations with a eunuch versus ones with a young boy. Al-Ḥuraytānī's depiction of al-Amīn's sexual tendencies reflected changing attitudes towards variant genders and the acceptability of sexual relations. The distinction between sex with a eunuch and a *ghulām* did not matter because both were of the male sex. In neglecting those previously acknowledged differences of gender, al-Ḥuraytānī forced al-Mas'ūdī's work to conform to modern understandings of sexuality.

The condemnation of al-Amīn for his love of the *ghulāmiyyāt* increased over time. Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd argued that, "al-Amīn… was a living example of this manifestation, which arrived to the degree of him dressing the *jawārī* in the clothes of the *ghilmān*… His interest grew in them and this phenomenon increased more and more in the age of al-Ma'mūn."[19] The emphasis of the *ghulāmiyyāt* was not on their masculine performance but rather the masculine aspect subsuming the feminine designation. Maḥmūd depicted them as al-Amīn's sublimated homosexual desires. While al-Mas'ūdī regarded the *ghulāmiyyāt* as proper objects of female desire, Maḥmūd construed that the *ghulāmiyyāt* symbolized an overtly non-normative court and were representative of al-Amīn's alterity. Changing attitudes towards *ghulāmiyyāt* were part of the wider reconfiguring of the Abbasid court's place in Arab history.

[18] Ḥuraytānī, *al-Jawārī wa al-qiyān*, 99.

[19] Maḥmūd, *al-Mut'a al-maḥẓūra*, 181.

4.3 The Role of Nationalism in the Critiques of a Sexualized Past

Modern writers came to distinguish the Abbasid Caliphate and, in particular, the time of al-Amīn as a break from traditional moral precepts. In trying to locate the reasons for such a change, modern writers created distance between the pure Arab culture and the cosmopolitan Abbasid culture. They implied that individuals like Abū Nuwās represented a form of cultural intrusion. The influence of Persian culture during the Abbasid era across all levels of society exemplified the porousness of Abbasid culture. Aḥmad Amīn believed that Persian culture had a large influence on the Abbasid court as seen by the celebration of Nowruz for example.[20] While not talking about any changes in sexuality connected to Persian cultural influence, Amīn planted the idea that the rise of Persian culture took place during the same time as the *ghilmān*'s popularity.

Arabized Persians were responsible, according to al-Munajjid, for illicit practices during the time of al-Amīn. The ever-present theme in *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya* that non-normative sexual desires represented a foreign intrusion became stronger with al-Munajjid's categorization of certain people as not truly Arab. Al-Munajjid explained that, "Firstly, the instinctive willingness in the heart of the Arabs was their tendency towards sexual pleasure and secondly, the influence of Arabized Persians who before Islam were libertines plucking pleasures wherever they found them."[21] The image that al-Munajjid had towards the Arab past showed influence from contemporary nationalist discourses. Sexualized depictions of Abbasid culture had existed for some time but the Persian origins for the popularity of transgressive sexuality stemmed from nationalist thought. Therefore, al-Amīn's court remained the pinnacle of decadence for al-Munajjid

[20] "The Abbasids moved in compliance to new customs, for example 'Nowruz' that was a holiday for ancient Persians. We didn't hear in the Umayyad age of this sort." Amīn, *Ḍuḥa al-islām*, 1:105.

[21] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayat al-jinsiyya*, 77.

but it was a Persianized court rather than an Arab one. The idea that Persian culture was responsible for the decadence of the Abbasids meant that previous eras did not have the same level of cultural porousness to allow the spread of non-normative sexual behavior.

In continuing his argument that Persians brought hedonism to the Arabs, al-Munajjid named some of the Persians responsible for the transmission of sodomy to the Abbasid court. He argued that, "There is no doubt that Arabized Persians were a large influence in the spread of sodomy and the love of *ghilmān*. The most famous sodomites in the Abbasid age were of Persian origins, especially amongst the poets and the *'ulamā'*. Wāliba b. Ḥubāb corrupted Abū Nuwās and others like Abū Nuwās corrupted others."[22] Al-Munajjid's representation of sodomy in the Abbasid court was similar to a virus. It spread from person to person but the original root lay in people coming from Persia. Yet, unlike other writers that conflated attraction to *ghilmān* with same-sex attraction between adult males, al-Munajjid left them as distinct practices. Despite categorizing some people as sodomites, al-Munajjid was careful to mention only people of Persian origin. Such standards excluded al-Amīn from being responsible for the spread of sodomy.

