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Gender Transgression in the Medieval Middle East

Due to the limited nature of traditional English pronouns, and the need of this paper to refer to people whose genders are ambiguous or non-binary, I have employed the neologistic gender-neutral pronouns sie and hir. "Sie" takes the place of "he" or "she," while "hir" replaces "him," "his," and "her."

Muslim religious law and Islamic culture often require strict divisions between men and women, and prescribe firm gender roles for people in these groups. These conventions might imply that there would have been little room for transgression of the gender system in medieval Islamic societies. In fact, such transgression existed on several levels in the medieval Middle East.

Gender in medieval Islamic society was divided mostly into the familiar categories of man and woman, and there was significant distinction between these categories. Most striking is the practice of *pardah*, which is the segregation of the sexes such that men do not see women. Through *pardah*, women were active mostly in the home, while men were active in public life. Traditional gender roles were also quite defined, as is made clear by Nadia Maria El Cheikh's study of *adab* texts (as opposed to religious law) regarding the "ideal spouse." The ideal wife was to be "submissive and obedient" to her husband, guard his money and honor, groom herself for his pleasure, and otherwise serve him.¹ In turn, the man should be religious and just, handsome, and generous.² Because marriage was expected of Muslims by religious tradition and social

¹ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 2 (2002): 186-187.

² Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 2 (2002): 191.

custom,³ these descriptions can be applied to ideal women and men in general, and not only to the question of finding a marital partner. Clearly, the expectations for women were focused mainly on the husband and household and were very different from the more general ones for the men. This reinforces the idea that women operated mainly within the home and family, while men took on the outside world: in this way, women and men lived completely different lives based on their gender. The scope of these distinctions suggests that gender roles were extremely important, because they determined individuals' lives so thoroughly.

The roles of man/woman, however, were not universal. Several types of gender ambiguity and transgression were present and even institutionalized, from the acceptance of the natural androgyny of children to the *mukhannathun*, male-bodied people who acted and dressed effeminately and apparently identified as women. Same-sex sexual behavior was present, as were *ghulamiyat*, female slave-girls who presented themselves as men. Studying how these groups were viewed and treated can help make clear the attitude of medieval Middle Eastern culture towards gender transgression.

Sexual behavior between people of the same sex is an obvious and common form of gender transgression. Such behavior violates the expectation that males will be sexually attracted to and active with females only; and that females will be sexually attracted to and active with males only. Same-sex sexual behavior by both male and female people certainly existed in the medieval Middle East, although there is much more

³ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 2 (2002): 186.

evidence for such activity between males than between females.⁴ Sex between males was generally assumed to involve penetration (Rowson says that “the *fiqh* literature defines this [homosexual activity], more or less exclusively, as anal intercourse”⁵) leading to the distinct categories of the penetrator and the penetrated.⁶ Unlike many other societies, where both partners in a same-sex relationship are considered “gay,” the roles of penetrator and penetrated differed significantly in the eyes of other Muslims. The penetrator, whether acting upon a woman, a boy, or perhaps even another adult male, did not lose any respectability because he was still playing the traditional sexual role of the man. The penetrated role, on the other hand, was considered shameful and emasculating.⁷ Furthermore, romantic or sexual desire of other men was considered natural and not disgraceful; it was only the act of sex between men that was looked on with scorn (for the passive partner by society and for both partners by religious law). Schmidtke, in “Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam,” explains: “Islamic law condemned homosexual practice, not homoerotic sentiment. Mutual attraction between males was unanimously viewed to be perfectly natural and normal.”⁸ From these perspectives, we can see that not only did medieval Islamic culture value masculinity (for the position in the ‘masculine’ active role in sex was what determined the permissibility of the act; and men were allowed – even expected – to admire other men sexually for their masculine

⁴ References to woman-woman sexual relations are “few and scattered.” Sabine Schmidtke, “Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 2 (1999): 262.

⁵ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 685.

⁶ Sabine Schmidtke, “Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 2 (1999): 260.

⁷ Sabine Schmidtke, “Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 2 (1999): 261.

