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Deborah Schlein April 16, 2013

The Talent and The Intellect: The *Qayna*'s Application of Skill in the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid Royal Courts

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies

2013

Abstract

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The *qayna* of the Umayyad (661-750) and ʿAbbasid empires (750-1258) was an extremely well-educated slave girl trained in the arts of poetic recitation, verse creation, musical theory, and song. This intensive education made her one of the most highly valued commodities in the empire, therefore, only wealthy noblemen and caliphs could purchase and keep such a slave. Their renown in these arts made many of these royally-owned *qiyān* quite famous, and anecdotes concerning them abound in literature of the ʿAbbasid era and afterward. These texts include the tenth-century historiographical work by al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and the Mines of Gems*), the tenth-century texts concerning song and poetry by al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (*The Book of Songs*) and *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir* (*The Slave Poetesses*), and the thirteenth-century biographical dictionary by Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ* (*The Women of the Caliphs*). Scholarship written on these women includes studies of their education and their interactions with their masters, but little research has been done concerning their agency. What has been said points only to the *qiyān*'s beauty and sexual allure as their tools of influence. Using the aforementioned texts, this thesis aims to discuss how the *qayna* primarily used her skills and intellect, over her beauty and sex appeal, to obtain certain freedoms, influence, and social mobility in the caliph's household.

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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Devin Stewart, for being such an incredible sounding board for all my various thesis ideas and questions. Dr. Stewart's ability to pull any book off the shelf pertaining to my various interests was invaluable to me as I was trying to figure out how best to pursue the topic of the *qiyān*. I am incredibly grateful to Dr. Roxani Margariti for her confidence in me and her constant encouragement throughout the research and writing process. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Strocchia for her support and guidance, as well as her knowledge of Italian Renaissance courtesans.

I am grateful to the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry, whose directors and fellows gave me unending support, a place to work without distraction, and numerous snacks to sustain me during the writing process.

I would also like to thank my Arabic professors, Rkia Cornell and Youness Elbousty, for helping me to reach a point in my Arabic skills where I was able to translate texts from the tenth century. Their encouragement and support over the past four years are the sole reason I was able to take on such complex texts.

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Introduction

"For if she set down upon her cheek one line of musk/ then I have set down upon my heart many lines of passion, And how lucky is the slave whose owner remains/ obedient to him [her] in what he [she] expresses and keeps concealed"

- "Laʿin ʾawdaʿat khaṭān min al-miski khaddahā/ laqad ʾawdaʿat qalbī min al-wajdi ʾasṭurā//
  Fayā man li-mamlūkin yaẓallu malīkuhu/ muṭīʿān lahu fīmā ʾasarra wa-ajharā"

- Maḥbūba, from al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and the Mines of Gems*)[1]

According to tenth-century Muslim historian al-Masʿūdī, these verses were composed and recited by the singing slave girl, Maḥbūba, to her master, the ʿAbbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil (r. 847 - 861). Maḥbūba was one of the *qiyān* (singular: *qayna*), slaves who were educated in the arts of music, poetry, and song. She was so talented and intelligent that al-Masʿūdī describes her abilities as equal to those of the *ʿulamāʾ*.[2] As a *qayna*, she was under the caliph's ownership and she worked to fulfill his every desire with her renowned skills, her creativity, and her intellect.

The verses above reveal Maḥbūba's talents, as well as her intimate relationship with the caliph. Upon entering a chamber, al-Mutawakkil found one of his *qiyān* had written his name, Jaʿfar, on her cheek with musk. He was so taken with the beauty of this scene that he ordered ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, a poet and the caliph's close confidant, to compose a poem to mark the occasion.

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[1] Abī al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), p. 125.

[2] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 124.

While ʿAlī was still considering his words, Maḥbūba, who was sitting behind a screen near the caliph, rose to the task and composed her own lines, reciting her verses. The first line recalls the scene that al-Mutawakkil so admired. The starkness of his name against the *qayna*'s cheek delighted the caliph. He had never seen such an innovative trick before, and this expression of the *qayna*'s love thrilled him. While another woman has performed this trick, it is Maḥbūba who, has "set down upon [her own] heart many lines of passion," and fallen in love with the caliph. She uses this instance to show the strength of her love and devotion for the caliph as greater than that of this other *qayna*, her rival. She also mentions the master fulfilling the wishes of the slave, in this case Maḥbūba herself, in that which "[she] expresses and keeps concealed." This is an allusion to the Qur'anic explanation of the omniscience of G-d: "He knows what is apparent and what is hidden."[3] In relation to al-Mutawakkil, Maḥbūba recalls his own ability to recognize her wishes without her having to voice them. This puts the caliph in a position of understanding, similar to G-d's all-knowing nature. She flatters al-Mutawakkil by comparing his ability to understand to the omniscience of G-d. This verse can also be interpreted as signifying the intimate relationship she shares with the caliph, both in public and in private. While, on the surface, these verses discuss another *qayna*'s actions, Maḥbūba's lines serve to underline her own relationship with al-Mutawakkil. Additionally, her words shed light on the status of *qiyān* owned by the caliph as slave members of his household.

Maḥbūba's verses encapsulate the royally-owned *qayna*'s status and station during both the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires. She was a highly educated slave woman who, in addition to her diverse artistic talents, was also extremely intelligent and learned. She was trained in the arts

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[3] Qur'an, 87:7.

of flirtation and sexual techniques as well, and was, therefore, as much a symbol of sexual appeal as she was of artistic achievement and intellect. It is evident from the four lines quoted above, that Maḥbūba and al-Mutawakkil had a long-standing relationship, and her poetry reveals that love, herself "deposit(ing) many lines of love on (her) heart."[4] *Qiyān* like Maḥbūba employed their skills to entertain their royal master and his guests, and to obtain a certain amount of power within the caliph's household. These women, who were owned by the caliph and were, by definition, slaves, wielded influence within the royal household and gained social standing and privilege through the employment of their abilities and their intellect.

The *qayna* as an elite slave was skilled in the arts of poetic recitation, verse composition, musical performance, and singing. These talents made her one of the most highly valued commodities in the empire. While wealthy noblemen and members of the upper middle-class did own talented *qiyān*, it is mostly the royally-owned female slave entertainers whose names have come down through the source material concerning their skills and profession. Through these sources, the modern reader can get a glimpse of how these women were perceived by society and, more importantly, by the scholarly class of men who wrote about the *qiyān* and whose works are extant today.

A *qayna*'s talents and intellect, though helpful to her in obtaining certain freedoms and influence within the caliph's household, were viewed by many members of Umayyad and ʿAbbasid society as a distraction from the caliph's own important duties and responsibilities. The opinions concerning the institution of the *qiyān* and their professionalization reflected this. Because of the nature of her occupation, a *qayna* was viewed by many as a sexual being first,

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[4] Fuad Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 143.

one whose beauty took precedence over her skills and intellect. It was her "inconsistency and her voracious appetite for lovers" that were the foundations of her opponents' criticisms.[5] The *qayna* as seductress and siren was a typical perception held by early Islamicate society, but so was the idea that the *qiyān* were skilled and educated women who could hold their own with men of great intellect and merit.

Most sources that discuss the *qiyān* contain narrative and literary anecdotes, and were written beginning in the eighth century, when these women began to gain notoriety in society. The *qayna* and her experiences were noted in historiographical texts, treatises on poetry, romantic literature, and critical diatribes. Depending on the literary group to which these texts belong, each source presents the lives and talents of these singing slave girls in a different manner.

The narrative sources include historiographical texts and biographical dictionaries which describe the *qayna* through the use of anecdotes of her life and experiences. This applies mainly to al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and the Mines of Gems*), al-Iṣfahāni's *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir* (*The Slave Poetesses)*, Ibn al-Sāʿī's *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ* (*The Women of the Caliphs*), and Yūnus al-Kātib's *Kitāb al-Qiyān* (*The Book of the Qiyān*).[6] Treatises on poetry and music, such as al-Iṣfahāni's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (*The Book of Songs*), also belong to this group of sources, which present the *qiyān* in a similar fashion, with the reported narratives attempting to give the reader an idea of their talents and personalities, without openly expressing a positive or negative opinion. Many of the *qiyān* in these anecdotes

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[5] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 6.

[6] Wijdan Ali, *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art: From the Seventh to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), p. 50. Yūnus al-Kātib's *Kitāb al-Qiyān* is a compilation of the history of Ḥijāzīi music and biographies of singers and musicians.

can be read as literary types, fulfilling preconceived notions of scholars who saw these slave women as lovers, confidantes, and talented entertainers.

In the romantic literature, such as the *qaṣīda* (ode) "Waḥīd, the Singing Slave Girl of ʻAmhama," by Ibn al-Rumi (836-896), the *qayna* was the soul-mate who educated her master, with her music, songs, and verses, in monogamous love and passion.[7] She became a symbol of culture and romance within these texts, and her relationship with her master was portrayed as easily overcoming all social and legal obstacles.

In direct opposition to this particular perception of the royal *qayna*, much of the contemporary critical literature, including texts written by Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib Al-Sarakhsī (d. 899), a ninth-century litterateur who wrote about poetry and the *qiyān,* viewed these slave women with great disdain. Al-Sarakhsī sees the *qayna* as a symbol of profligacy and sexuality and one who distracts men from their responsibilities.[8] The *qayna* was described as a drain on wealth, a villain, and, in a number of cases, a threat to the very structure of family, as she distracted young men from marriage.[9] In these critical texts, the *qayna's* sole purpose was to cause the downfall of man and society. The *qiyān "*were vilified as unprincipled women,"[10] and the way they were portrayed and viewed in this literature mirrors a similar backlash of public

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[7] Julia Bray "Men, Women, and Slaves in ʿAbbasid Society" in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300 - 900*, Ed. Leslie Brubaker, Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 137.

[8] Franz Rosenthal, *Aḥmad b. At-Ṭayyib As-Sarakhsī* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1943), pp. 95-6. Al-Sarakhsī writes about a *qayna* named Sabah. A musician named al-Zubaydi heard her sing and decided to train her to become a *qayna*. After her debut, Sabah became famous and many men fell in love with her due to her breathtaking voice. She takes a lover, marries him, has his child, and then is divorced by her husband. Al-Sarakhsī writes that this doesn't seem to phase her and she takes a friend's servant as a lover. He notes "she did not disdain or refrain from anyone, from the oldest to the youngest," and her profligacy and her open sexuality give her a negative reputation in Al-Sarakhsī's eyes.

[9] Bray, "Men, Women, and Slaves in ʿAbbasid Society," p. 137.

[10] Kristina Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," in *Children in Slavery Through the Ages,* edited by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph C. Miller (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State Press, 2009), p. 109.

opinion during the Ottoman empire, when the sultan's concubines were considered to be just as manipulative and distracting.[11]

Concerning the critical literature directed toward the *qiyān*, al-Jāḥiẓ' ninth-century *Risālat al-Qiyān* says a great deal about the *qayna* and her profession. This short text is fashioned as an epistle written for men of great means and intellect, nobles who dabbled in the arts and enjoyed their entertainment. As James Montgomery explains, the text is ultimately a defense of the nobleman's lifestyle, rife with entertainment, intellectual discourse, and the performances of the *qiyān*. The *Risāla* does, however, superficially parrot the complaints of the day concerning these female professionals, but this is all in a further attempt to defend the need for the *qiyān* as a professional class and their importance to society.[12]

From these complaints, the reader can discern what negative views did exist concerning these women. In reference to her ostensible love for her master, al-Jāḥiẓ writes, "The singing girl is hardly ever sincere in her passion, or wholehearted in her affection. For both by training and by innate instinct her nature is to set up snares and traps for the victims, in order that they may fall into her toils," and, ultimately, help her to obtain the prestige and influence she desires.[13] This is why al-Jāḥiẓ superficially calls *qiyān* insincere: he writes that they are "given to employing deceit and treachery in squeezing out the property of the deluded victim and then abandoning him."[14] The *qayna* is viewed as possessing a deceptive nature, out for herself alone,

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[11] Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 63.

[12] James E. Montgomery, "Beeston and the Singing Girls" in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies,* vol. 36 (London: Archaeopress, 2006), p. 20.

[13] Abū ʿUthman ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *Risālat al-Qiyān* (*The Epistle on Singing Girls of Jahiz)*, trans. A.F.L. Beeston with Arabic original (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1980), pp. 31-2.

[14] *ibid.* p. 34.

and only seeming to love her master in order to attain a certain status. Though al-Jāḥiẓ uses the *Risāla* ultimately to demonstrate the importance of the *qayna*'s work and station in society, his seemingly outraged complaints concerning them do shed light on how the *qiyān* were perceived by certain outspoken members of the community.

Two dissimilar opinions concerning the *qiyān* and their profession began to emerge as these women gained status and prestige through the application of their prodigious skills. The *qayna*'s ability to change her master's mood, or that of her general audience, with the presentation of a song or a quick-witted reply in verse to another poet's words, was her way of gaining acceptance in the court and finding a place in her master's heart - if not one of love, then at least one of great appreciation and respect. Kristina Richardson notes that the *qiyān* were viewed with both admiration and suspicion, since they "occupied an intermediate position in Islamicate society between the secluded sphere of women and the visible sphere of male belletrists."[15] Richardson goes on to say that the *qiyān* "held liminal positions as 'privileged' slave women who did not command the same respect as free entertainers and men of letters.[16] In describing the *qayna*'s status in this fashion, Richardson attempts to explain the limbo these women were in, constantly trying to please their masters but never gaining equal standing with their free male counterparts. It seems to me, however, that the successful *qayna* not only obtained a status in her master's household that was often higher than that of free women, but she also possessed poetic skills equal to if not better than those of the caliph's own male poets. Maḥbūba is a primary example of this phenomenon. In *Murūj al-Dhahab* she is deemed to possess poetic and intellectual skills on par with, and often better than, those of al-Mutawakkil's

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[15] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 109.

[16] *ibid.*

(r. 847-861) own poets and scholars, such as ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, whom Maḥbūba easily surpasses in extemporaneous verse composition.[17] Richardson does have a point, however, in that there were two very different views of the institution of *qiyān* in the caliph's court. On the one hand, *qiyān* were praised for their skill and talent, but on he other hand, they were very often viewed as distractions for the caliph and entertainers who led him astray from his duties as ruler of the Islamic empire. The more women who were brought to Baghdad as prisoners of war to become *jawārī* for the noble households, the more corruption seemed to spread.[18] It seems that many people saw the *qiyān* as disturbances to the flow of royal and political responsibilities to which the caliph was required to attend. As in the Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik's reign (r. 720-724), the *qiyān* distracted the ruler from his daily obligations and, therefore, they were viewed as a primary reason for the corruption and eventual downfall of the empire. Their ultimate place in society, however, was as educated and intelligent companions with whom the caliph was comfortable conversing and to whom he delighted in listening.

This kind of slave-master relationship grew out of a system of slavery which introduced increasing numbers of *qiyān* and *jawārī* to the early Islamicate courts. These slave women were captured as a result of the Arab conquests, and the Umayyad and, particularly, the ʿAbbasid courts housed many of these talented slave women. The ʿAbbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) was said to have owned more than four thousand concubines, all housed in the palace in Baghdad.[19] This influx of *jawārī* resulted in a shift away from the freer society in which slave and free women lived, to a more secluded existence for the free women of the empire.

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[17] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 125.

[18] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 43.

[19] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 82.