Persians, as the importers of "sodomy," served as a way to prop up nationalist claims and distance true Arabs from the possibility of being homosexual themselves. Hichem Djaït, without mentioning al-Amīn or his reign, dwelt upon the cultural transformation of the Islamic world during the early Abbasid period. In regards to the appearance of what he deemed to be homosexuality, he noted that:

> The historical roots of this phenomenon are undeniable. If the primitive Arab man was almost uniquely heterosexual, classical Islamic society, under Eastern influence (the role of Khurasanian soldiers was decisive), was in part a frustrating reaction to Islamic law (polygamy of the rich created amongst the

[22] Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥayāt al-jinsiyya*, 85.

> people 'a famine of women,' cloistering, veiling, etc.), which practiced, on a scale, a homosexuality facilitated by the massive contribution of young male slaves.[23]

Djaït articulated his nationalist ideology by rendering Arabs as heterosexual and their Persian counterparts as homosexual. Al-Amīn and other caliphs in this thought furthered the degradation of a supposedly pure culture. Djaït created a homosexualized time and space but avoided naming particular individuals.

Maḥmūd agreed with previous writers on the timelessness of homosexuality but he chose not to blame Persians for its presence in Arab culture. Maḥmūd attacked several sexual acts but the chief target of his critique was male-male sexual interaction, again primarily anal sex. Discussing sodomy, he argued that, "in that light, linking homosexuality to what is external does not explain what is historical, it is a kind of justification for the phenomenon of regression."[24] Maḥmūd understood that previous writers framed the rise of sodomy as a Persian incursion into Arab culture, but he argued that sodomy existed natively within Arab culture. Maḥmūd structured his argument by dismissing the nationalist discourse, which condemned Persians for the spread of sexual vices. By implication, Maḥmūd's use of regression made sodomy a symbol of decadence rather than an import. Whether "homosexuality" came from abroad or not was not of any import for Maḥmūd. Its inclusion and spread within Arab culture resulted from problems associated with Abbasid immorality. Al-Amīn, in this matrix, became not a symbol of Persian influence in Abbasid society but a reflection of society's moral drift.

---

[23] Djaït, *La Personalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques*, 208.

[24] Maḥmūd, *al-Mut'a al-maḥẓūra*, 181.

4.4 Diminishing the Presence of al-Amīn

Even though many writers used Persia to locate the origins of Abbasid decadence, a few authors chose to excise al-Amīn from that history due to his problematic role as a sexually non-normative ruler. To achieve this erasure, writers wrote about distinct attributes of al-Amīn's court but avoiding naming him. Zayyāt destabilized the historical grounding of the *ghulāmiyyāt* and its precursor, the *ghilmān* tradition, by rendering them as something whose origins remained unknown in order to lessen the rupture they caused for a court upholding proper gender attractions. He argued that, "it is not known exactly when the *ghilmān* tradition grew in Arab civilization. Did it occur at the end of the Umayyad state or did it enter Iraq with the Abbasids and their followers from Iran and Khurasan?"[25] Zayyāt believed that the rise of the *ghilmān* reoriented desire within the Abbasid court, a change that culminated with the introduction of the *ghulāmiyyāt* tradition. Zayyāt attempted to cloud the origins of what he interpreted to be a breakdown of proper male outlets for sexual desire. It appears that within the article, Zayyāt deliberately fused other gender variant performances like the *mukhannathūn* of Mecca with the *ghulāmiyyāt* even though the former were males masquerading as females.[26] The origins of the *ghulāmiyyāt* lay clearly in the court of al-Amīn, but Zayyāt preferred an ambiguous history for them in order to lessen the implications of a non-normative sexuality pervading Arab society. Zayyāt tried to make the *ghilmān*, the *ghulāmiyyāt*, and others one group of people traversing gender boundaries and therefore less remarkable.

In a similar manner, Zayyāt heterosexualized another aspect of the court, the *ghulāmiyyāt*, by linking them with proper heterosexual desires. Instead of having the

[25] Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," 188.