⁸ Sabine Schmidtke, “Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 2 (1999): 260.

qualities), it also cared more about specific deeds than thoughts, identity, and emotions when deciding whether a person was sinful or contemptible.⁹

A man who had sex with another man, even in the active role, was in dubious territory; but sex with a prepubescent boy was common and relatively acceptable – certainly for the man (known as a *luti*) and perhaps for the boy as well. Rowson comments in “Gender Irregularity” that “being known as a *luti* resulted in little or no loss of prestige” the public attitude towards lutes seems to have been... a sort of clucking disapproval not unmixed with envy.”¹⁰ This was because boys were not really considered men for the purposes of gender. Erotic poetry written about such relationships stresses the fact that the boys did not yet have beards, and many poets considered the growth of a beard to be a “blemish” on the boys’ attractiveness. Ibn al-Abbar, who lived from 1198 through 1260, wrote the following about a “gazelle,” a common term for the beloved, especially a young male:

*No, the gazelle is no more handsome
And his countenance, once like a moon, no more shines,
A beard has appeared on his face, a blemish
Which brought him death with no resurrection.*¹¹

The beard served as a mark of masculinity, and the lack of one made the boy a sort of androgynous being. This contributed to their sexual availability, which in turn made them seem yet more effeminate. Olsen notes the “sexual ambiguity” of these boys and also

⁹ Compare Jesus in the New Testament: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' But I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a women to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Mat 5: 27-28 King James Version.

¹⁰ Everett K. 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), 53.

¹¹ Glenn W. Olsen, “The Sodomitic Lions of Granada,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (Jan., 2004): 14-15.

mentions children who worked as wine servers, who were trained to be flirtatious and were perhaps admired for their androgyny. Interestingly, although the wine servers were often boys, girls with their hair cut short and dressed in boys' clothing could take the same role. The case of the wine servers implies that a child's gender could be determined according to the situation rather than by hir anatomy (not possible, at least so easily, for adults); and the sexual ambiguity of the sodomized boys made sex acts with them acceptable.

Ghulamiyat, who were a sort of female cross-dresser in 9th-century Baghdad,¹² were similar to the young wine-serving girls in several respects. Ghulamiyat were slave-girls who were dressed and groomed to appear as young, attractive men. Like the wine-serving girls, ghulamiyat were placed into a cross-gender role rather than choosing it based on personal preference or identity. Everett Rowson, in his description of the *ghulamiyat* in "Gender Irregularity," explains that although the ghulamiyat did not try to "pass," i.e. to be perceived as a male-bodied person, their dress and grooming did not retain any feminine qualities and they were reasonably indistinguishable from the boys they imitated. Rowson quotes a poem by the poet Abu Nuwas, in which Abu Nuwas describes an affair with a ghulamiyat, referring to hir first with female pronouns and later with male ones, and calling hir "boy." Clearly, there was considerable gender ambiguity

¹² The fad of having ghulamiyat developed after the mother of the caliph al-Amin provided him with cross-dressed slave-girls to distract him from his passion for eunuchs. Everett K. 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), 47.

surrounding the ghulamiyat, and yet they were popular with both the upper and middle classes.¹³

Male cross-dressers, known as *mukhannathun*, were also fixtures, but they were quite different from the ghulamiyat in several respects. They wore women's clothing and acted in a feminine manner, but were viewed as effeminate men rather than as women. They were popular first as musicians and later as entertainers, but frequently engaged in illicit activities such as matchmaking because they were allowed to spend time with women, under the assumption that they were not attracted to them.¹⁴ In 717, the *mukhannathun* of Medina (which, at the time, had the most notable group) were castrated as punishment for an uncertain transgression, though it seems that this was not done as a direct result of their gender behavior.¹⁵ Their response to the castration provides insight not only into their famed wit and irreverence but also their feelings about their gender.

Rowson quotes Hamza:

Nasim al-Sahar: "With castration I have become a *mukhannath* in truth!"

Nawmat al-Duha: "Or rather we have become women in truth!"

Bard al-Fu'ad: "We have been spared the trouble of carrying about a spout for urine."

Zill al-Shajar: "What would we do with an unused weapon, anyway?"¹⁶

¹³ Everett K. 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), 47.

¹⁴ "The Effeminate of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 675.

¹⁵ Everett K. Rowson, "The Effeminate of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 690-691.

¹⁶ "The Effeminate of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 691

From this commentary, it seems likely that some, if not most, mukhannathun identified as women in some fashion.¹⁷ They are distinct from ghulamiyat in that they chose the mukhannath role based on their own internal identity, rather than being put into it. They also gave up status as a result of that decision: a mukhannath, though not necessarily despised by society, was not someone to be taken seriously in the way that sie might have been had sie decided to live as a traditional man.¹⁸ Their status dropped significantly between the height of their fame at Medina in the early Umayyad period and their reemergence in ‘Abbasid Baghdad. During the latter time, they were more entertainers than musicians, and their jokes often focused on a “flaunting of [their] passive homosexuality.”¹⁹ Simultaneously, or perhaps as a result, they were now more consistently associated with passive homosexuality;²⁰ the stigma of that institution presumably led to their relative disgrace.