Before Islamicate society was inundated with *jawārī* and concubines as a result of the Arab conquests, free women were more independent in their actions and decisions. Women living before the advent of Islam participated in community affairs. Like the Prophet's favored wife ʿĀʾisha, who briefly took up political leadership after his death, women of the *jāhiliyya* would support their men in battle by singing to keep up their courage, feeding them, and caring for the wounded and the dying.[20] Women were allowed more sexual autonomy in their marriages which were matrilocal, in that the husband had to either visit or reside with his wife, and matrilineal, with all children belonging to the mother's tribe.[21] Even after Islam became an established religion, Muslim women were not nearly as secluded or submissive as their Jewish and Christian counterparts.[22] They were free to go out into the markets without a male relative as escort. The legal requirement of *ḥajj* also allowed many of these women to venture from their homes in order to perform public acts of devotion and philanthropy, and a wife did not need her husband's consent to go on pilgrimage (though she was not entitled to his support if she went against his wish). Muslim wives were not subject to their husband's authority while performing *ḥajj*.[23] The act of pilgrimage was more important than obedience to one's husband.

As more female slaves entered *dār al-Islam*, and the professionalization of the *jawārī* became more pronounced, free women of the empire began to lose their independence. There was a definite distinction between the two classes of women. While the Arab woman of noble

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[20] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam,* p. 42.

[21] *ibid.*, p. 41.

[22] Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State in Early Islam - Part 1," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, No. 1 (1942): p. 115

[23] Marina Tolmacheva, "Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval Ḥajj," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R.G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 161.

lineage was perceived as haughty, but generally virtuous, the slave woman, working as a singer or concubine (in some cases, both), was understood to have pride in her beauty and talent, but very loose morals.[24] The idea of *fitna* - the undisciplined release of sexual energy and the ensuing temptation - further widened the divide concerning the rights of free women versus those of singing girls and courtesans.[25] Whereas free women were losing their independence through the enactment of a strict morality concerning their every decision and movement, slave girls were trained as singers, dancers, and musicians and were encouraged to use their skills to entertain their audiences. The *qiyān* constituted formidable rivals for the noble Arab wives, who saw these concubines as usurpers of the affection and favor of Arab men. Because of the enormous harems many ʿAbbasid caliphs possessed, women, both wives and concubines, likely experienced a great amount of psychological and emotional insecurity as they competed for their husband or master's affections.[26] This rivalry was made even more intense by the close connection a *qayna* shared with her master, the caliph, as a result of the application of her skills in poetry and music. Within the Umayyad and the ʿAbbasid courts, in particular, foreign slave women began to make their mark in the royal bloodline. Numerous ʿAbbasid caliphs were the sons of concubines, including Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809), son of al-Khayzurān, and Maʾmun (r. 813-833), son of Marājil. Thus, the freedoms of noble Arab women were severely curtailed as the *jāriya* became a more prominent influence in the caliphal court.

The curtailing of free women's rights as a result of the influx of slave girls in the wealthy Umayyad and ʿAbbasid households is a topic of discourse among feminist scholars of pre-

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[24] Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State in Early Islam - Part 2," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, No. 3 (1942), p. 351.

[25] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 113.

[26] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 82.

modern Islam. This phenomenon has been dubbed by Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan feminist writer, as the '*jawārī* revolution.' As she explains, "it could be argued that the first slave revolt was that of the women slaves, the *jawārī*, who... launched (their own) assault on the caliphs. The only difficulty is dating the event, which might be done by identifying the first caliph who became hostage to the charms of his slave singer."[27] This 'revolution,' in which the *jawārī* and, more specifically, the *qiyān* used their talents and intellect in order to win over their masters, allowed a number of these slave girls to gain even more freedoms within the household, while free women were relegated to their quarters, away from the gatherings of men. Additionally, Leila Ahmed explains that the seclusion of the harem, where the caliph visited his wives and concubines, was much harder on the freeborn Arab woman than it was on the concubine.[28] The Arab wife was confined to her quarters, while the *qayna* was called to entertain the caliph and his guests. It was quite possible that the *jāriya* would see her master more often in one week than the caliph's legal wives did. Thus, a slave girl was more likely to have a standing relationship with the caliph than was his own wife.

The discussion of the *qayna's* freedom, in relation to that of legally free women, is just one topic of discourse covered by scholars who have written about the events that led up to and were affected by the arrival of the *qiyān*. The scholarship written about the *qiyān* themselves can be divided into two main groups - general examinations of these women and their arts and responses and reactions to particular sources written about them.

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[27] Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 37.

[28] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 79.

There are a few works that discuss the slavery, education, and arts of these women as a developing institution of early Islamic society. In her 2009 article "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," Kristina Richardson presents a gendered study of slavery in the ʿAbbasid period focusing primarily on the *qiyān*.[29] Her examination of the *qiyān* sheds light on the rights and privileges of this class of slave women. Fuad Matthew Caswell's *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, published in 2011, is a study of the institution of the *qiyān,* its history, and the roles these singing slave women carried out.[30] Caswell's text also includes case studies of specific singing slave girls, including ʿArīb, a talented *qayna* who performed for a total of six caliphs, from al-Amin (r. 809-813) to al-Mu'tazz (r. 866-869).[31] Madeleine Pelner Cosman and Linda Jones' 2008 *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World* briefly discusses the *qiyān* in relation to the development of music.[32] They paint the *qayna* as a singer continuing the long history of Arabian music and poetry. Additionally, J.E. Bencheikh's "Les Musiciens et la Poésie: Les Écoles d'Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī et d'Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Mahdī," published in 1975, describes the education of these women in the context of the Mawṣilī and Mahdī schools, which served as two of the most renowned programs for educating future *qiyān.*[33]

A number of articles discuss the portrayal of these singing slave women in contemporary texts of the ʿAbbasid period. al-Jāḥiẓ' *Risālat al-Qiyān* is the most popular topic, with three

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[29] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," pp. 105-116.

[30] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*.

[31] *ibid.,* p. 97. This leaves out al-Muntasir (r. 861-2) and al-Musta'in (r. 862-6) whom ʿArīb did not work under.

[32] Madeleine Pelner Cosman, Linda G. Jones, *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2008), pp. 752-4.

[33] J.E. Bencheikh, "Les Musiciens et la Poésie: Les Écoles d'Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī et d'Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Mahdī" in *Arabica* 22, No. 2 (1975), pp. 114-152.

articles examining his treatment of this particular institution of slavery. Charles Pellat's "Les Esclaves-Chanteuses de Ǧāḥiẓ," published in 1963 is a historical, sociological, and literary commentary on the *Risāla*.[34] James Montgomery's 2006 article "Beeston and the Singing Slave Girls," refutes the argument that al-Jāḥiẓ' epistle was purely a tirade against the existence of the singing slave girl.[35] Frédérique Sicard's "L'amour dans la Risâlat al-Qiyân: Essai sur les Esclaves-Chanteuses de Ǧāḥiẓ," published in 1987, presents the *Risāla* as a prime example of Arabic-Muslim literature about love where, in this case, the beloved is a slave.[36] Concerning other texts written about the *qiyān*, Hilary Kilpatrick's article "Women as Poets and Chattels: Abū l-Faraǧ al-Iṣbahāni's 'al-Imā` al-Šawā`ir,'" published in 1991, analyzes the duel nature of the *qayna*, both as artist and as slave.[37] Here she discusses the slave poetesses' literary activity during the ʿAbbasid period using the anecdotes in al-Iṣfahāni's text. Akiko Motoyoshi's article "Sensibility and Synaesthesia: Ibn al-Rūmī's Singing Slave Girl," published in 2001, reads the tenth-century poet's verses as a description of the *qayna*'s skill and her effects on men.[38] Additionally, Nadia El-Cheikh's 2002 article "Women's History: A Study of al-Tanukhi," uses this tenth-century author's two most famous texts on the social history of the ninth and tenth centuries - *Nishwār al-Muḥāḍara wa-Akhbār al-Mudhākara* (*Shared Conversation and*

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[34] Charles Pellat, "Les Esclaves-Chanteuses de Ǧāḥiẓ" in *Arabica* 10, No. 2 (1963), pp. 121-47.

[35] Montgomery, "Beeston and the Singing Girls," pp. 12-24.

[36] Frédérique Sicard, "L'amour dans la Risâlat al-Qiyân: Essai sur les Esclaves-Chanteuses de Ǧāḥiẓ," *Arabica,* vol. 34, No. 3 (1987), pp. 326-338.

[37] Hilary Kilpatrick, "Women as Poets and Chattels: Abū l-Faraǧ Al-Iṣbahāni's "Al-Imā' Al-Šawā'ir" in *Quaderni di Studi Arabi,* vol. 9 (1991), pp. 161-176.

[38] Akiko Motoyoshi, "Sensibility and Synaesthesia: Ibn al-Rūmī's Singing Slave-Girl," in *Journal of Arabic Literature,* vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 1-29.

Memorable Information) and *Al-Faraj ba'da l-shidda* (*Deliverance from Misfortune*) - to discuss the freedoms and actions of women in the ʿAbbasid period, including those of the *qiyān*.[39]

Very little of the scholarship that has been written about the *qiyān* discusses their application of skill and intellect as a force in obtaining freedoms and influence within their masters' households. Most of the works that mention the ways in which a *qayna* gained her powers of influence say nothing of her artistic talents or intellectual skills being used for her own gain. Rather, they point only to her possession of beauty and sexual appeal as tools of influence. *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, by Fuad Matthew Caswell, explores the lives of the *qiyān* and their many accomplishments, but presents these women as slaves whose sole purpose is to "please and (to) act as objects of desire."[40] He posits, with this theory, that it is mainly their beauty and their sexual allure that helped them to obtain exceptional freedoms and influence within the caliph's household. In addition to this work, Kristina Richardson's "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries" depicts the *qiyān* as memorable more for their sexual intrigues and relationships with their masters than for their talents or exceptional abilities. She argues that, "the female slave entertainers of caliphs and other wealthy patrons of the ʿAbbasid period exploited their sexuality and their proximity to the politically powerful for personal gain."[41]

While it is true that a major part of a *qayna*'s job was to offer her master companionship and sexual favors, this did not necessarily define her life, nor was it the only way she obtained power and privileges within his household. I propose that it is primarily a *qayna*'s application of

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[39] Nadia M. El-Cheikh, "Women's History: A Study of al-Tanukhi" in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources* ed. Manuel Marín, Randi Deguilhem (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), pp. 129-48.

[40] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 14.

[41] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 106.

her impressive array of artistic and literary talents, as well as that of her intellect, rather than the use of her beauty or sexuality alone, which ultimately helped her to obtain certain freedoms, influence, and social mobility within the caliphal court. This kind of application, exemplified in the *qayna*'s use of skill in musical performance, singing, and verse composition and recitation, is the agency that most helps her to gain privileges and influence within her master's household, and instances of it abound in the anecdotes concerning these talented women. Much as the sultan's own women during the Ottoman empire helped construct his household, so too did the *qiyān* help construct the caliphates of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires with the combined powers of their skills and intellect.[42] In fact, more than half of the thirty-seven ʿAbbasid caliphs were born of slave mothers. Thus, as she used the talents she possessed, the status of the beloved concubine continued to gain prestige within the court.

Julia Bray, in her article "Men, Women, and Slaves in ʿAbbasid Society" explains that "opportunities for success are shown as being conditioned, in their turn, either by factors which override the givens of the individual's social situation, or, conversely, by social inheritance:.... an individual's gender and the spectrum of roles available to each sex, and his or her discretion in observing appropriate demeanors or boldness in overstepping them."[43] For the *qayna,* I posit that the factors that most conditioned her success were her artistic talent and her aptitude for learning, both of which allowed her to transcend the boundaries of her status as a slave. She was able to influence her audience primarily with her wit and musical abilities, and it was her role as a learned woman that put her in a position in which many opportunities for success were well within her reach. The *qayna* also observed "appropriate demeanors (and) boldness in

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[42] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, p. x.

[43] Bray, "Men, Women, and Slaves in ʿAbbasid Society," p. 131.

overstepping" her bounds by using her talents to persuade her master, and his audience, to bestow certain social freedoms upon her.

It is apparent from the numerous anecdotes reported throughout the narrative sources concerning the *qiyān* that they primarily used their skills, rather than their sexual appeal alone, to obtain these freedoms. The tenth-century history *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar (The Meadows of Gold and the Mines of Gems*), by al-Masʿūdī, relates anecdotes pertaining to the *qiyān*'s lives with the caliphs.[44] Al-Masʿūdī's attention to detail and his appreciation for the smallest facts allow the reader to get a full sense of the *qayna*'s intellect, relationships, and talents. Similarly, al-Iṣfahāni's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (*The Book of Songs*), a contemporary work to *Murūj al-Dhahab*, lays out the background and life experiences of *qiyān* who wrote and performed songs and poetry.[45] Julia Bray describes this massive text thus: "Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahāni is able to trace the opportunities for self-advancement that could be seized by talented individuals, whether or not they could claim an Arab lineage."[46] Therefore, his text is a perfect source for a scholar looking to discuss the freedoms and influence of the *qiyān*, as well as their social mobility, based on their talents in music and poetry. Al-Iṣfahāni's other famous text concerning the *qiyān* and female poetesses is *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir* (*The Slave Poetesses*) which focuses solely on the educated slave poetesses of the ʿAbbasid courts.[47] Both their verse-capping competitions and their use of poetry as a medium of dialogue between themselves, their masters, and their acquaintances are recounted within this text in order to give a sense of the *qayna*'s

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[44] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol.1-4.

[45] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmia, 1992).

[46] Bray, "Men, Women, and Slaves in ʿAbbasid Society," p. 131.

[47] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahāni, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir* (Beirut: Dar al-Nakhl, 1984).

abilities and relationships. Hilary Kilpatrick, an al-Iṣfahāni scholar, points out that "Since it is as poets that women gain entry to this book, their poetry is given pride of place" within the text, and "the occasion giving rise to the poetry is mentioned," often being set in a narrative framework, much like the author's other compendium of poetry and song, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*.[48] Lastly, Ibn al-Sāʿī's thirteenth century text *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ* (*The Women of the Caliphs*) narrates a number of anecdotes from the lives of women close to the caliph, whether they were his relatives or his *jawārī*.[49] A number of ʿAbbasid *qiyān* are mentioned in this work, and Ibn al-Sāʿī takes great pains to relate the details of these anecdotes and mention both the relationships these women nurtured with their masters and the beautiful verses they created for their caliphs' pleasures.

It should be noted that the anecdotes presented in these texts use literary types to portray the lives of the *qiyān.* These anecdotes do not present a complete reality, but they do have kernels of social reality embedded within them. They record the virtuosic skills of the most famous *qiyān* and *jawārī.* Thus, their overall portrayal is quite positive. This can be seen in the narrative reports concerning *qiyān* like Maḥbūba, whose prowess at extemporaneous verse creation and recitation was well-documented, but whose interactions with men other than her master were not recorded. Additionally, Maḥbūba, Sallāmat al-Qass, and Ḥabbāba are all depicted as talented, loving, and intelligent *qiyān* whom their masters adored, and Al-Khayzurān is presented as a powerful and commanding presence in the lives of her husband, al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), and her sons, Mūsā al-Hādī (r. 785-786) and Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). These women are viewed with a great amount of respect in the recorded anecdotes, and their skills and intellect helped them to attain this coveted status. This kind of literary portrayal is mirrored in the sources that

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[48] Kilpatrick, "Women as Poets and Chattels," p. 163.