[26] Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," 673.

ghulāmiyyāt ensconced within the court of al-Amīn, Zayyāt figured them as part of al-Ma'mūn's court. He argued that, "Al-Ma'mūn grew up loving the *ghulāmiyyāt*. Thus, when he became Caliph he chose to dress his *jawārī* in the clothing of *ghilmān* and did not suppress his passion for them."[27] It is important to note that Zayyāt did not negate the *ghulāmiyyāt* tradition but rather normalized it by placing it in the court of al-Ma'mūn, whose sexual tendencies were not questioned. Despite questioning the acceptability of the *ghulāmiyyāt*, Zayyāt attempted to frame this particular iteration of cross-dressing as permissible in certain situations. In addition, Zayyāt further clarified that these women were the *jawārī*, an already proper outlet for male sexual desire. From his argument, removing them from the court of al-Amīn negated the confusing gender performance that the ghulāmiyyāt represented for other writers.

The Abbasid court viewed the *ghulāmiyyāt* as a way to correct misguided desires towards the norm; however, some writers like Abdulwahab Bouhdiba in his 1975 *La Sexualité en Islam* believed it to be the opposite. This was done despite al-Amīn's court being the first location where they appeared. In analyzing the *ghulāmiyyāt* as a symptom of homosexuality's influence on Arab culture, Bouhdiba argued that, "on this eternal evolution of taste as far as women were concerned a very marked homosexual element sometimes played a role. Faced with competition from boys, Arab women sometimes tried to resemble them. The Abbasids, for example, even preferred a tomboy type of woman, with hair cut very short and a manly stride."[28] Bouhdiba morphed the *ghulāmiyyāt* from an outlet meant to replicate normative sexual desires during the reign of al-Amīn to homosexual ones. The changed meaning of the

[27] Zayyāt, "al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām," 190.

[28] Abdulwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1985), 141-142.

masculine performance by the *ghulāmiyyāt* in Bouhdiba's view collapsed variant genders into either male or female, which results in the *ghulāmiyyāt* of al-Amīn becoming male homosexual objects. Rather than mention al-Amīn or any other caliph who showed interest in these women, Bouhdiba preferred to ascribe the practice to a homosexual subculture that polluted wider Abbasid culture.

Instead of attempting to render the Abbasid court acceptable, Abū Fakhr shifted the practices he disliked to spaces beyond the court. He argued that, "The Abbasid age saw the launching of unruly instincts and individual feelings. The interests and leadership of the caliphs flowed... as places of pleasures expanded enormously: Thus, slave girls and *ghilmān* were bought for private houses."[29] Unlike the Abbasid sources, which placed the epicenter of *ghilmān* and slave women in the court, Abū Fakhr held responsible individuals outside of the court. Likewise, he decreased the caliph's role in this context. The court, while being the trendsetter, did not dictate the direction that sexual trends would go.

Abū Fakhr expanded upon the idea of the *ghilmān* being separate from the court and instead, placed them within religious institutions. This change made the spread of *ghilmān* not a condemnation of al-Amīn but rather of other individuals. On the popularity of *ghilmān*, Abū Fakhr noted that, "It spread with the acquisition of *ghilmān*. There were many rules on the seduction of *ghilmān* and controlling them. It is interesting that the lessons of the *'ulamā'* and scholars in the mosque were packed with *ghilmān* who came to receive education and were seduced instead. The majority viewed the *ghulāmiyyāt* with disapproval but understood to be an aristocratic pleasure."[30] By this idea, Abū Fakhr blamed instead the religious classes. The political beliefs of Abū

[29] Abū Fakhr, *al-Dīn wa al-dahmā'* 189.

[30] Abū Fakhr, *al-Dīn wa al-dahmā'* 191.

Fakhr, a staunch Arab secular nationalist, gave him reason to castigate Islamic institutions like the *'ulamā'* and mosques as centers of sodomy. Excising al-Amīn from that tawdry past allowed Abū Fakhr to render the sexuality of the former, strictly, a political figure, acceptable. Abū Fakhr implicitly depicted al-Amīn as 'heterosexual' by erasing non-normative practices from the court.