Clearly, each type of cross-gender behavior was distinct in its origins and social status. To discover how they fit together, we must examine the question of gender transgression from several perspectives, including that of religious law and tradition, secular law and beliefs, and science.

The rationalist scientist ar-Razi, in a piece on the “treatment” of passive homosexual desire, describes his theories about the origins of gender and makes clear that

¹⁷ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 692.

¹⁸ “...presumably dubious social status,” Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 671.

¹⁹ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 693.

²⁰ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 693.

he perceived a connection between sex, gender, and “sexual orientation.”²¹ He suggests that all three categories are decided in utero: the “sperm” of the mother and the sperm of the father combine to form the child, and the gender trichotomy depends on the relative strength of each sperm. If, for example, the mother’s sperm is much stronger than that of the father, the child will be female and very feminine in her characteristics, physical and otherwise. If the father’s sperm is significantly stronger, the child will be male and quite masculine. Ar-Razi admits that most people exist in some middle ground, where the sperm are more equal: these children, he says, “whether male or female, [are] not masculine in the extreme and not feminine in the extreme.”²² He goes on to mention people in whom the sperm are supposedly quite equal, with the result of a feminine man, a masculine woman, or an intersex person. So, significantly, a person’s gender was thought (at least by ar-Razi) to be genetically determined, and some people were physically, naturally inclined to behave in an epicene manner and/or be attracted to people of the same sex. This is important because if gender is something inherent in a person from birth, it is more difficult to think of gender transgression as “deviant behavior” – that is, people can’t be blamed for something that comes naturally to them. Ar-Razi expresses distaste for passive homosexual behavior in this discussion, and offers a “cure,” but he admits that males who are naturally very feminine cannot be “cured” (and, to continue the previous argument, are not to blame for their behavior). In addition, the philosopher Miskawayh commented that being a mukhannath was a result of a physical inclination, but that it could be “treated,” and that such a person was to blame

²¹ The term “sexual orientation” may not be appropriate, since it speaks to modern/Western concepts of sexuality, but it is difficult to find an appropriate substitute.

²² Franz Rosenthal, “Ar-Razi on the Hidden Illness,” Macalester College, <http://www.macalester.edu/~cuffel/ar-razi2.htm>.

for not suppressing his natural tendencies. He notes that if it were not possible for him to do so, then it would be unfair to condemn him.

It is important to consider that Razi, unlike many people in the medieval Middle East, was deeply suspicious of religion,²³ and so his views may not reflect the beliefs of the devout Muslims of the time. The perspective of Muslim religious law on gender transgression is quite different than Razi's scientific proposal. The prophet Muhammad condemned cross-dressers in particular: Rowson, in "Effeminates," quotes a *hadith* reading "the prophet cursed effeminate men and mannish women" or, alternatively, "men who imitate women" and "women who imitate men."²⁴ The Qur'an appears to decry same-sex sexual behavior in the following lines:

4:15 If any of your women commit a lewd act, call in four witnesses from among yourselves against them; if they testify to their guilt confine them to their houses till death overtakes them or till God finds another way for them.

*4:16 If two men among you commit a lewd act, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, let them be. God is forgiving and merciful.*²⁵

According to Schmidtke, the actual punishment for sex or desire between men is debated between traditions: some are tolerant, while others claim that Muhammad mandated that both partners be killed.²⁶ But the question is not whether Muslim tradition denounces gender transgression, as is clear from this evidence; it is, rather, whether cultural attitudes overcame this disapprobation. Rowson relates the following anecdote about some men

²³ "Al-Razi made it clear that all supposedly revealed religions were a disaster for humanity... human beings could negotiate existence on its most profound level without religion." Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 229.

²⁴ Everett K. Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 673

²⁵ Qur'an 4:15-16.

²⁶ Sabine Schmidtke, "Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 2 (1999): 260.

caught out in a rainstorm who must decide whether to take shelter in the house of Tuways, a well-known mukhannath:

“...He proposed that they take refuge with Tuways, near whose residence they were standing, and enjoy his conversation, but Abd al-Rahman b. Hassan b. Thabit objected, saying, “With all due respect, what do you want with Tuways? He is under the wrath of God, a mukhannath whom it is shameful to know.” Abdallah replied, “Don’t say that! He is a witty, delightful person, and will give us good company...”