[49] Tāj al-Dīn Abī Tālib ʿAlī b. Anjab Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*, (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif Bi-Misr, 1968).

discuss courtesans of various societies, such as Renaissance Venice, in which the reader is given a glimpse of the elite concubine's skills and seemingly elegant lifestyle, but learns very little about the everyday interactions and mundane events that made up a courtesan's life. Essentially, these anecdotes tell the story of the concubine that the authors want their readers to know, and they leave out any information thought to be unrelated to what was deemed important about these women. It is important to note that, while the reader can attempt to form a picture of the *qayna*'s life from the anecdotes in these texts, the result of these attempts will not be a complete image of who the *qayna* was or even how she navigated everyday life within the caliphal household. These anecdotes only present a portion of the *qiyān*'s lives and, even with that information, these women are still presented as literary types. Though these reports may only give us a snapshot of the life of the *qiyān*, that picture does reveal how these women wielded their intellect and skill in order to obtain freedoms and influence within the household itself.

The arts of poetic recitation, musical performance, singing, and general intellectual discourse that the *qiyān* possessed established them as a professional community of entertainers, both in the caliph's household, and other major households in the capital, as well as in many major cities outside his court. These highly trained women supplied an entertainment service and, in return for the outstanding application of their talents, they obtained certain freedoms and influence. As a professional class of women, the *qiyān* were quite aware of their place in society. One wrong move in the presence of a master, and their careers could be ruined. The *qayna*'s profession made her life very public to the court. Therefore, authors like al-Iṣfahāni and Ibn al-Sāʿī were able to take advantage of the fame and notoriety of these women and record their stories for the future. The anecdotes concerning the *qiyān* and their verses relate stories of

famous women who used their intellect and skills wisely, and obtained power and prestige as a result of their talents.

Although I disagree with the importance Kristina Richardson places on a *qayna*'s beauty over her talents, she does make the significant point that gendered examinations of slavery during the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid periods are sparse.[50] In addition to refuting the argument she shares with Fuad Matthew Caswell, that the royal *qiyān* primarily used their sexual appeal and beauty over their skills and intellect to obtain gifts, better treatment, and improved prospects within their masters' households, I will also be adding to the scholarship concerning the *qiyān* by discussing their roles as female slave entertainers. The first chapter discusses the factors that played a role in the development of the *qayna* and her arts. This chapter contains a brief examination of the prominence of female slave entertainers and courtesans in other societies. The chapters following this discourse focus on the lives of four *jawārī* from the narrative sources mentioned above. Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba are first, followed by Maḥbūba. I discuss al-Khayzurān, the *jāriya* of al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), in the final chapter. The evidence supporting the primary application of skill and intellect over beauty abounds in the narrative texts, and within the following sections I aim to reveal that kind of agency.

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[50] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 107.

Chapter 1: The Professionalization of the Singing Slave Girl

The prevalence of female entertainment slaves was a phenomenon stemming back to the early days of Islam, when the institution of slavery and the presentation of music and poetry began to intertwine and produce slave women whose artistic talents far surpassed those of their peers and *jawārī* rivals. The success of the *qiyān* as entertainers was governed by the rules of slavery, the education these women received, and the evolution of music in the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid courts. These were major factors in the development of the *qayna* as entertainer and concubine, and, as these factors developed, the institution of the *qiyān* and their arts also flourished.

Slavery was a vital aspect of Umayyad and ʿAbbasid society. It was a key practice of the civilizations occupying the region where Islam ultimately developed, and Islamic law accepted the enslavement of non-Muslims as a legitimate institution of society. Thus, slavery was already considered a normal custom when the Prophet Muḥammad began to receive his revelations.[51]

Islamic law prohibited the enslavement of any free Muslim or of a Christian or Jew living in *dār al-Islam.*[52] In his *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis points out that the slave population was recruited in four main ways: capture, tribute from vassals, offspring of slaves, and purchase in slave markets.[53] Wars of expansion produced the largest number of

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[51] Kecia Ali, "Slavery and Sexual Ethics in Islam," in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious Sexual Legacies*, ed. Bernadette J. Brooten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 109.

[52] Shaun E. Marmon, "Slavery, Islamic World," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Scribner, 1989), p. 332.

[53] Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 9-10.

slaves from prisoners of war who, being neither Muslims nor inhabitants of *dār al-Islam*, were eligible for enslavement and thus sold into slavery in the markets situated in the urban centers of North Africa and the Middle East.[54] A large proportion of captives were women and older children.[55] Thus, many of the *qiyān,* both women and girls, came to the empire in this fashion. They were captured during the campaigns of expansion and were then brought to the Islamic imperial cities as slaves. Because of this process of enslavement, these women came from vastly different communities and regions, including the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, Iran, North Africa, Central Asia, India, Spain, China, Southeast Asia, and the Byzantine empire.[56]

Slaves' duties during the early Islamic period were various. Sexual division of labor operated in all societies of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires, and the most common purpose for acquiring slaves was the need for household labor.[57] While male slaves became servants, gardeners, watchmen, and general domestic help, female slaves were chambermaids, cooks, wet nurses, seamstresses, and confidantes to their owners.[58] These slave women were particularly commonplace in the early ʿAbbasid empire, when expansion was rampant, and female slaves were found in private households working as domestic labor, companions to freeborn women, and entertainers and concubines to men.[59] Owning female slaves in particular was a display of

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[54] Bill Kte'pi, "Slavery," in *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa: An Encyclopedia* ed. Andres L. Stanton (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2012), vol. I: p. 83.

[55] Catherine M. Cameron, "Captives and Culture Change: Implications for Archaeology," *Current Anthropology,* vol.52, No. 2 (2011): p. 194.

[56] Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, p. 11.

[57] Male slaves were also trained as soldiers, and were a large part of the army, as indicated during the Zanj Rebellion in the ninth century, when the agricultural slaves in Iraq revolted and slave troops were sent to quell their rebellion. Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1987), p. 50.

[58] *ibid.*, p. 56.

[59] Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ʿAbbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 113.

wealth and prominence and, as the Arab conquests continued, the influx of slave women led to the greater development of concubinage in urban societies.

The introduction of slavery to the early Islamicate period also brought with it a development in terminology concerning slaves. Numerous labels are applied to the slave, either male or female, and a number of them come directly from the Qur'an. The words *raqaba* (neck) and *ʿabd* (slave) are both used in the Qur'an to denote the idea of slaves and slavery. More specific terms used include *ama* and *jāriya*, which both indicate female slaves, and *fatā* (young man) and *ghulām* (boy), which are the titles of male slaves. The most general term used to define these men and women is *mā malakat aymānukum*, or 'that which your right hands possess,' as in *surah* 16, verse 71: "those who are more favored will by no means hand over their provisions to those whom their right hands possess."[60] The word *qayna* (pl. *qiyān*) is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an and has a different history from the other terms used to denote slaves. This term originally meant trained technician, either slave or free, and, more specifically, in its masculine form of *qayn* during the pre-Islamic period it was the word for blacksmith.[61] The term was later used to refer to any kind of slave engaged in manual labor or gainful employment, and it was ultimately defined as any person engaged in an artistic performance for a reward.[62] This last applies to the *qayna* of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid courts.

Opinions about the skill and value of slave girls from different regions varied, but the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik b. Marwan (r. 685 - 705) puts it most succinctly, as recorded in

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[60] Qur'an 16:71.

[61] Marcus Jastrow, "Kina," in *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashiq Literature* (New York: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1950), p. 1362. Interestingly enough, *qina* in Hebrew (*quf-yud-nun-hay*) means rhythmic song, lamentation, or dirge. The relation of the Hebrew *q ina*, the musical term, to the Arabic *qayna*, singing slave girl, shows a connection in musical connotations.

[62] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 2.

the thirteenth-century text *Tuḥfat al-ʿArūs wa Nuzhat al-Nufūs* (*The Gift of the Bride and the Excursion of the Soul*), by the sociologist Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Tījānī (d. 1310): "the best among the slave women were the Berbers for procreation, the Byzantines for service, and the Persians for good behavior."[63] Because the primary language of each slave girl's homeland was not Arabic, it was necessary to teach her the empire's *lingua franca*. A *qayna*'s Arabic lessons gave her a perfect command of the Arabic language and allowed her to communicate flawlessly with her audience, both of which were necessary for her success.

Rules pertaining to sexual relations with one's female slave are laid out in *surahs* 23 and 24 of the Qur'an. These laws are especially important to the lives of the *qiyān* because these women were viewed as objects of sexual desire, as well as artistic and intellectual talent. The Qur'an addresses the believers concerning their sex lives: "Successful indeed are (those).... who guard their modesty - save from their wives or those whom their right hands possess."[64] From this, it is deduced that a man is permitted to have sex with his slave girls as well as his wives. Extramarital cohabitation, however, is allowed between a man and his own female slave alone; he may not cohabit with a slave belonging to his wife, even with her consent.[65] In the case of royally-owned *qiyān*, the caliph is well within his rights to have sex with his own *qayna*, but his wife's slaves and *qiyān* are completely off limits to him, unless he buys them from her. Concerning sexual relations with one's *jāriya*, the Qur'an presents the rule even more explicitly by commanding masters to "force not your slave girls to whoredom,"[66] explaining that, although

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[63] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 15.

[64] Qur'an 23:1-6.

[65] R. Brunschvig, "'Abd" in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Boston: Brill, 1960), p. 30.

[66] Qur'an 24:33.

they are allowed to have sex with their female slaves, masters are not allowed to force their *jawārī* into prostitution in order to make a profit. This suggests that prostituting out one's slave girls was a common practice during the time of revelation. The verse serves as an explicit warning against such an action, and the condemnation of this kind of prostitution plays a key role in the life of a *qayna* specifically. It counts unlawful any form of prostitution of female slaves and, therefore, under Qur'anic law, the royal *qayna* is protected from "whoredom."

A female slave's relationship with her master was also dictated by Qur'anic prescription and social practice. A *qayna* entertained her master in the bedroom as well as in the literary salon. The relationship between slave girl and master could take many forms. She could be his servant, his concubine, or the mother of his child (or all three).[67] As a concubine, a *qayna* could be one among any number of slave women kept by the caliph as a sexual partner. The Qur'an allows the keeping of concubines, advising "if ye fear that ye will not do fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (those) that your right hands possess."[68] This verse sets out two laws pertaining to relationships with women. A man may marry up to four women, as long as he feels he is capable of providing for them, but he is also allowed an unlimited number of concubines. In this way, the master-concubine relationship is legitimized, and the *qayna*'s position recognized. In fact, it was during the Umayyad period that concubines began to become prominent in the court. Among the caliph al-Walīd's (r. 705-715) sons, sixteen were born of mothers who were concubines, and two of them became caliph in the last years of the Umayyad

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[67] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid," p. 106.

[68] Qur'an 4:3.

empire.[69] These were Yazīd III, who ruled for six months in 744, and his successor, Ibrāhīm, who ruled for an even shorter time that same year. Their mothers were non-Arabs, Yazīd's being the direct descendant of Yazdajird, the last of the Sassanians, and Ibrāhīm's claiming Greek extraction.[70] Before the rise of the courtesan as mother to the heir apparent, women of noble Arab blood, such as Umm Khālid, wife to Yazīd I (r. 680-683) and mother of his successor Muʿāwiya II (r. 683-684), gave birth to future caliphs.[71] Many concubines, however, such as al-Khayzurān, eventual wife to al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), became primary consorts to the caliphs. Thus, the Umayyad practice of naming the sons of courtesans as heirs to the caliphate continued in the ʿAbbasid period.

Slave girls were allowed to marry, but this severely altered their relationship with their master. It is important to note that a slave girl was not permitted to marry her owner. He could be the master of a *qayna* or the husband of a free or manumitted woman, and, in many cases, he was both of these, just not in relation to the same woman. The Qur'an states that, "Whoso is not able to afford to marry free, believing women, let them marry from the believing maids whom your right hands possess."[72] This verse proposes a slave woman, like the *qayna*, as a possible choice of wife for a free man, but her master must first give his consent to the marriage, especially considering that once she is married, he, as her owner, is no longer allowed to have sexual relations with her.[73] In light of this, it is entirely lawful for the *qayna*'s master to withhold

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[69] Ruth Roded. *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1994), p. 57.

[70] Abbott, "Women and the State in Early Islam - Part 2," pp. 360-1.

[71] *ibid.* 343-4.

[72] Qur'an 4:25.

[73] Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), pp. 80-1.

permission for her to dwell in the house of her husband.[74] If her master feels she will serve him better in his own home, he has every right to ban his *qayna* from living with her husband. Additionally, if she bears her slave husband's children, those offspring become slaves belonging to her owner.[75] If, however, a master did want to marry his *qayna*, he would first have to manumit her, so that she would be considered free under the law. This act of manumission is in line with the fact that Islam forbids men to marry their female slaves before freeing them.[76] If he wants to marry his slave woman, he must manumit her first. This is reflected in the life of al-Khayzurān, the one-time *jāriya* of the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), who manumitted and then married her in 776.[77]

Surah 24, verse 33 directs Muslims to emancipate those slaves who seek freedom: "and such of your slaves as seek a writing (of emancipation), write it for them if you are aware of aught of good in them, and bestow upon them of the wealth of G-d which he hath bestowed upon you." In Islam, the process of manumission is considered an act of piety, often undertaken as thanksgiving or by way of expiation of sin.[78] Slaves who attempt to purchase their freedom from their owners, and who are deemed good in the eyes of their masters, are "given enough to (buy their freedom) if they do not have the means" to do so.[79] In addition to this kind of self-manumission, the *jāriya* may also be manumitted on her master's death provided she fulfills a

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74 ʿAlī b. Abī Bakr al-Marghīnānī,, *The Hedaya*, trans. Charles Hamilton (Karachi: Daarul Ishaat, 1989), p. 59.

75 Ali, "Slavery and Sexual Ethics in Islam," p. 113.

76 Al-Marghīnānī,, *The Hedaya*, trans. Charles Hamilton, p. 31.

77 al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī*, Vol. XXIX, trans. Hugh Kennedy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 177.

78 Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 11.

79 Aḥmad b. Naqīb al-Miṣrī, *Reliance of the Traveler: A Classical Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1991), p. 271.

certain set of requirements. When a slave girl gives birth to her master's child, she enjoys three new rights: she may not be sold again, she is manumitted and becomes free when her master dies, and any children, including the first child, that she has by her master are born free. This status gives her the title of *umm walad*, mother of a child. This social practice also allows a *qayna* who has satisfied these requirements to attain a new sense of freedom in her relationship with her master, and, ultimately, upon her master's death, gives her actual freedom in her manumission. While this custom is not set forth in the Qur'an, it is frequently attributed to the caliph 'Umar (r. 634 - 644).[80] The process can also be traced back to the Prophet's own treatment of his female slaves. In the early stages of Islam, Muḥammad was sent two enslaved sisters as a gift from the Christian commander of Alexandria. He took one of these Coptic women, Mariya, as his concubine and, when she bore him a child, Ibrāhīm, he freed her from his services.[81] While this anecdote did help legalize the use of slave women, such as *qiyān,* as sexual partners, it also reveals the roots of the freedoms conferred upon slave women when they became *ummahāt awlād* (mothers of children). A number of *jawārī* attained this status after giving birth to the caliph's offspring, and some became the caliph's primary consort by using the freedoms they had obtained from their status as *umm walad*. These ambitious women include Marājil, favored concubine of Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809) and mother of al-Maʾmun (r. 813-833), as well as Qarāṭīs, Byzantine concubine to al-Muʿtasim (r. 833-842) and mother of al-Wāthiq (r. 842-857).