The Abbasid court in modern configurations underwent various changes from its earlier understandings. The influx of Euro-American ideas on sex, gender, and sexuality intermingled with previous notions of those concepts. In the new approach undertaken by Arab writers, the maligned Umayyad court remained steadfast in tradition and morality. The Abbasid court was now a center of decadence but one where the supposed ringleaders of decadence became noticeably absent. As a space, the Abbasid court became problematic, a place where gender and sexual normativity collapsed. Yet, the figures that populate and provide voices for that space, ones that inhabited the Abbasid histories, disappeared or become standard-bearers of a new normativity. Reconciling the non-normative acts of al-Amīn and others necessitated a separation of gender and sexual performance.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

For over a century now, the Middle East has engaged with gender and sexual constructs originating in Europe and America, which have led to new configurations of the Abbasid court that have since been 'heterosexualized' or 'homosexualized'. In May 2001, fifty-two men were arrested in Cairo for sexual deviance, under the crime of demeaning religion.[1] The Egyptian government claimed that the men arrested were members of a cult that allegedly elevated Abū Nuwās to the status of a homosexual "prophet."[2] In Algeria, an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) rights group modeled after similar groups in the United States and Europe named itself "Abu Nawas" in honor of the poet they claim was homosexual and the lover of Caliph al-Amīn.[3] In Jordan, a television drama called *Abnā' Hārūn al-Rashīd* [*Sons of Hārūn al-Rashīd*] depicted Caliph al-Amīn as a homosexual whose mother Zubayda tried to save him from his homosexual desires.[4] These examples demonstrate that the sexuality binary of the West has entered mass culture across the Arab world. Al-Amīn's non-normative practices when not presented as a homosexual identity, have now become forms of homosexual practice. Likewise, a prominent member of Al-Amīn's court, Abū Nuwās, has been fashioned by marginalized groups in society as a homosexual hero of

---

[1] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 181.

[2] This was claimed because a booklet found in a home of an accused was entitled *Agency of God on Earth: our Religion is the Religion of Lot's People, our Prophet and Guide is Abu Nawas* and it led the state to believe that those arrested subscribed to the book's argument. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 181. Brian Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 129-130.

[3] Abu Nawas: Présentation," Abu Nawas Groupe des Militants LGBT Algériens, accessed November 16, 2011, http://www.abunawasdz.org/p/presentation.html.

[4] Cooperson, "Al-Amīn, Muḥammad."

sorts.

These modern categorizations of Abū Nuwās, al-Amīn, and others limit the possibilities of understanding their sexuality. As I argued earlier, Abbasid court society understood gender, sex, and sexuality differently, when compared to recent conceptualizations of those categories. Abbasid court society thought that there were multiplicities of genders. Each gender fell comfortably within a designated sex of either male or female. The gender identity of an individual changed over time. For instance, *ghilmān*, eunuchs, and adult men occupied various genders categorized as men. Adult males occupied the top rung in a gender hierarchy; at the bottom were slave women.[5] Unsurprisingly, sexuality in the Abbasid court did not center itself around binary categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Instead, the act functioned separately from the identity. Therefore, a word like *lūṭī* or *ma'būn* [male desiring penetration] focused on the act and not an identity.[6] Abbasid court society understood sexual acts as licit or illicit. An adult male having sexual relations with a wife or his female slave was licit. Outside of those confines, certain acts were more condemnatory than others. Condemnation changed depending on whether or not a person maintained his gender's position of power. Therefore, an adult male retaining an active role in sex with a eunuch or boy was less shameful than an adult male being penetrated by another male.[7] By understanding the framework that shaped Abbasid era conceptualizations of gender, sex, and sexuality, it becomes easier to understand how historians understood people who violated normative standards.

---

[5] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 67.

[6] Texts like al-Rāzī's treatise on men desiring to be penetrated demonstrate that leading doctors of the era did not classify these men with an identity. Rosenthal, "Ar-Râzî," 55-56.

[7] Rowson, "Traffic in Boys," 196.

During the Abbasid era, the legacy of al-Amīn was contentious. Indignation towards al-Amīn resulted in early chronicles detailing tawdry details about his non-normative sexuality and tastes. Over time, the applicability of such accusations lessened as the civil war between him and al-Ma'mūn became a distant memory. Naturally, questions about the applicability of various anecdotes to his life, especially his sexual practices, remain impossible to prove. Al-Amin's portrayal, as it has been passed down, comes from histories that are overwhelmingly negative and seek to depict him as everything a caliph should not be. As I argued in this thesis, Abbasid chronicles represented al-Amīn as a figure that transgressed sexual norms of his time but remained within the normative boundaries of masculinity. Abbasid historians clearly took issue with the actions of al-Amīn, sexual or otherwise, but not all of them condemned him for his supposed attraction to *ghilmān* and eunuchs. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī utilized al-Amīn's sexual inclinations to denigrate and to delegitimize his rule. The later *Murūj al-dhahab* by al-Mas'ūdī did not dwell on al-Amīn's sexual acts to the same extent when attacking his reign. By the time al-Mas'ūdī wrote his work, the question of the civil war and al-Ma'mūn's rise was less contentious. Such changes reflected the fluidity attached to the acts he practiced and their resultant judgments.