Rahman says specifically that Tuways is “under the wrath of God,” but Abdallah disregards this due to Tuways’ admirable personal characteristics. At least for Abdallah, and apparently for many other people, the religious proclamations against gender transgression were not important enough to condemn gender-variant people in everyday life.

Of course, each type of gender-variant person would have experienced different treatment, which probably also depended on the area and the time period. Mukhannathun experienced the greatest drop in social status due to their gender, and were sometimes persecuted, though not consistently. Another anecdote about Tuways quotes someone as saying of him, “his downfall was his *khunth* [effeminacy]; were it not for that, there is not one of the Quraysh, or the Ansar, or anyone else, who would have failed to welcome him.” Rowson says that “the mukhannathun were not respectable because they had voluntarily relinquished their manhood.”²⁷ Often, though, it was not so clear that their effeminacy was the direct cause of their disgrace. Rather, it seems that effeminacy was associated with irreverent behavior – not entirely untrue, considering that the

²⁷ Everett K. 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), 65.

mukhannathun were famed as musicians (music was considered frivolous) and for their cheeky humor. The persecution of the mukhannathun during the early Umayyad period, Rowson says, appears to have been “based on a perceived connection between cross-dressing and a lack of proper religious commitment.”²⁸ Official persecution, however, depended greatly on who was in power at the time; in fact, according to an anecdote, the caliph Sulayman brought the mukhannath al-Dalal to his court after al-Dalal was castrated in the 717 persecution; the caliph was apparently distressed by that turn of events, and had al-Dalal sing for him, kept hir at court for a month, and rewarded hir afterward.²⁹ The same caliphs who were strict against all sorts of impropriety were the ones who struck out against the mukhannathun: for example, one governor of Mecca “took stringent measures against singing, singers, and date-wine, and issued a proclamation against the *mukhannathun*.”³⁰ Another caveat was the mukhannath’s perceived involvement in heterosexual immorality, including matchmaking activities. In one hadith, Muhammad banishes the mukhannath Hit after he catches hir describing a woman’s belly wrinkles to Muhammad’s brother-in-law.³¹ Presumably, not all mukhannathun engaged in such activities, but generalizations about their immorality, irreligiosity, and irreverence were what tended to lead to their persecution.

Society treated the *ghulamiyat* quite differently than it did the mukhannathun. Rowson explains: “The *ghulamiyat* were not respectable because they were slaves and because they appeared in public, in contrast to respectable free women, kept in seclusion

²⁸ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 687

²⁹ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 692

³⁰ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 688

³¹ Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1991): 674

and veiled from public view... The gender strand within the social hierarchy cost [hir] no prestige relative to [hir] more conventional slave-girl peers...³² In other words, a ghulamiya, as a slave and a female, already had a low status. Taking on masculine characteristics did not shame hir further because sie was adopting some of the trappings of man – the public, powerful gender role. In contrast, the mukhannath gave up masculinity in hir gender role, and in doing so brought hirsself further from the respectable status sie perhaps, in the eyes of those who believed that hir gender was a conscious decision on hir part, could have had. Additionally, while mukhannathun were thought to promote sexual immorality, ghulamiyat did something of the opposite: they at least occasionally charmed gay men, resulting in sex that was technically legitimate because the ghulamiyat was female-bodied!

Clearly, the Middle East did not have one clear line on cross-gender behavior. The way in which such behaviors were handled varied due to a number of factors and was based on questions of reputation, sexual morality as defined by religious law, and gender prestige. However, it is clear from the case of the ghulamiyat that excepting the words of Muhammad, there was no direct proscription against cross-gender behavior. Problems arose when such behavior was correlated with other problematic activities, or when the gender performed was one more feminine – and thus of lower status – than that suggested by the person’s sex and other status-determining elements. It seems possible that, as has been suggested about modern Western transgender people,³³ mukhannathun and passive homosexuals seemed threatening because the idea that a male-bodied person

³² Everett K. 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), 65.

³³ For a non-academic but fascinating discussion of this theory, see Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vision Books, 1994).

would elect to live as something other than a traditional man questions a deep-set societal assumption: that is, that man is the gender of opportunity and thus the one to be desired. But whatever the reason for their attitudes, it is clear that medieval Muslim society was not nearly as clear-cut on issues of gender transgression as one might assume.