At her most basic, the *qayna* was a domestic slave. While this category also included personal attendants, cooks, midwives, and foster mothers, the *qayna* became the epitome of art, service, intellect, and sexual appeal combined. Her life may have been governed by the laws and

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[80] Ali, "Slavery and Sexual Ethics in Islam," p. 111.

[81] *ibid.*

social practices of slavery, but the strong relationship she formed with the caliph allowed her to transcend the normal limits of a domestic slave's freedoms, and, as a result of this relationship, she wielded a great amount of influence within the court. To do this successfully, however, she first needed to be educated in a *qayna*'s arts. Without this training, she would not stand a chance against the other concubines and *jawārī* in the caliph's court.

In the same passage in which he relates Maḥbūba's verses, al-Masʿūdī also briefly discusses her education. She was initially owned by Ibn Ṭāhir, a slave broker who "educated her, trained her, and taught her the kinds of knowledge" that made her the intellectual equal of al-Mutawakkil's own *'ulamā'*.[82] She composed and recited her own poetry, as shown above, and she sang and played the *ʿūd*.[83] It is thanks to the training she received that she possessed such remarkable skills and, with these abilities, was even able to best some of the caliph's own scholars and poets.

A *qayna*'s education and training were her keys to success in the caliph's household. To be selected for this line of work she had to show some spark of intellect. Beauty and a melodious voice were certainly helpful characteristics, but she needed to possess an aptitude for musical education and intellectual culture in order to succeed in the arts of music, song, and poetic recitation.[84] As mentioned above, it was also necessary for her to learn Arabic and its cultural nuances. The result of these particular studies was a *qayna* fluent in the language with, it was hoped, absolutely no trace of a foreign accent. The successful acquisition of these abilities

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[82] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 125.

[83] *ibid.*

[84] Charles Pellat, "Kayna," in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 821.

enabled the *qayna* to impress her master and his audience with her skills and to produce in them a greater appreciation for both her and her arts.

Institutions were established to teach future *qiyān* the necessary skills, musical and otherwise. Just as the major slave markets were located in the imperial cities, so too were the schools for *qiyān*, particularly in Baghdad. These academies grew around talented musicians and singers who taught their pupils a *qayna*'s skill set. The most famous academies belonged to slave merchants who were musicians and poets in their own right. The slave traders Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 804) and his son Isḥāq (d. 850) were both skilled in the arts of music and poetry. Ibrāhīm was considered to be the most versatile musician, singer, and instrumentalist, and he was also a prolific composer.[85] Additionally, Isḥāq was deemed the greatest musician of all time and "is regarded as the archetype of the perfect, widely cultured musician," in that he was a singer, an instrumentalist, a composer, a theorist, a musicographer, and a poet.[86] Together, these men educated the slaves they bought, as well as those of other merchants, and they upgraded these women by teaching them singing, musical composition, poetic recitation, and verse creation.[87] Their rival was Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (779-839), the son of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785) and a talented singer and musician in his own right. Like his rivals, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī worked as a *muqayyin*, a trainer of *qiyān*, and educated singing slave girls in his own style. While the Mawsili school advocated "a more conservative and technically more demanding curriculum,"[88]

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[85] Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 27.

[86] *ibid.* 28.

[87] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 17.

[88] Julie Scott Meisami, Paul Starkey eds., "Singers and Musicians" in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature,* vol. 2 (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 724.

Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī took a more "innovative and indulgent approach to the repertoire," and led his modernistic program in an attempt to "free (music education) from the bonds of the strict rhythmic and melodic rules" that were currently taught. [89] *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the tenth-century compendium of music, verse, and song, by al-Iṣfahāni, is the primary source of evidence for these rivalries, schools, and skills. The kind of education these men offered was a booming business from the eighth to the tenth centuries, and slave owners and merchants would send their *jawārī* to academies such as these in order for them to be 'finished' in this manner.

One of the many highly valued skills a *qayna* perfected at such an institution was *badīha*, or the ability to compose and recite verses at will, much as Maḥbūba did for al-Mutawakkil. A successful *qayna* had a "repertoire of upwards of four thousand songs, each of them two to four verses long," and, when she felt that her repertoire was not sufficient, she was able to compose verses extemporaneously.[90] Along with the poetry and songs concerning the anguish of love and the heights it could bring (*ṭarab*),[91] as well as the cultural and literary (*adab*) arts, students were also taught techniques of flirtation and seduction.[92] As a slave girl, the *qayna* was as much a concubine as an entertainer, and she provided her master with companionship and sexual favors, as well as musical and intellectual diversions. Other, less common skills that were taught to the *qiyān* included various activities such as chess and backgammon, and a few of these women also

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[89] Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam*, p. 28.

[90] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Risālat al-Qiyān*, trans. A.F.L. Beeston, p. 35.

[91] *Ṭarab* can be translated extremely loosely as entertainment, but it refers more to the highs and lows that love brings which is memorialized in poetry and song.

[92] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, p. 14.

studied the Qur'an and *hadith*.[93] In fact, in *Murūj al-Dhahab* al-Masʿūdī insists that Maḥbūba was learned in *'ilm* (the Islamic sciences), as well as music and poetry.[94]

The extensive education the *qiyān* received greatly increased their commercial value in the slave market. Brokers and masters sent their *jawārī* to these schools in order for them to acquire the training needed to become *qiyān*. This process was extremely expensive, but the profit that was made when these slave women were sold was well worth the expense for many owners. The price of a *qayna* was exorbitantly high. One example of such extreme cost is mentioned in al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab,* when he discusses the relationship between the Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik (r. 720-724) and his *qayna*, Sallāmat al-Qass. Upon seeing her, the caliph was so enthralled by her beauty and so pleased with her talents that he immediately paid three thousand dinars (gold coins) to her broker in order to expedite the purchasing process.[95] While it is true that he was the caliph, and, therefore, probably more than capable of paying such a price, this was an exorbitantly high sum, equal to thirty thousand dirhams (silver coins). To put this into perspective, the twelfth-century text *Kitāb Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* (*The Book of the Virtues of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*) contains a report from the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn ʿAqīl, who lived during the eleventh century, which relates that, "a singing woman is worth thirty thousand (dirhams), but a *sādhijah* (an untrained slave woman) is worth twenty dinars."[96] As the conversion of dinars to dirhams is 1:10, this means that while an

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[93] Matthew S. Gordon, "Preliminary Remarks on Slaves and Slave Labor in the Third/Ninth Century ʿAbbasid Empire" in *Slaves and Households in the Near East* ed. Laura Culbertson (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), p. 81.

[94] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 125.

[95] *ibid.,* vol. 3, p. 207.

[96] Manāqib al-Imaam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. *Kitāb Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, Ed. ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Amman: Dar Ibn Khaldun, 2008), p. 81.

untrained slave's worth is equal to two hundred dirhams, a singing slave girl, a *jāriya mughanniya*, is valued at one hundred fifty times that much for her skills alone. In *A Mediterranean Society*, S.D. Goitein also points out that the standard price for an untrained slave girl was twenty dinars during the Cairo Geniza period (969-1250).[97] This consensus concerning the price of female slaves points to the understood value of slave women with various skills. Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik can afford to spend such a high sum on his purchases. One of his middle class subjects would not have been able to do the same.

A *qayna*'s talents and education, however, made her a worthy acquisition, and this opinion held for gifting *qiyān* to wealthy and powerful men like the caliph, as well as purchasing them. This is revealed in another anecdote from *Murūj al-Dhahab* concerning Maḥbūba, her former master Ibn Ṭāhir, and al-Mutawakkil:

> Ibn Ṭāhir led to (al-Mutawakkil) a gift within which were one hundred maidservants and one hundred manservants, and in the gift was a slave girl he called Maḥbūba[98]

The purchase or, less common, gifting of a *qayna* reflect her intensive education and her phenomenal talents. These processes also reveal the degree of the master's own appreciation and desire for a woman who was viewed as an extremely valuable commodity.

Singing slave girls such as the *qiyān*, who were educated in such highly valued performance arts, were not unique to the Islamic empires alone, but were a prominent feature of many societies. Famous female entertainers and courtesans abounded in many civilizations, and were well-renowned in places such as Renaissance Italy, Mughal India, and Song dynasty China. These women had to use their skills and intellect, just as the *qiyān* did, to succeed in the societies

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[97] S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* 1 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), p. 139.

[98] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 124.

they inhabited. Without their talents, their beauty and sexual appeal would not have helped them to achieve the same level of fame and prestige that they obtained in their profession.

Venetian courtesans were the most famous and most educated women in society during the Italian Renaissance (c. 1350-1550). They were not only beautiful women, but also talented individuals who wrote poetry, took part in intellectual discourse, and counted great politicians and scholars among their friends and intellectual sparring partners. The most renowned of these courtesans was Veronica Franco (1546-1591), whose poetry and letters earned her a place in history among the literary masters. Without her wit and creativity, Franco would not have reached the heights of society which she eventually graced. By allying herself with prominent and well-respected men, she became a writer of great renown.[99] To succeed in this particular lifestyle, "a woman needed to be beautiful, sophisticated in her dress and manners, and an elegant, cultivated conversationalist."[100] No document expresses these necessities for a courtesan's success more succinctly than Franco's own letter to a female friend of hers entitled "A Warning to a Mother Considering Turning her Daughter into a Courtesan." In this letter, Franco implores her friend not to prepare her daughter for life as a courtesan.[101] The most telling sentence is one which mirrors the necessity for intelligence and talent integral to a *qayna*'s success in her own profession. Franco explains, "your daughter, who, considered from a purely carnal point of view, is really not very beautiful... has so little grace and wit in conversation that you'll break her neck expecting her to do well in the courtesan's profession, which is hard enough to succeed in even if a woman has beauty, style, good judgement, and proficiency in

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[99] Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal, eds. *Veronica Franco: Poems and Selected Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 1.

[100] *ibid.*

[101] *ibid. p.* 39.

many skills."[102] A woman's outstanding beauty did not guarantee her success in this profession, and, just as the *qayna* had to be extraordinarily talented in her arts to succeed, so, too, did the Venetian courtesan.

In Mughal India (1526-1858), the courtesan was a learned woman who, much like the *qayna* of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires, was trained in singing, music, and dance. Doris Srinivasan describes the royal courtesan as "a cultured woman, as opposed to a prostitute who is not considered to be cultured or intelligent."[103] She succeeds because she is able to offer her royal master her wit and charm, as well as her beauty, and she uses that keen intellect to gain influence within his court. One such Mughal courtesan was Nur Bai, whose patron, Mohammad Shah Rangila (r. 1719-1748), was a famously pleasure-loving Mughal emperor. "Exceedingly beautiful and dignified in bearing, (Nur Bai) offered intellectually stimulating company to her patrons," with her conversation, as well as her dance and musical skills.[104]

Additionally, the *ṭawāʾif*s, most notably those of the north Indian kingdom of Awadh during the nineteenth century, were famous for their characteristic Lucknowi mannerisms and their skills in both Kathak dance and Hindustani music.[105] These women catered to later Mughal members of the nobility and young *nawabs,* Muslim rulers of princely states in South Asia, who came to learn a *ṭawāʾif*'s arts. Just as distinct opinions existed concerning the noble Arab women and the *qiyān*, so too were these opposite views present when it came to Indian wives versus

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[102] Jones and Rosenthal, eds. *Veronica Franco, p.* 39.

[103] Doris Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and G-d's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India" in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman, Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 166.

[104] Harsha V. Dehejia, *A Celebration of Love: The romantic Hero in the Indian Arts* (New Delhi: Roli Books Private Limited, 2004), p. 224.

[105] Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and G-d's Mortal Wives," p. 161.

courtesans. While the wife was seen as "chaste, embedded in a patrilineal kin group upon which she was economically dependent, and uneducated in spheres unrelated to the home," courtesans such as the *ṭawāʾif* were considered to be "unmarried, unchaste, attached to a matrilineal kin group, economically independent, and educated to a degree."[106] As the wife was becoming more dependent upon her male relatives, the *ṭawāʾif* was free to make many of her own life decisions.

While there were many counterparts to the *qiyān* in other societies, even ambitious *jawārī* had comparable peers in foreign empires. Beverly Bossler, in her 2008 article "Gender and Entertainment at the Song Court," discusses the meteoric rise of a slave girl in Song dynasty China.[107] A young girl entered the court of Emperor Zhenzong (r. 997-1022) as a hand drum player when the emperor was still a young boy. Ultimately, the two fell in love, and the one-time slave became Empress Liu (r. 1022-1033), who took over the reins as regent for her young son after her husband's death.[108] Women who possessed striking personalities and intellects, and began their careers in the imperial courts as slave girls, were able to nurture such close relationships with their master's and, in some instances, become the wives of great rulers. Much like the *qiyān,* however, female entertainers at the Song courts lived a liminal existence, belonging completely neither to the court nor to the outside world. They moved freely between these two realms, being one of the most despised social groups of their day, but also socializing with and entertaining the most elite members of Song society.[109] A Song dynasty slave girl's

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[106] Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and G-d's Mortal Wives," p. 164.

[107] Beverly Bossler, "Gender and Entertainment at the Song Court" in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). p. 261.

[108] *ibid.*

[109] *ibid.* p. 262.

swift rise through the ranks of the empire was the result of her application of skill and intellect, public opinion notwithstanding.

The prominence of female slave entertainers and courtesans in such diverse societies points to a pattern of entertainment and professionalism of the courtesan's arts in many civilizations. Often, women who entertained with verse, music, and song were also concubines to their patrons. The employment of their artistic skills, in addition to that of their sexual appeal and beauty, helped these women to obtain more freedoms and influence, as well as a coveted social status within society. Just like the *qiyān*, these women worked to obtain their freedoms using the artistic and intellectual skills they possessed.

As the professionalization of courtesans and *qiyān* developed, so too did their arts. Just as the Venetian courtesans took greater roles in intellectual discourse and poetry, so too did the *qiyān* become more dominant as poets and musicians. As the music and arts scene in early Islamicate society developed, the *qiyān* began to play a more prominent role in the entertainment of the caliph and his guests.

The pre-Islamic tradition saw both men and women engaging in the performance of music and poetry. Women, who were not yet restricted in their actions, participated as both patrons and performers.[110] While men brought these arts into the public sphere, it was women who provided continuity from the pre-Islamic traditions to the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires.[111] The poetry and music that were performed by the *qiyān* allowed them to express their own feelings in the tropes of the *qaṣīda* (ode). As these women applied their artistic talents to

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[110] Sunni M. Fass, "Music," in *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam*, ed. Monique Bernards, John Nawas (Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 341.

[111] Hilary Kilpatrick, "Mawālī and Music," in *Patronate and Patronage in Early Classical Islam*, ed. Monique Bernards and John Nawas (Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 346.

their performances, they gained more freedom within their households by delighting their masters with their skills.