It is in the modern era that al-Amīn came to be construed as someone homosexual. This reconfiguration happened due to Arab intellectuals engaging with Euro-American constructs of gender and sexuality. The modern era has witnessed changes in the approaches towards understanding the Abbasid court and the reign of al-Amīn, in particular. Al-Amīn became increasingly problematic for Arab scholars and writers in the twentieth century onwards. His sexual liaisons appeared as non-normative for writers. Whereas some writers chose to engage with the material and depict al-Amīn

according to their separate understandings of sexuality; others diminished his role in the Abbasid court. In many cases, the Abbasid court became a homosexualized space. Rather than placing individuals within an Abbasid understanding of gender, these modern writers projected their own biases and concerns upon the court and its people.

At present, there is growing production of historical works analyzing the Abbasid court and the history of sexuality in the Middle East. As non-normative sexualities become a topic of wider discussion, this new discourse will eventually give more attention to the Abbasid era. It may be that, consequently, our understanding of the sexual practices of the Abbasid court will be problematized, nuanced, and conceivably, produce a replication of that court that is not distorted by subscribing in advance to Western concepts of gender and sexuality. Questions surrounding the very nature of the recent renderings of the Abbasid court and that of historical memory forced writers to acknowledge that modern concepts of sexuality and gender do not conform with those practiced during earlier times.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Primary Sources

Ibn‘Abd Rabbih, Ahmad b. Muḥammad. *Unique Necklace*. Translated by Issa J. Boullata. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2009.

al-Jaḥiẓ, *‘*Amr ibn Baḥr. *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ.* Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1987.

———. *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ.* Translated by Alfred Felix Landon Beeston. Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980.

al-Jahshiyārī, Muḥammad b. ‘Abdūs. *Kitāb al-wuzarā’ wa-l-kuttab.* Abu Dhabi: National Library Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage Cultural Foundation, 2009.

Mas'udi. *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids.* Translated by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone. London: Kegan Paul, 1989.

Al-Mas‘ūdī, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī. *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawhar.* Beirut: al-Jāmi‘a al-Lubnānīyah, 1966.

Sbath, Paul. “Le livre des caractères de Qosṭâ ibn Loûqâ.” *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte* 23 (1941): 103-169.

Al-Ṭabarī, Abū-Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr. *The History of Al-Ṭabarī. Volume 31, the War between Brothers.* Translated by Michael Fishbein. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr. *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk,* edited by M.J. De Goeje*,* 15 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1964.

II. Secondary Sources

Books

Abbot, Nabia. *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.

Amīn, Aḥmad. *Ḍuḥā al-islām.* Cairo, Lajnat al-ta’līf wa-l-tarjama wa-l-nashr, 1946.

Andrews, Walter G. and Kalpakli, Mehmet. *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Ayalon, David. *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999.

Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Bouhdiba, Abdelwahab. *Sexuality in Islam.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. Routledge: London, 1985.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

Cantú, Lionel. *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men.* New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Cooperson, Michael. *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

al-Diyyālmī, ʻAbd al-Ṣamad. *Sūsyūlujiyyat al-jinsāniyya al-ʻarabiyya.* Beirut: Dar al-talīʻa, 2009.

Djaït, Hichem. *La personalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974.

Abū Fakhr, Ṣaqr. *Al-Dīn wa al-dahmā' wa al-damm: al-ʻarab wa al-istʻṣā' al-ḥadātha.* Beirut: al-mu'assasa al-ʻarabīya lil-dirāsāt wa-l-nashr, 2007.

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality: Volume 1.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Habib, Samar. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations.* New York: Routledge, 2007.

El-Hibri, Tayeb. *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History The Rashidun Caliphs*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

———. *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ʻAbbāsid Caliphate.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Ḥuraytānī, Sulayman. *al-Jawārī wa al-qiyān wa ẓāhirat intishār andiyyat wa manāzil al-muqayyinīn fī al-mujtama‘ al-‘arabī al-islāmī.* Damascus: Dār al-ḥaṣād, 1997.

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004.

Kennedy, Philip. *Abu Nuwas: a Genius of Poetry.* Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005.

Khalidi, Tarif. *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas‘ūdī*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975.

Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Maḥmūd, Ibrāhīm. *al-Mut‘a al-muḥarrama: al-liwaṭ wa-al-siḥaq fi al-tarikh al- ‘arabi*. Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2000.

Al-Munajjid, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. *Al-Ḥayāt al-jinsīyya ‘inda al-‘arab: min al-Jāhilīyya ilā awākhir al-qarn al-rābi‘ al-hijrī.* Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1975.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches, Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Ringrose, Kathryn M. *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Robinson, Chase. *Islamic Historiography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

El-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800.* Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Sarḥān, Haytham. *Khiṭāb al-Jins: Muqārabāt fī al-adab al-‘arabī al-qadīm*. Casablanca: al-markaz al-thaqāfī al-‘arabī, 2010.

Seidman, Steven. *The Social Construction of Sexuality*. New York: W. W. Norton: 2010.

Sharabi, Hisham. *Arab Intellectuals and the West.* London: John Hopkins Press, 1970.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire.* Durham: Duke University Press,

1995.

al-Ṭahṭāwī, Rifāʻa Badawi Rafīʻ. *An Imam in Paris*. Translated by Daniel L. Newman. London: Saqi, 2004.

Whitaker, Brian. *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Zayzafoon, Lamia Ben Youssef. *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology.* Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005.

Ze'evi, Dror. *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Articles and Chapters

Abu Nawas Groupe des Militants LGBT Algériens. "Abu Nawas: Présentation." Accessed November 16, 2011. http://www.abunawasdz.org/p/presentation.html.

Adang, Camilla. "Ibn Hazm on Homosexuality: A Case Study of Zahiri Legal Methodology." *Al-Qantara* 24(2003): 5-31.

Amer, Sahar. "Joseph Massad and the Alleged Violence of Human Rights." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (2010): 649-653.

———. "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (2009): 215-236.

Bellamy, James A. "Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature." *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam.* Edited by Afaf Lufti al-Sayyid Marsot, 23-42. Malibu, CA: Udena Publications, 1979.

Boone, Joseph A. "Modernist Re-Orientations: Imagining Homoerotic Desire in the 'Nearly' Middle East." *Modernism/Modernity* 17(September 2010): 561-605.

El-Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "In Search for the Ideal Spouse." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45 (2002): 179-196.

———. "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48 (2005): 234-252.

Epstein, Steven. "A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality." *Sociological Theory* 12(1994): 188-202.

El-Hibri, Tayeb. "The Regicide of the Caliph al-Amīn and the Challenge of Representation in Medieval Islamic Historiography." *Arabica* 42 (1995): 334-364.

Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. "Umayyad Poetry." *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*. Edited by A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Serjeant, G.R. Smith, 387-432. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Hurvitz, Nimrod. "From Scholarly Circles to Mass Movements: The Formation of Legal Communities in Islamic Society." *American Historical Review* 108 (Oct. 2003): 985-1008.

Kennedy, Hugh. "Al-Jāḥiẓ and the Construction of Homosexuality at the Abbasid Court." In *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*. Edited by April Harper and Caroline Proctor, 175-188. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Mezziane, Mohammad. "Sodomie et masculinité chez les juristes musulmans du IX^{e} au XI^{e} siècle." *Arabica* 55 (2008): 276-306.

Murray, Stephen O. and Will Roscoe. *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature.* New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Puar, Jasbir. "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages." *Social Text* 84/85 (2005): 124-125.

Roded, Ruth. "*Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations. Routledge Research in Gender and Society* by Samar Habib." *MELA Notes* 82 (2009): 33-34.

Rosenthal, Franz. "Ar-Râzî on the Hidden Illness." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 52 (1978): 45-60.

Rowson, Everett K. "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists." *Body Guards*. Edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 50-79. London: Routledge, 1991.

———. "The Effeminates of Early Medina." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111:4 (1991): 671-693.

———. "Gender Irregularity as Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad." *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*. Edited by Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 45-72

———. "The Traffic in Boys: Slavery and Homoerotic Liaisons in Elite ʻAbbāsid Society." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11(2008): 193-204.

Traub, Valerie. "The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies." *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire.* Edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afasaneh Najmabadi, 1-40. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Wright Jr., J. W. "Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire in Early 'Abbāsid Poetry." *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*. Edited by J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett Rowson, 1-23. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Zayyāt, Ḥabīb. "Al-Mar'a al-ghulāmiyya fī al-islām." *al-Mashriq* (1956): 153-192.