

Abstract

Title: Narrative, Gender and Authority in ‘Abbāsīd Literature on Women

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The ‘Abbāsīd dynasty came to power after a revolution in 750, and ruled the vast Muslim empire until the 930s and 940s. This period has often been dubbed the golden era of Islam, due to its prospering and often innovative cultural and scientific production. During this period, some of the fundamental texts in Islam were produced, collections of traditions from the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers, Qur’ān exegesis, jurisprudence and the legal discussions which led to the Islamic laws (*sharī‘a*). These texts are often referred to when women’s situation in Islam is discussed. However, curiously, women’s status in ‘Abbāsīd literature is frequently examined without taking in account the breadth of this literature with its seemingly paradoxical images of issues such as gender, sex and women. This study attempts to contribute to a more comprehensive picture of women and gender in ‘Abbāsīd literature, analyzing texts about women from completely different contexts with the help of narratology, in particular the methods elaborated by Gerard Génette and Mieke Bal. The texts analysed in this thesis are the biographies of pious women in *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* by Ibn Sa‘d (d. 845), in particular Muḥammad’s wife ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr, the biography of the ‘Abbāsīd court singer ‘Arīb, by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967) and the volume on women, *Kitāb al-nisā’*, in the adab anthology *‘Uyūn al-akhbār*, by Ibn Qutayba (d. 889). The analyses explore how narrative technique is used to create authority, or authenticity, in the distinctive khabar-literature, to which all the analyzed texts belong. Moreover, the construction of gender is discussed, along with gender-based hierarchies and different approaches towards authority. The women’s biographies in Ibn Sa‘d’s work are arranged around two poles: women’s object-positions in marriage and subject-positions in piety, linguistically as well as thematically. Here, it is argued, we may discern a normative tendency, which acknowledges women’s capacity to act as individuals, as long as it is within certain spheres of society. These texts provide a static model for gender relationships, where the husband is always the absolute authority, reflecting a view of hierarchy as being constant. Conversely, the anecdotes in the more profane texts often have as their main point the overturning of hierarchies, and women have mostly the last word. Hierarchies and authorities are challenged on a thematic as well as a linguistic level. Possibly, the disagreement in women’s possibilities and positions between the religious and the profane texts are due to the interpretation of the first Muslim community in Medina as being stable, whereas positions and hierarchies in ‘Abbāsīd Iraq are uncertain and fluctuating. Although these positions are literary motives, the analyses give an idea about the limits of thinkable behaviours and roles of women, limits that are far more flexible and permitting than generally maintained.

Key words: ‘Abbāsīd literature, ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr, qiyān, khabar, adab, history-writing, ḥadīth literature, narratology, gender, power-relationship, hierarchy, authority, subject-position, obedience, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, Ibn Sa‘d, Ibn Qutayba