The Umayyad period ushered in the flowering of Ḥijāzī musical culture. Mecca and Medina, in particular, were places of high achievement and innovation in the arts of music and poetry. They later supplied the court at Damascus with talented singers and musicians, both slave and free. Most musicians were *mawālī*, freedmen who had converted to Islam, and they supplanted the Arab tribesmen as performers.[112] As their talents matured, *qiyān* also rose in prominence among the singers of the Ḥijāz, and many caught the attention of caliphs who appreciated their arts. Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya (r. 680-683), a composer in his own right, was the first ruler to introduce music to the court.[113] At the time, it was the custom for musicians and poets to present their arts from behind a curtain, out of respect to the caliph's dignity, but it was quite common for the curtain to be raised and the caliph or princes to join in when they were pleased with the performance.[114] Many of the Umayyad caliphs, specifically al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik (r. 705-715), Yazīd b. ʻAbd al-Mālik (r. 720-724), and al-Walīd b. Yazīd (r. 743-744), encouraged and patronized poets and musicians.[115] Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik, in particular, was known for his overt love of music, poetry, and *qiyān,* and this open appreciation led to a reputation of profligacy that followed the institution of the *qiyān* into the ʿAbbasid empire.

As Islamicate society saw an influx of *jawārī* in its urban centers, it also witnessed the rise of the *qayna* as musician and poet in the caliphal court. The music and arts scene had

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[112] Kilpatrick, "Mawālī and Music," p. 332.

[113] Ali, *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art*, p. 49.

[114] *ibid.*

[115] Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam*, p. 18.

transferred from the Ḥijāz to Baghdad, where musicians and poets began to free themselves from the classicism of the old tradition. Many male and female slave singers educated in the Ḥijāz moved to Iraq to be nearer to wealthy patrons. Arabic music reached its height during the ʿAbbasid period because of the aristocracy and the *qiyān* who developed and supported it.[116] The role of musicians in the palace was tied to functions and celebrations. The songs they performed at weddings, births, and circumcisions expressed joy and happiness. When members of the aristocracy were ill, they sang to give comfort, and if a noble had died, professional female mourners could be called in if necessary.[117] The singing of poetry was most favored by aristocratic patrons and, often, musicians, both slave and free, possessed talents in verse composition, as well as music and song. While the status of musicians improved somewhat because of the degree of professionalism they had attained, music and poetry were still viewed by many outside the palace as corrupt and sinful.[118] This was ostensibly due in large part to the *qiyān*, whom the critics blamed as distractions from responsibility and piety. Even the participation of the aristocracy did not erase the stigma of professionalism from the musical occupation.

Yet aristocratic participation was a major addition to the development of music and poetry during the ʿAbbasid period. Singing would not have acquired such value and appreciation in the caliphal court without the involvement of the ruling family as both patrons and performers.[119] The caliphs al-Wāthiq (r. 842-847) and al-Mu'tamid (r. 870-892) were both

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[116] Kilpatrick, "Mawālī and Music," p. 346.

[117] George Dimitri Sawa, "The Status and Roles of the Secular Musicians in the Kitāb al-Aghānī (Book of Songs) of Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani" in *Asian Music* 17, No. 1 (1985): p. 75-6.

[118] *ibid.* p. 73.

[119] Kilpatrick, "Mawālī and Music," p. 347.

accomplished musicians, and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (r. 817-819), the half-brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809), acquired great fame as a musician and singer.[120] He and his sister, ʻUlayya bt. al-Mahdī, were two of the most renowned royal musicians of their day.[121] As already noted, the prince also worked as a *muqayyin*, training *jawārī* to become renowned performers of music and poetry as *qiyān*.[122]

The involvement of highly trained and skilled musicians, both royal and otherwise, in the early Islamicate period, as well as the expansion of slavery and the rampant Islamic conquests which inundated the empire with slave girls during the Umayyad and ʻAbbasid empires, all pushed the development of the institution of the *qiyān* to the fore. Singing slave women of the early Islamic empires were the products of these particular aspects of society, and they used the skills they learned to obtain freedoms and influence within their masters' households.

The *qayna*'s position as an entertainer and a concubine in the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid courts helped her to transcend the boundaries of slavery with her royal master, and, thus, gain her own freedoms in his household. The performances she gave and the companionship she shared with the caliph made her one of his most prized possessions, and her skills and intellect brought her great fame. Thus, the *qayna* was well-known in early Islamicate society, and stories of her relationships and talents abound in the literature written about the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid periods.

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[120] Ali, *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art, p.* 83.

[121] Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam, p.* 70.

[122] *ibid.,* pp. 27-8.

Chapter 2: Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba

The life of a well-renowned *qayna* was memorialized through the anecdotes and verses a scholar deemed especially stunning or provocative. If she was lucky, her words and deeds were preserved in written form for centuries, and she would be forever known for her wit and creativity because of his texts. Most of the recorded anecdotes concerning these classically-trained *jawārī* discussed their actions in relation to the lives of their masters, whose fame far surpassed their own. It is rare that a *qayna*'s actions are recorded as being strongly entwined with another's of her station. While there may be anecdotes that relate the singing and arrangement of a *qayna*'s verses as presented by her peers, few *jawārī* are so connected in their life stories that they are presented almost as sisters, accompanying one another and discussing the merits of certain poets with each other. Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba, the two beloved *qiyān* of Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Mālik (Yazīd II) (r. 720-724), are an exception.

Both these *qiyān* were exceptionally talented and well-versed in music, but they were not equal in their abilities. According to Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahāni, "Sallāma was the better of the two in singing, and Ḥabbāba was the better of the two in looks."[123] They were both beloved by Yazīd II, and he repeatedly called upon them to entertain him as a pair, in addition to meeting with them individually.

Yazīd's appreciation for music and poetry, after the condemnation of these arts by his predecessor 'Umar b. ʿAbd al-'Aziz (r. 717-720), branded him as a ruler more interested in entertainment than in ruling his own people. The Umayyad empire was beginning to fall into

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[123] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī,* vol. 8, p. 347.

decline, and its inhabitants needed a caliph who could bring back their days of glory.[124] Yazīd's extravagant nature and appreciation for singing girls, however, gave him a reputation of profligacy.[125] A man who spent his time listening to music and calling upon his favored *qiyān*, Sallāma and Ḥabbāba, to entertain him was not the strong ruler the public desired and this negative reputation followed him after his death, when writers such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) wrote their histories of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires.

Sallāma and Ḥabbāba's particular skills may have put Yazīd at ease in such times of great pressure and stress. The literary anecdotes that record their interactions clearly show a greater love for Ḥabbāba than for Sallāma on the part of Yazīd, but his relationships with both his favored *qiyān* were quite strong.

Sallāma was born in Medina where she learned singing and poetic recitation from Maʿbad, Ibn ʿĀʾisha, Jamīla, and Mālik b. Abī al-Samaḥ, all renowned singers and poets in their own right.[126] Ruth Roded views Sallāma as a representation of "the tension between the pious and the worldly, between achieved prominence and nobility of birth, in the Umayyad period."[127] Sallāma's musical talents and her value as a *qayna* made her a commodity of great material value, and this was deemed inappropriate by religious leaders of the Umayyad empire, who felt it

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[124] al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The Empire in Transition*, Vol. XXIV, trans. David Stephan Powers (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. viii-ix. The expansion of the Umayyad empire was tapering off as the rulers looked more toward quelling rebellion then conquering new lands. Yazīd was continually appointing and dismissing governors to rule over his territories when he believed the current governor was not capable of carrying out the responsibilities effectively. In 720/721, he appointed Saʿid Khudhayna as governor of Khurasan. That next year, Yazīd dismissed him, and appointed Saʿid b ʿAmr al-Harashī as governor. The year after that (722/723), Yazīd decided to dismiss Saʿid b. ʿAmr al-Harashī and he replaced him with Muslim b. Saʿid.

[125] *ibid.* p. xiii.

[126] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī,* vol. 8, p. 347.

[127] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who,* p. 56.

was more important to lead a pious life than to live one of pleasure. Sallāma also attained her status through the use of her musical skills, and not the level of nobility in her family. Thus, she obtained her rights through her achievements. Sallāma is the perfect example of a *qayna* who actively took a role in her own life and thereby bettered her situation.

The epithet 'al-Qass' was added to her name while she was under the ownership of Sohayl b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.[128] Al-Qass was a legislator from Mecca whose full name was ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbdallāh b. Abī ʿUmar. He was from the Banū Jushma b. Muʿāwiya and, because he was known for his asceticism and diligent worship, he was called al-Qass, or "the priest."[129] While Sallāma was in Mecca with Sohayl, al-Qass happened to pass by their living quarters and catch a strain of verse coming from within. Upon hearing Sallāma's beautiful voice, he was charmed by her and fell in love. Though the feelings were mutual, they agreed they could not consummate their relationship legally, and, so, parted ways. For this reason, Sallāma was known as 'Sallāmat al-Qass,' or 'the Sallāma of "the Priest."'[130]

It was not Sallāma's appearance that made al-Qass fall in love with her, but her voice. The anecdote above exemplifies the effects of vocal skill, rather than those of visual beauty or sexual allure, in eliciting an emotional reaction and forging a relationship, even if that connection was ultimately denied. This kind of love is elaborated upon in *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* (*The Ring of the Dove*), a treatise, written by the eleventh-century Andalusian polymath Ibn Ḥazm, which discusses the many ways one can fall in love and the effects of that love. Ibn Ḥazm explains, "To

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[128] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 8, p. 347-8.

[129] The word *qass*, or *al-qass*, means priest or presbyter and has a distinct Christian connotation with its usage. It is possible that al-Qass, who was from an Arab tribe and whose real name contains titles that Muslims would use, may have lived in a Christian quarter or known a group of Christians who had named him. In this way, he could have acquired this name.

[130] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 8, p. 352.

hear a girl's voice singing behind a wall may well move the heart to love, and preoccupy the mind." [131] This is the exact way al-Qass fell in love with Sallāma and it is mirrored in Yazīd II's own experiences with her. His decision to purchase this particular *qayna* is a testament to her skill. When Sallāmat al-Qass was presented to Yazīd, he expressed a wish to hear her sing. Upon hearing her singing capabilities, the caliph was mesmerized and payed Sohayl three thousand dinars (equivalent to the agreed upon sum of thirty thousand dirhams for a trained *jariya*) in order to keep her in his court as his own.[132] While Sallāmat al-Qass was beautiful, it was her vocal skills that so attracted her audience.

Like Sallāma, Ḥabbāba was also born in Medina. She was owned by a man named Ibn Mīnā, but she honed her musical and poetic skills under the guidance of Ibn Suraykh, Ibn Muhriz, Mālik, Maʿbad, ʿAzzah al-Maylāʾ, and Jamīla, one of Sallāma's own teachers.[133] The "beautiful sweetness of (her) face, the graceful loveliness of her singing, the goodness of her voice, and her strumming of the *ʿūd*" all added to her appeal as a *qayna*.[134] When Yazīd II bought Ḥabbāba, he named her 'al-ʿĀliya,' the high one, and she became the *qayna* most dear to his heart.[135]

Sallāma and Ḥabbāba were respected for their talents and opinions concerning song and poetry. One day, the two *qiyān* were playfully arguing about which one of them most closely compared to the beautiful voice and talents of the great slave singer Maʿbad. Each *qayna*

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[131] Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥazm, *The Ring of the Dove*, trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd., 1953), p. 30.

[132] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 3, p. 207.

[133] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 119.

[134] *ibid.*

[135] *ibid.*

believed herself to be Maʿbad's equal. When Yazīd asked them about their quarrel, they explained their situation. He called for Maʿbad to enter into his presence and then ordered first Ḥabbāba, then Sallāma to sing. Ma'bad listened to their voices and proclaimed: "The correct one is Ḥabbāba."[136] This is interesting to note, considering that Sallāma was considered to be the better of the two at singing, but Ma'bad's judgement indicates the level of talent of which both these *qiyān* were capable.[137] It was Ḥabbāba, in this instance, who most closely followed the style of a renowned court singer. Upon hearing this verdict, Yazīd calmed his quarreling *qiyān* and listened to the poetry and song of his court entertainers. What seemed, on the surface, to be a superficial squabble was more of a test of skill and learning ability. Sallāma may have had the better voice, but, here, Ḥabbāba was judged to be the better listener and student of Ma'bad's technique. This anecdote reveals the flexible inner hierarchy of the *qiyān*. Even if one *qayna* is more skilled than another in singing or verse recitation, she might still be outperformed by her peer, who may follow the rules of technique more closely. The quarrel that was reported also indicates both a friendly rivalry between the two *qiyān* and a kind of respect for their opinions and skills on the part of Yazīd. A man who takes his *qiyān*'s arguments seriously appreciates their abilities and their competitive natures, as well as the friendship that they share.

Yazīd's love for Sallāma and Ḥabbāba was in great part due to their excellent singing abilities. Jamīla, a slave singer who taught both *qiyān* their trade, stressed the "pleasant (sound) and beauty of their voices (along) with the excellence of their singing" to Yazīd.[138] Yazīd, duly

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[136] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 133.

[137] *ibid*., vol. 8, p. 347.

[138] *ibid.,* p. 227.

impressed, told Sallāma and Ḥabbāba, "the two of you are one melody."[139] At this praise, they sang for him together. In describing Sallāma and Ḥabbāba in such a way, Yazīd paired them together as complementary talents who occupy the same rank. They often performed this way, accompanying each other and entertaining the caliph's guests as a duo. It was a mark of Yazīd's love for both of them, and his enjoyment of their talents, that he paired them together in such a way and called for their joint entertainment so often.

The caliph's reactions to his *qiyān*'s delightful songs and melodies are a testament to their phenomenal skills. According to al-Jāḥiẓ, "Yazīd used to listen (to Sallāma and Ḥabbāba), and, when he was specially moved, he would rend his garment and cry, 'I am transported,' and Ḥabbāba would reply, 'Please don't be transported! We need you."[140] His response to their application of musical skill is so great that he cannot contain his emotions and must physically show how he feels. Ḥabbāba's answer to his feeling of being transported is to bring him back to earth with her wit. Yazīd is her master, but she also shares a deep relationship with him and, here, she is reminding him metaphorically that she does not want him to leave her or Sallāma. He has a responsibility to stay grounded with them in this realm, and he should not ignore that duty.

Although Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba are often written about as an entertainment duo, Ḥabbāba is mentioned much more often than her partner, and Yazīd II has a closer relationship with her than he does with Sallāma. They discuss a range of topics in the comfort of Yazīd's chambers without disturbance. Yazīd and Ḥabbāba share a bond of great love for music and for each other.

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[139] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 8, p. 227.

[140] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Risālat al-Qiyān*, trans. A.F.L. Beeston, p. 23.

One evening, Ḥabbāba and Yazīd are relaxing together on the roof. Ḥabbāba sings verses by al-Aḥwaṣ and Yazīd is taken with their beauty. He asks who wrote the poetry she has sung for him, and Ḥabbāba is astonished. Yazīd does not know the verses of one of his own great poets. They send for Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri to confirm Ḥabbāba's answer, and when al-Zuhri explains that Ḥabbāba was correct in saying that al-Aḥwaṣ was the poet, Yazīd sends him on his way with a four hundred dinar reward for his knowledge.[141] This scholarly exchange, with Ḥabbāba's knowledge of poetry surpassing that of her master, demonstrates the breadth of education she had received. As a ruler, Yazīd is surrounded by musicians and poets at his beck and call. It is a rare occasion when he does not know the writer of the verses being presented to him. It is the novelty, as well as the beauty, of these lines that so entrance Yazīd. Ḥabbāba uses her knowledge of such a wide spectrum of music and poetry to her advantage, and the caliph loves her all the more for her use of contemporary novelties.

Ḥabbāba gained a great amount of respect and influence within the caliphal court through her status as Yazīd II's most beloved *qayna*. She used that influence to ensure that the bond she had created, and in which she had invested her love, was strong and true. One Friday, Yazīd had worked the entire morning without inviting Ḥabbāba to join his company. She spoke to her own *jawārī*, commanding them "When the Commander of the Faithful leaves for prayer, notify me."[142] Instead of informing her, however, the *jawārī* went one step further and actually found the caliph and brought him to their mistress. She received Yazīd*, ʿūd* in hand, and began to sing for him as she played.[143] Rather than being angered by the abrupt nature of his *qayna*'s

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[141] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 4, pp. 245-6.

[142] *ibid.,* vol. 15, p. 126.

[143] *ibid.*

summons, Yazīd relaxes, and basks in the warmth of Ḥabbāba's music. Her power to calm and charm her master is formidable, and, instead of angering him, her commanding spirit delights Yazīd. Ḥabbāba also employed that commanding spirit when she dealt with her own slaves. The fact that Ḥabbāba, a slave herself, albeit quite a glorified one, has *jawārī* of her own to order about demonstrates her high status as a *qayna* and her importance to Yazīd. Slaves could be given as gifts to preferred *qiyān*, and, as the caliph's favored entertainer and his beloved, Ḥabbāba received her own *jawārī* as a symbol of Yazīd's appreciation and her status in the royal court.

Ḥabbāba's strong personality sometimes led to misunderstandings between herself and Yazīd because he wanted so much to please her. As the caliph's lover, Ḥabbāba was superior in beauty, loveliness, and musical skill. One day Yazīd told Ḥabbāba that he had appointed to her person a trusted man named ʿAlī. When she heard this, Ḥabbāba explained that she had found out about this appointment, and she had already dismissed the man. Yazīd became angry with her and, before allowing her to explain why she had done this, he left her presence in frustration and prolonged his abandonment of her for a time. A while later, a eunuch who was entertaining Yazīd informed him that Ḥabbāba was seen playing a game with ʿAlī, the man the caliph had appointed, and whom she had dismissed. Yazīd went to her chamber and exclaimed, "I had dismissed him (as per your wishes)! And she (said): I had hired him as a servant (as per your wishes)!"[144] Upon realizing that they had greatly misunderstood each other's desires, Yazīd apologized and spent the next few days alone with Ḥabbāba. They spent so much time together,

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[144] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 128.

in fact, that Maslama, Yazīd's brother, finally entered their chamber and begged his caliph to return to his responsibilities before the empire fell to pieces.[145]

Yazīd's attempt to appoint a companion for his beloved goes horribly awry as they disagree with each other and then try to set aside their quarrels. Ḥabbāba's initial complete rejection of Yazīd's decision, without even informing him about her own actions before she carried them out, indicates the power she held to make and put such decisions into action. Her abilities and her status as Yazīd's beloved allow her to give such orders. It is Yazīd's spoiled reaction, of frustration at Ḥabbāba's undoing of his own decisions, that she does not expect. He is the caliph, though, and she should have been aware of the ruler's sometimes self-absorbed nature. When he ignores her out of anger, Ḥabbāba reappoints ʿAlī. Very soon, however, she and her audience come to find out that Yazīd, in his sadness at quarreling with his beloved, dismissed ʿAlī to appease her. The miscommunications and attempts to remedy the situation demonstrate Yazīd's desire to care for Ḥabbāba and his willingness to admit his mistakes to a woman who is legally a slave. Again, it is Ḥabbāba's status as a talented entertainer and the caliph's beloved that allow her to act in such a brash way with him.

The fact that Maslama must plead with the caliph, after his reconciliation with Ḥabbāba, to return to his duties and responsibilities as ruler reveals a greater perceived issue with Yazīd's rule. As reported in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the caliph is so engrossed in his entertainment and his relationship with Ḥabbāba that he forgets his obligations as ruler of the Umayyad empire.[146] In this anecdote, the *qayna*, Ḥabbāba, is the reason for Yazīd's distraction from his duties. A large contingent of theologians and religious advisers felt that the *qiyān* and their musical ways were a

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[145] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 128.

[146] *ibid.*

path to disaster for any man faced with the responsibilities of ruling an empire.[147] Thus, this theme of the *qayna* as dangerous distraction is common with anecdotes concerning caliphs whose reigns were not deemed successful, as is seen in later reports concerning Ḥabbāba and her master.

Of all the anecdotes regarding Ḥabbāba's effect on Yazīd II, it is her death and burial that are most telling concerning their relationship. When Ḥabbāba was conversing with Yazīd one day, she ate a pomegranate, swallowed one of the seeds, and subsequently died, probably from choking. Yazīd was so heartbroken that he would not allow her body to be buried. He stayed with Ḥabbāba's corpse until she began to smell. His courtiers urged him to bury her because, they told him, "she has become carrion in your hands."[148] After Ḥabbāba's body was interred, Yazīd continued to grieve for her. He had his slave girls sing Ḥabbāba's songs and verses to memorialize her and "he cried until he almost died."[149] He spent forty days mourning the loss of his beloved and then he, too, passed away.[150]

The extreme grief that Yazīd experiences at the death of his beloved Ḥabbāba indicates his love and appreciation for such a talented *qayna*. Yazīd mourns the loss of Ḥabbāba so strongly that he is unwilling to part with her rapidly decaying body. Only when the physical effects of putrefaction take hold and his courtiers can no longer stand the smell does Yazīd consent to bury her. His love and longing for Ḥabbāba are so strong that he cannot continue living without her, and he dies within forty days of her own death. Sallāmat al-Qass is the sole

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147 Sawa, "The Status and Roles of the Secular Musicians in the Kitāb al-Aghānī," p. 70.

148 Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 140.

149 Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 3, p. 209.

150 Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 15, p. 141.

survivor of this trio, and she is witness to the passionate relationship that Yazīd II and Ḥabbāba shared.

Yazīd was the first recorded caliph to die of heartbreak.[151] In addition to his purported obsession with entertainment, his cause of death and the events leading up to it also portray the caliph in a negative light in relation to his *qiyān*. According to al-Ṭabarī, Yazīd refused to see anyone for seven days after Ḥabbāba's death on the recommendation of Maslama, his brother, who feared that if he did present himself to his public during this period of grief, he would appear foolish in the eyes of his people.[152] Maslama worried that the people would not appreciate Yazīd's grief over a *qayna* when their cities and families needed his guidance. This simple anecdote further implicates Yazīd in a life devoted to pleasure and excess, as perceived by his own brother, rather than duty or caliphal responsibility.

Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba delighted Yazīd and entertained him with their verses, wit, and musical talents. The caliph would introduce his two exceptionally talented *qiyān* to his guests, who would then be entertained by music and song. Yazīd did this because he felt their talents should be appreciated by others besides himself. When they were not performing for him, Yazīd discussed poetry and song with Sallāma and Ḥabbāba, asking for their thoughts on these subjects. His treatment of these two *jawārī* demonstrates Yazīd's appreciation for their talents as well as their minds. A slave is not asked for her opinion, but a *qayna* of true talent is respected for her arts and invited to join in such conversations as an expert. This respect and appreciation for Sallāma and Ḥabbāba are a direct effect of the application of their skills.

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[151] Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam,* p. 39.

[152] al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The Empire in Transition,* Vol. XXIV, trans. David Stephan Powers, p. 196.

Chapter 3: Maḥbūba

Maḥbūba, as the beloved of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847 - 861), held a position of privilege and power within his court. She was an accomplished singer and poetess, and the primary sources have much to say about her relationship with her master as well as her beautiful verses. She was proclaimed by several writers to be the best at verse composition and poetic recitation, and her wit and creativity endeared her to many.

The verses which Maḥbūba chimes in with, after ʿAlī b, al-Jahm has failed to come up with his own poetry, serve to commemorate another *jāriya*'s creativity, but, more importantly, they act as a definition of Maḥbūba's own complex relationship with al-Mutawakkil. After he encounters the *qayna* with his name written on her cheek, he orders the poet, ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, to compose lines to honor the event. Maḥbūba, being extremely clever and ever-ready to compose, recites her own verses from behind the screen where she sits.

> She wrote Jaʿfar on her cheek with musk
> And the musk, in tracing its path, fell on my heart
> For if she set down upon her cheek one line of musk
> Then I have set down upon my heart many lines of passion
> And how lucky is the slave whose owner remains
> Obedient to him [her] in what he [she] expresses and keeps concealed
> And how lucky are the eyes of one who has seen the likes of Jaʿfar
> May G-d send abundant rain on Jaʿfar [i.e. bless him profusely] in the direction of the beginnings[153]

These verses show both the rivalry between the *qiyān* and the strength of Maḥbūba's relationship with al-Mutawakkil. He has just witnessed an act of creativity which both surprises and delights him, but Maḥbūba turns the attention to herself to show him that she is more

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[153] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 203.

talented and much more in love with him than this other *qayna*. The lines of love that Maḥbūba sets down upon her own heart reveal the love that she feels for al-Mutawakkil. Her impromptu verses demonstrate her ability to comprehend her master's emotions and thoughts in a moment, and the speed with which she composes these verses attests to that. This kind of improvisational verse composition (*badīhah)* was a highly prized skill in the *qiyān*, and Maḥbūba specialized in this extemporaneous technique. The verse concerning the master who is "obedient to [her] in what [she] expresses and keeps concealed" describes the strong bond between the caliph and Maḥbūba in that she hints at her own appreciation and love for al-Mutawakkil's attention and praise, notwithstanding his observation of the capricious whims and flirtations of his other *qiyān*.

In composing and reciting these lines with such alacrity and skill, Maḥbūba shows herself to be serious competition for the court poets and intellectuals. According to al-Masʿūdī, she was even considered to be equal to if not better than al-Mutawakkil's own '*ulamāʾ* in matters of culture and poetry.[154] In this particular scenario she put the poet ʿAlī b. al-Jahm to shame and, after her recitation, he "remained surly and did not utter a word."[155]

Al-Iṣfahāni explains that Al-Mutawakkil is so pleased with Maḥbūba's verses that he orders the great slave poetess ʿArīb to set them to music and sing them for him.[156] This is a process that is repeatedly enacted concerning the verses of talented *qiyān*. The *qayna* will recite her poetry, and the master will be so taken with the wit and beauty of her lines that he will call for a poetess or singer (often the same person) to put the verses to music and present them. ʿArīb was a famous poetess in her own right, and the story of her singing another's verses reveals a

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[154] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 4, p. 125.

[155] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 203.

[156] *ibid.*

possible inner hierarchy of entertainers, with the *qayna* as creator and the actual singer as arranger of the verses. This situation occurs frequently when a caliph has enjoyed his *qayna*'s wit and skill in this fashion, and it is seen throughout *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, especially in regard to Maḥbūba's own verses.

This same anecdote, from al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab* and al-Iṣfahāni's *Kitāb al-Aghānī*,[157] is repeated in two other works - *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*,[158] also by al-Iṣfahāni, and Ibn al-Sāʿī's *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*.[159] While these other texts identify the *qayna* who wrote upon her cheek as Qabīḥa, a favored concubine of al-Mutawakkil, al-Masʿūdī is much more vague in his *Murūj al-Dhahab.* He explains that the woman with musk on her cheek is a *qayna*, but he does not name her.[160]

There are a number of possible reasons for this difference. The anecdote is the same in both al-Iṣfahāni's works and Ibn al-Sāʿī's text, but different in *Murūj al-Dhahab*. One possibility for this discrepancy is the different resources these authors used to obtain their anecdotes. In *Kitāb al-Aghānī,* al-Iṣfahāni explains that he heard from Jaḥẓa, who was told by Aḥmad b. Hamdun, that Jaʿfar b. Qudāma told him about the story of the *ghāliya*, that perfume mixture which the *qayna* used to write the caliph's name upon her cheek.[161] In his other work, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, al-Iṣfahāni begins his *isnād* with Jaʿfar b. Qudāma, who was told by ʿAlī b. Yaḥyā al-Munajjim about the incident.[162] Ibn al-Sāʿī, using the exact same anecdote from *al-Imāʾ al-*

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157 Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 203.

158 *idem.*, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 164.

159 Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*, p. 194.

160 Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab,* vol. 4, p. 125.

161 Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 203.

162 *idem.*, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 163.

Shawāʿir in his *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*, cites the same *isnād*.[163] The commonality in *isnāds*, therefore, is a possible reason that all three of these works relate the story of the *ghāliya* with Qabīḥa as the actor. Al-Masʿūdī, however, obtains his anecdote directly from the poet ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, or so he says in *Murūj al-Dhahab*.[164] If al-Masʿūdī did actually obtain this story from ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, the caliph's confidant and poet would likely have been quite old at the time, and it is possible that his memory failed him concerning the name of the *qayna*. As he was a poet, however, it is also possible that he blocked Maḥbūba, a rival to his eminence as court poet, from his memory. Al-Mutawakkil reigned as caliph until his death in 861. Al-Masʿūdī was writing in the first half of the tenth century. While it is feasible for him to have spoken to a very old ʿAlī in the tenth century, it turns out that this could not have been possible. ʿAlī b. al-Jahm died in 863, two years after al-Mutawakkil's own death. It is likely, then, that al-Masʿūdī read a text by the poet which related this anecdote. It is also possible that the other two authors share the same *isnād* because Ibn al-Sāʿī copied the anecdote and *isnād* from al-Iṣfahāni's texts, or that they both took this anecdote from a previous source. Al-Masʿūdī's source may not be the same as theirs, which is possibly a text by Jaʿfar b. Qudāma himself. The idea that the authors could have received their information through written texts by these people, however, reveals another possible reason for this discrepancy. If these anecdotes were transmitted through written texts, it is quite possible that the word for *qayna* - *q-y-n-h* - could have been confused with another *jāriya*'s name, Qabīḥa - *q-b-y-ḥ-h*, who was a favored concubine of al-Mutawakkil and bore him a son, al-Mu'tazz (r. 866-869). These kinds of copyists' errors are common and this could easily be the reason behind the disparity. The fact remains, however, that this difference in information sets the anecdote in

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[163] Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*, p. 194.

[164] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 4, p. 125.

Murūj al-Dhahab apart from those in the other sources, and, therefore, sheds light on a possible rivalry between *jawārī*.

The *ghāliya* anecdote shows that Maḥbūba is a talented *qayna* and the beloved of her master, al-Mutawakkil, but it is the next sequence which truly reveals the nuances of the relationship she shares with the caliph. Al-Iṣfahāni relates the story of the apple in *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*. ʿAlī b. al-Jahm is sitting in al-Mutawakkil's presence relaxing and drinking with him when, suddenly, the caliph hands Maḥbūba a *ghāliya*-covered apple, wrapped in musk. Upon receiving this gift, Maḥbūba turns it over in her hand and then leaves. One of her female slaves returns to al-Mutawakkil and gives him a piece of paper from Maḥbūba, upon which the *qayna* has written a few verses:

> O perfume of an apple that I devote to myself
> That ignites the fire of passion in my heart
> I weep to it and I complain of my wasting away
> And of the strength of heartache I experience
> If an apple could cry, this one in my hand
> Would cry from my trembling
> If you do not know what my soul suffers
> Then the proof is in my thin frame
> If you ponder it, you will know that
> It does not belong to a creature who is strong[165]

After reading this, al-Mutawakkil is so taken by Maḥbūba's verses that he laughs heartily and shares the verses with his guests. He then commands ʻArīb, again, and Shāriya, another *qayna*, to set Maḥbūba's lines to music and sing them.[166]

This anecdote reveals a great deal about the relationship between Maḥbūba and her master. From the description of the scene, the reader can imagine al-Mutawakkil holding a

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[165] Al-Iṣfahāni, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 160.

[166] *ibid.*

cultural gathering and being entertained by his slaves and courtiers. ʿAlī b. al-Jahm is described as sitting in the presence of the caliph and, when Maḥbūba is given the apple, she quickly studies it and then leaves. These spatial dynamics shed light on the way subordinates to the caliph treated his dignity and power. One must not come too close to the ruler of the empire for fear of disrespecting him. In this anecdote, Maḥbūba leaves the caliph's presence to compose her verses, while in the last one she was behind a screen near his person. Thus, respect for the caliph's space and dignity is understood in the court.

One detail in this anecdote should be noted for its presentation of Maḥbūba's status. After she leaves the chamber without a backward glance, Maḥbūba sends one of her own *jawārī* back to al-Mutawakkil with the verses she has written. It is a sign of her standing within the household that Maḥbūba, technically a *jāriya* herself, has her own slave girls at her command. She has gained enough respect and prestige within the court that she warrants her own servants, and it is presumed that, when al-Mutawakkil became aware of how important she had become to him, he gave her *jawārī* of her own.

Al-Mutawakkil's reaction to Maḥbūba's words is also quite telling. Upon reading her words, the caliph is overcome with laughter, and he reacts to his *qayna*'s verses with great joy, almost childlike in his happiness.[167] The fact that Maḥbūba's written words, without even the aid of her voice, can elicit such a powerful reaction from her master shows the strength of her relationship with al-Mutawakkil. He can see her reciting these verses with such emotion and skill, and, through his innate connection with her, he can feel the passion in her words. His laughter is a sign that he not only understands her true meaning but also appreciates her turn of

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[167] Al-Iṣfahāni, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 160.

phrase and creativity. This kind of connection between *qayna* and caliph was difficult to cultivate if one did not have the right skills or appropriate personality, and Maḥbūba, having both in abundance, was able to nurture such a relationship with her master.

The verses themselves tell their own tale of connections and emotions. Maḥbūba directs her verses to the apple she has been gifted by al-Mutawakkil, but she really tells her master, through the apple, of her passion and heartache. As a gift from the caliph, the apple represents their relationship and thus, for her, "ignites the fire of passion in (her) heart."[168] The wasting away to which she refers is the heartache she feels when she sees al-Mutawakkil, her lover. Her wish for the personification of the apple then transforms this gift into a physical symbol of her pain and emotion concerning their relationship. She describes herself as weak, having a thin frame which "does not belong to a creature who is strong."[169] This anguish and fatigue while in love is discussed in great detail in Ibn Ḥazm's *Ring of the Dove*, in which he states "The flintstone of yearning passion kindled the fire of anguish within my breast." [170] This wasting illness is also part of a greater trope used in the *qaṣīda*, or ode poem. The British orientalist A.J. Arberry explains through the words of Ibn Qutayba, a ninth-century scholar of Arabic linguistics and philology, that one of the essential tropes of a *qaṣīda* was the fatigue, want of sleep, and physical anguish that the body experienced when in love.[171] Thus, in her verses, Maḥbūba follows the pattern of the *qaṣīda* in enumerating the physical maladies she experiences because

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[168] Al-Iṣfahāni, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 160.

[169] *ibid.*

[170] Ibn Ḥazm, *The Ring of the Dove*, trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 87.

[171] A.J. Arberry, *Arabic Poetry: A Primer for Students* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 5. Arberry takes this explanation of *qaṣīda* patterns from Ibn Qutayba's *Kitāb al-Shiʿr wa'l-Shuʿarāʾ* (*The Book of Poetry and Poets*), pp. 14-15.

of the strength of her love for al-Mutawakkil. Ultimately, Maḥbūba's seemingly sad verses tell the story of her love for the caliph by revealing to him how much in love with him she actually is - so much so, that the emotions and passion are affecting her physically.

Al-Mutawakkil's laughter, while it may seem a harsh reaction to verses that present themselves as intense heartache, is actually the result of his strong connection and understanding with his beloved. He reads between the lines and finds the message of deep love and affection she has sent to him. He hears this well-known trope of heartache and fatigue, and is delighted by Maḥbūba's use of this pattern for her own means. He is also taken by the creative way she presents this love and laughs at her cleverness and, even, her audacity at treating their relationship so openly.

Again, at the end of this anecdote, the reader is confronted with al-Mutawakkil's treatment of his slave girls and the hierarchy in which they lived and worked. He orders the *qiyān* ʿArīb and Shāriya to set these verses to music and sing them for the rest of the day.[172] While his desire to be continually entertained by these verses does reveal his delight with the creativity and wit of Maḥbūba, it also sheds light on this hierarchy of *jawārī*. The *jāriya*, more often *qayna*, who composes the verses is the creative artist held in high regard, when her verses please, but the *jawārī* nearby who have listened to the recitation, or read the verses, are the ones commanded to sing them and set them to music.

The next anecdote concerning Maḥbūba demonstrates the strength and passion of her relationship with al-Mutawakkil. In his *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ,* Ibn al-Sāʿī relates the story of the results of al-Mutawakkil's quarrel with Maḥbūba. After the argument, ʿAlī b. al-Jahm calls upon

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[172] Al-Iṣfahāni, *al-Imāʾ al-Shawāʿir*, p. 160.

the caliph, who tells him that he dreamed that Maḥbūba had made up to him. The caliph calls for a servant to find out what she is doing, and the servant returns, explaining that Maḥbūba is sitting in her chamber singing. Al-Mutawakkil is taken aback and angered by her apparent nonchalance concerning their argument, so he and ʿAlī b. al-Jahm go to Maḥbūba's chamber to listen to her song:

> I roam the palace not seeing anyone
> I complain to it but it does not address me
> As if I committed a sin
> From which no repentance can absolve me
> Is there anyone who can intercede with a king
> Who had visited me in sleep and made up with me
> Then, when morning flashed its light
> He returned to his chamber and was cold towards me[173]

Maḥbūba's touching verses move al-Mutawakkil, and upon sensing his presence, his beloved *qayna* comes out to him. She had also seen him in a dream in which they made up, and so she composed these verses. The caliph, being moved by her talents and love for him, enters her chamber as her lover once again, and they enjoy each other's company.[174]

The situation these two strong personalities have found themselves in is one that common people of the court do not often survive. It seems that Maḥbūba has angered her master in some way and they have quarreled about it. The fact that she has so far remained unscathed from this argument is a testament to her relationship with al-Mutawakkil and her talents as a *qayna*. Her verses, in lamenting the fallout of al-Mutawakkil's anger, help to further assuage the doubt and frustration lingering between them. From her lines, the reader can assume that the caliph has attempted to ignore Maḥbūba because he is so angry with her. Both parties, however, grieve the

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[173] Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ,* p. 96.

[174] *ibid.*

loss of the closeness they shared and wish for reconciliation, as revealed by the two similar dreams. Maḥbūba's verses describe her situation as bleak, with no possibility of peace. This is the predicament into which she fears she has fallen. Her roaming in the palace signifies the loneliness she feels.[175] Additionally, her references to wandering and searching are also homages paid to the patterns of the *qaṣīda.* In his *Arabic Poetry*, Arberry uses the quote from Ibn Qutayba to point out that bewailing the separation from one's beloved and traveling by night and noonday heat in order to find this soulmate are two more tropes of the *qaṣīda*.[176] Maḥbūba does both these things as she describes her frenzied search for a sympathetic ear in order to find her lover once again. When she questions her nonexistent audience, "Is there anyone who can intercede with a king?" she reveals how dire the situation has become for her, in that she thinks her own words will no longer make a difference in her case. How wrong she is. For, when al-Mutawakkil visits Maḥbūba's chamber, her verses move him to mend their relationship, and he enters her rooms to restore that connection that they both feared had been lost.

Thus, it is Maḥbūba's verses, and the caliph and his *qayna*'s mutual desire to mend what had seemingly been torn asunder, that work together to fix their relationship. Maḥbūba influences her master, through her emotionally-charged and creative verses, to make peace with him. This use of skill alone, and not beauty or sexual appeal, is a perfect example of a *qayna*'s talents put to work to persuade and influence her master.

Maḥbūba's last anecdote in these sources tells of her grief after al-Mutawakkil's murder (d. 861). Her verses and faithful devotion to her former master are so powerful that they almost get her killed. After the caliph's death, a number of *jawārī*, including Maḥbūba, are given to

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[175] Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ, p.* 96.

[176] Arberry, *Arabic Poetry*, p. 5.

Waṣīf, a man with a notorious temper. He orders the *jawārī* to come forth and entertain him. While the others are dressed in colorful fine array, Maḥbūba enters the chamber in bland white clothes, the color of mourning. When asked to recite for Waṣīf, she declaims:

> What kind of life would delight me
> If I could not see in it Jaʿfar
> He was a king
> My eyes had seen him murdered, covered in dust
> All who were grieving
> And sad have recovered
> Save Maḥbūba who
> If she saw death for purchase
> Would buy it with her own means
> All this to be buried
> To the grieving ones, death
> Is sweeter than a long life[177]

Waṣīf is angered by Maḥbūba's grief, and he prepares to have her killed. Bughā, one of his Turkish commanders, quickly steps in and asks Waṣīf to present Maḥbūba to him as a gift. When he does so, Bughā sets her free. He commands her to live wherever she chooses, and Maḥbūba's life ends in obscurity.[178]

Maḥbūba is greatly affected by her master's death. Al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (*The History of the Prophets and the Kings*) reports the events of al-Mutawakkil's murder in great detail. The caliph was killed by his own men: Baghlūn the Turk, Bāghir, Mūsā b. Bughā, Hārūn b. Suwārategin, and Bughā al-Sharābī. As al-Mutawakkil tried to reason with his assassins, Baghlūn cut off his ear. In retaliation, the caliph cut off Baghlūn's hand, but Hārūn and

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[177] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, pp. 204-5.

[178] *ibid.* p. 205.

Mūsā b. Bughā "pounced on al-Mutawakkil with their swords, (and then) killed him and sliced him to pieces.[179]

Hearing of her master's death affects Maḥbūba to her very core and her will to recite verses of joy and happiness is greatly diminished. That connection she shared with him is still so strong that she is unable to apply her skills to the cultivation of a new relationship. She loved the caliph too much to mar the memory of their own connection in such a way. Her verses hint at her being present at al-Mutawakkil's murder, or at least nearby, because her "eyes had seen him murdered, covered in dust."[180] While others have easily shed their mourning clothes, Maḥbūba is unable to recover. Her grief is so great that she is willing to die so that she will no longer feel such pain: "If she saw death for purchase/ (she) would buy it with her own means// To the grieving ones, death/ is sweeter than a long life."[181]

In these sources, Maḥbūba's skills and her relationship with al-Mutawakkil define her life. She is known for her closeness to her master and her witty, beautiful verses. Therefore, it is quite interesting to note that Maḥbūba's career in al-Mutawakkil's court did not begin with such great success.

Before Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahāni even begins to recount the stories of Maḥbūba's life and relationships in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, he describes her origins and her arrival at al-Mutawakkil's court. Maḥbūba was born in Basra, and, when she was led to the caliph as a gift by Ibn Ṭāhir, not only was she a virgin, but she was also "more beautiful and purer than Faḍl al-Yamāmiyya," one

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[179] al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Incipient Decline,* Vol. XXXIV, trans. Joel L. Kraemer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 180.

[180] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 204.

[181] *ibid.* p. 205.

of al-Mutawakkil's famous poetesses.[182] Her singing, however, was described as mediocre and, when she arrived at the caliph's court, "she remained after him a while, and he did not lust for her, and she also sang songs without eloquence or wit."[183] Though she is deemed beautiful and well-educated, it seems that Maḥbūba began her career in al-Mutawakkil's court unnoticed and, in all things but looks, unexceptional.

Maḥbūba's story then is not one of automatic acceptance, but of work and learning, in which she reassesses her talents and trains herself from the bottom up. Through the employment of her ever-expanding skills, she obtains a close relationship with her master and, ultimately, it is the wit and beauty of her verses, which once were dry and uninteresting, that allow her to form such a close bond with the caliph al-Mutawakkil, as demonstrated by the many anecdotes which regale the reader with stories of her poetic successes, as well as the strong bond she shared with her master.

The anecdotes reported by al-Masʿūdī, al-Iṣfahāni, and Ibn al-Sāʿī concerning Maḥbūba all present her as a skilled and innovative poetess and the beloved of al-Mutawakkil as a result of her talents. Her influence in the royal household came primarily from those skills of poetic composition and recitation. Her wit and creativity with words helped her to soften her master's mood, or to incite in him great passion or joy, depending on the situation. She acquired a kind of facility with her poetry that enabled her to excel as a gifted performer. Therefore, Maḥbūba's relations with al-Mutawakkil grew close, and she held a lofty place in his affections unrivaled by

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[182] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, p. 202.

[183] *ibid.*

any other.[184] The nature of a *jāriya*'s service "allowed for informal relationships to develop between slave and master," and Maḥbūba's stunning talents helped her to obtain such a close connection with the caliph.[185] As related by the anecdotes, she is the perfect example of a *qayna* who, after beginning her career as an unnoticed and seemingly talentless *jāriya*, used her skills and her facility for learning to one day become al-Mutawakkil's most beloved *qayna*.

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[184] Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qub Al-Ya'qubi, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje. (Ledien: Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum vol. 7 1892), p. 282. (As cited by Matthew S. Gordon in his "Preliminary Remarks on Slaves and Slave Labor in the Third/Ninth Century ʿAbbasid Empire," p. 72.)

[185] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," pp. 106-7.

Chapter 4: Al-Khayzurān

A *qayna*'s skills in poetic recitation, music, and singing played a large part in the obtainment of certain liberties within the caliph's household. Though she walked a thin line between formal behavior and informal, personal conversation with her master, the successful *jāriya* was able to use her skills and intellect to rise in the ranks of women in the court and, in very special cases, even become the caliph's primary mistress and the mother of successive caliphs.

The social mobility of a *jāriya* is initially linked to her marketability. Whatever skills she may possess, whether for the purposes of entertainment or for the care of the household, the training she has received increases her value in the slave market. Those skills are her keys to a life of relative luxury in her master's house. The *jāriya*'s successful application of these talents helps her to obtain better treatment, various gifts, and the possibility of improving her own prospects. In some instances, *jawārī* "received money for their services or married their masters," and, "in this way, they became property owners (after their masters' deaths)."[186] In order to marry their slaves, masters first had to manumit them. Thus, when her husband had died, the now-widow of her former master could claim property he had left her.

Most of the *jawārī* whose names have been recorded and remembered through history "are the *ummahāt awlād* or the most famous singing slave girls."[187] Those singing slave girls are the *qiyān* who, with their skills and wit, obtained a special place in the hearts of their royal masters. Because of the nature of the relationship certain *jawārī* shared with their masters, some

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[186] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*, p. 126.

[187] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 115.

of them did give birth to the caliph's children, becoming *ummahāt awlād* and, thus, obtaining freedoms and influence within the household, which were not alloted to ordinary slave girls. The *umm walad* enjoyed a higher status within the household because she could no longer be sold and upon the death of her master she became free; the child she bore was also considered free and no future children of hers would be born into slavery.[188] If a *qayna* became an *umm walad*, she enjoyed a wide array of benefits, in addition to those allotted her by law, including increased social standing among her peers. Motherhood offered more security and acceptance than the transitional reality of the lives many of the childless *jawārī* led.[189] Many caliphs were the sons of slave girls, and those whose mothers began their lives at court as slaves gradually gained acceptance and were established as heirs to the caliphate in their own right.[190] In fact, almost every ʿAbbasid caliph, from al-Saffāḥ's reign (r. 750-754) to the beginning of the tenth century, was the son of a concubine.

Just as "a female slave of humble origins could hope to become a sultan's wife" through the application of her own skills, so, too, could a *jāriya* in the caliph's household envision herself at the highest rungs of society by her master's side, and even fulfill this wish so that it became reality.[191] Though not technically a *qayna*, one very determined ʿAbbasid *jāriya* did just this, becoming the caliph's wife and the mother of two successive rulers. Her meteoric rise through the ranks of women in the caliph's household is a story about the application of pure willpower and great intellect.

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[188] Brunschvig, "ʿAbd," p. 31.

[189] Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyan*) of the ʿAbbasid Court," p. 116.

[190] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*, p. 121.

[191] Yossef Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society: An Overview," *Mamluk Studies Review,* vol. 11, No. 2 (Chicago, Middle East Documentation Center at University of Chicago, 2007), p. 11.

Al-Khayzurān was the concubine and later wife of the third ʿAbbasid caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785). She was originally owned by a Thaqafī Arab, but was brought to al-Mahdī's father, al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775), as a *jāriya* for his household.[192] Al-Manṣūr gifted her to al-Mahdī, and she bore him two sons, Mūsā al-Hādī (r. 785-786) and Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). After she became an *umm walad*, al-Mahdī manumitted al-Khayzurān, and this improved her status as well as that of her sons, freeing her from slavery and putting both sons in line for legitimate succession.[193] Upon manumitting her in 776, al-Mahdī married al-Khayzurān.[194] She had considerable influence over her husband during his reign and, when her second son, Hārūn al-Rashīd, succeeded as caliph in 786, she ruled for him with the vizier Yaḥyā al-Barmakī (767-803) until her death in 789.[195]

Al-Khayzurān was a strategic thinker and a powerful influence in al-Mahdī's life. Her interactions with her master, and later her husband, mirror the dance that the *qiyān* navigated when conversing with their own masters. Al-Iṣfahāni relates an anecdote in which a certain *jāriya*, al-Muhallibiyya, is being considered as a gift for one of al-Mahdī's courtiers, Isḥāq b. ʿAziz, who is wooing her at the time.[196] Al-Muhallibiyya is al-Khayzurān's *jāriya*, but al-Mahdī feels that Isḥāq b. ʿAziz's love should not go unrequited, and he wants to give al-Muhallibiyya to him so that their love has a legal chance. If Isḥāq acts on his love while the *jāriya* is still under al-Khayzurān's ownership, then he does so illegally and with great disrespect towards al-

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[192] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 25, p. 245.

[193] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad,* p. 18.

[194] al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī,* Vol. XXIX, trans. Hugh Kennedy, p. 177.

[195] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*, p. 117.

[196] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 4, p. 62.

Khayzurān. It is this illegal act of love that al-Mahdī wants to ensure does not occur. When al-Khayzurān hears of this plan, she mistakes al-Mahdī's thoughtfulness for lust on his own part, and she believes he wants al-Muhallibiyya for himself.[197] She, being a clever woman who wants to ensure her own position within the court, however, tells al-Mahdī "O Commander of the Faithful, if you want her for yourself.... then she is yours."[198] Al-Mahdī is surprised by this and explains to al-Khayzurān that he had actually come to her to buy al-Muhallibiyya from her for his courtier, Isḥāq b. ʿAziz, for a sum of fifty thousand dirhams. They then set aside the misunderstanding and work together to gift al-Muhallibiyya to Isḥāq b. ʿAziz.[199]

This interaction between al-Khayzurān and al-Mahdī reveals a great deal about their relationship. As caliph, he has the power to buy and sell any slaves in his household. Al-Muhallibiyya, however, is owned by al-Khayzurān, so he must discuss his plan with her first, before acting on it. Only a woman of great standing and importance would have the right to own *jawārī*. Al-Khayzurān's ownership of a *jāriya* and al-Mahdī's need to obtain her consent before selling this slave show al-Khayzurān's importance and social standing in the court, as well as al-Mahdī's own respect for his beloved and her property. Initially, al-Khayzurān misunderstands her lover's intentions. Though she may be jealous, she agrees to al-Mahdī's request without argument and, only when he explains to her that he does not want al-Muhallibiyya for himself, but, rather, for Isḥāq b. ʿAziz, does she realize what he is asking. Al-Khayzurān's immediate agreement to what she sees as her lover's possible infidelity demonstrates that, though she may hold a certain amount of power due to her status within the household, she still understands that

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[197] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 4, p. 62..

[198] *ibid.*, p. 63.

[199] *ibid.*, p. 62.

she cannot thwart al-Mahdī's intentions without incurring his wrath and her own possible demotion. It should also be noted that in al-Khayzurān's acceptance of such a relationship al-Mahdī would be indebted to her for facilitating this affair.

For these reasons, she agrees with what she sees as the caliph's decision to take on another lover in his life, even though it may have repercussions in their own relationship. This kind of response reveals the shrewd and careful mind which al-Khayzurān possessed. When al-Mahdī corrects al-Khayzurān's error in judgement and explains that he would actually like to buy al-Muhallibiyya for his courtier, Isḥāq b. ʿAziz, she quickly understands the situation and eagerly agrees to help him in this endeavor. As Leslie Peirce explains concerning Ottoman royal women, the favorite concubine or wife helped to maintain the royal household and often acted as political confidante to the sultan.[200] This can be applied to ʿAbbasid wives and concubines as well. Al-Khayzurān sees it as her duty to help al-Mahdī in rewarding one of his own courtiers, and she willingly sacrifices her own *jāriya* for the peace and smooth management of al-Mahdī's court. The imminent loss of one of her own slaves does not faze her. Al-Khayzurān understands that al-Mahdī's wishes are akin to law, and she intends to help him carry out this specific wish with as little hindrance from her as possible, whether that means a new *jāriya* for al-Mahdī or, in reality, for his courtier and friend.

Not long after she was manumitted, al-Khayzurān went on pilgrimage. This is very briefly recorded in al-Iṣfahāni's *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. As she leaves to perform the *ḥajj*, Abū Dulāma (d. 777), a poet in al-Mahdī's court, yells at her and asks to speak with her. Al-Khayzurān graciously obliges, and Abū Dulāma proceeds to ask for a *jāriya* of his own from her. He pleads

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[200] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem, p.* 63.

with her: “Give me a slave girl from your slave girls who will entertain me and display a gentle attitude toward me and relieve me from my old age.... for whom I will long and whom I will miss.”[201] Al-Khayzurān laughs and agrees to his request. When she returns from her pilgrimage, she brings Abū Dulāma with her to Baghdad to carry out his wish.[202]

Though quite short, this anecdote demonstrates al-Khayzurān’s position in society. First, she goes on pilgrimage as a free woman. Ruby Lal, in her text *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, points out that the women of emperor Akbar’s (r. 1556-1605) *harem*, including his aunt, Gulbadan Banu Begum, set out on the *ḥajj* in 1578. This pilgrimage sheds light on the desires and agencies of imperial women.[203] Though these royal women belong to the Mughal dynasty and not the ‘Abbasid empire, in which al-Khayzurān lived, the decision and undertaking of one’s own pilgrimage still demonstrates the same general idea - imperial women had the right and privilege to take their own pilgrimages when they felt it was necessary. In undertaking this *ḥajj*, al-Khayzurān is performing an essential act of Islam - one which humbles and enlightens its followers. When Abū Dulāma calls out to her and makes his plea, he is treating her as one with the power to grant such a request - a patron. Al-Khayzurān’s position in the caliph’s household and her renown make her the best person to whom Abū Dulāma can put this petition. It also helps that she owns a number of *jawārī*. Abū Dulāma’s request for a companion chosen from the ranks of al-Khayzurān’s own slaves demonstrates his understanding of her powers. Viewed through a lens of extortion, this request can also be seen as a form of blackmail. If al-Khayzurān refuses Abū Dulāma’s petition, he can very easily humiliate her in his court

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[201] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 10, p. 310.

[202] *ibid.*

[203] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 177.

poetry for being stingy. Conversely, if she accepts his request, he can immortalize her kindness and her reputation for generosity in the verses he recites for the court and, in this fashion, he can make her even more famous. Ultimately, Abū Dulāma feels al-Khayzurān can easily give one of her *jawārī* to him and not suffer from doing so. Whether this is true or not is less relevant than the fact that Abū Dulāma believes such a thing about al-Khayzurān. Her reputation as a powerful, generous, and enduring woman in al-Mahdī's court precedes her and Abū Dulāma plans to use this to his advantage. She is also undertaking one of the most important religious customs of Islam, and when a person goes on Ḥajj they must prepare themselves for such a spiritual journey by helping others in any way they can. Therefore, Abū Dulāma feels that there is no problem in asking al-Khazyuran to fulfill such a request.

Al-Khayzurān held an especially prominent role in the reigns of both her sons. While she was the real directing influence behind Hārūn al-Rashīd's candidature and she ruled as regent when he first became caliph, al-Khayzurān was also an adviser to his brother and predecessor, Mūsā al-Hādī.[204] One day, she asked Mūsā al-Hādī to appoint his maternal uncle al-Ghiṭrīf as governor of Yemen, and he promised her that he would do so.[205] While he delayed the appointment and arguments ensued, it is the fact that his own mother acted as primary adviser which truly demonstrates the kind of power al-Khayzurān wielded within the ʿAbbasid court. Her clever mind and closeness to the reigning caliphs of the time gave her the unspoken right to advise the ruling caliph and to discuss state matters with him in an attempt to form the perfect government she envisioned.

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[204] al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, The History of al-Ṭabarī: *The ʿAbbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium,* Vol. XXX, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 56.

[205] Al-Iṣfahāni, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 14, p. 171.

In fact, Mūsā al-Hādī's postponement of his mother's request and the subsequent arguments and mayhem foreshadow his own demise. Al-Hādī's rule lasted one year, from 785 to 786. When he felt that his mother was being too intrusive, he turned against her. One day, al-Hādī sent his mother a dish of rice saying, "I found this tasty and accordingly ate some of it; so you have some too.[206] Khāliṣa, one of al-Khayzurān's own *jawārī* found something amiss in this gift and begged her mistress not to partake of the dish. They had the servants bring in a dog to try the rice and when it ate some, it fell down dead. Upon entering her son's presence after this incident, al-Hādī asked his mother how she liked the dish and al-Khayzurān replied that she enjoyed it very much. In frustration, al-Hādī exclaimed, "You can't have eaten it, because if you had, I would have been rid of you. When was any caliph ever happy who had a mother (still alive)?"[207]

Instead of pathetically melting into the shadows, however, al-Khayzurān saw al-Hādī's change of heart as betrayal, and it is said she had him murdered.[208] There are a number of theories concerning al-Hādī's ultimate demise, one of which simply points to abdominal cancer as the culprit, but the more conspiratorial of these reports states that al-Hādī's death "was at the hands of some slave girls belonging to his mother al-Khayzurān, whom she had ordered to kill al-Hādī."[209] Al-Ṭabarī relates that when al-Khayzurān became aware of his betrayal "she secretly dispatched at the time of al-Hādī's illness some of her slave girls to kill him by covering over

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[206] al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The ʿAbbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium,* Vol. XXX, trans. C.E. Bosworth, p. 43.

[207] *ibid.*

[208] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*, p. 117.

[209] al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The ʿAbbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium,* Vol. XXX, trans. C.E. Bosworth, pp. 41-2.

(his mouth and nose) and sitting on his face [thus suffocating him]."[210] After the death of his brother, al-Khayzurān's second son, Hārūn al-Rashīd, took the throne in 786 at the age of twenty, and his mother ruled alongside him until her own death in 789. Possibly having learned from his brother's demise, Hārūn al-Rashīd acknowledged the talents and intellect of al-Khayzurān, and he had no qualms about ruling with a woman of such supreme judgement. [211]

Al-Khayzurān, though not technically a *qayna*, began her career as a *jāriya* and concubine to al-Mahdī. Like the *qiyān*, however, she used her wit and intellect to climb the social ladder, and she ultimately became the caliph's wife. Hers is a story of determination and perseverance. The closeness of the relationship she shared with al-Mahdī allowed her to wield certain influential powers over him when it came to politics, and her position gave her the ability and means to advise and command as she saw fit. This advisory position was one she took up for all the men in her immediate family, and it was the way she put her intellect to use for them that made her a memorable woman, and one whose experiences and actions were worthy of recording for posterity.

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[210] al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The ʿAbbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium,* Vol. XXX, trans. C.E. Bosworth, p. 43.

[211] Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, p. 51.

Conclusion

"Have you not heard her (marvelous as she is), when she raises her voice in song, how skillful is her execution; she renders the thread of the lyric in such a way as to render it to a turtle-dove cooing in her throat"

- "A-lam tarahā wa-Allāhu yakfīka sharrahā/ Idha ṭarrabat fī ṣawtihā kayfa taṣnʿū// taruddu niẓāma l-qawli hattā taruddahu/ ilā ṣalṣalin min ḥalqihā yutarjʿu"

- An unnamed poet's verses regarding Sallāmat al-Qass, quoted by al-Jāḥiẓ[212]

While this unnamed poet's verses praise Sallāmat al-Qass, these lines can be applied to any of the skilled *qiyān* who used their talents and intellect in order to obtain a certain standing in their master's households. Sallāmat al-Qass, Ḥabbāba, Maḥbūba, and even al-Khayzurān stand as remarkable examples of the use of skill and intellect in obtaining certain freedoms, influence, and social mobility within the caliphs' courts of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid empires. The very education that these women received was their key to success. Without the honing of these skills, the *qiyān* would not have been considered so valuable, nor would they have obtained those freedoms that helped them to make such a name for themselves. It is their agency and tenacious drive to better their situations that allowed these women to gain such social standing within the court and with their masters, the caliphs.

Additionally, the changing status of music and poetry within the court affected the importance that was placed on entertainment as well as the portrayal of the *qiyān* as entertainers. The Umayyad period was a time of transmission and continuity for entertainment, and *qiyān*

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[212] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Risālat al-Qiyān*, trans. A.F.L. Beeston, p. 10 (Arabic original), p. 23 (English Translation).

such as Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba were transmitters of the pre-Islamic musical and literary traditions. As music and poetry became more integral to the caliphal court, the *qiyān* took a more active role in the presentation of such arts. This can be seen in the anecdotes concerning these women. While Sallāma and Ḥabbāba are recorded as being highly skilled at singing and musical performance, Maḥbūba is remembered more for the specific verses she composed. This change in anecdotal patterns demonstrates the evolution of music in the caliphal court. As more importance was placed on such entertainment arts, the anecdotes concerning the *qiyān* became more specific when it came to their actual skills. The ʿAbbasid empire was the shining example of royal entertainment at its finest. Verse recitation and singing were praised beyond compare, and even scholars who wrote about love and its effects were taken by the role music and poetry had in the arts of love. Ibn Ḥazm's description of falling in love upon merely hearing a woman's voice exemplifies the importance that was placed on music in the ʿAbbasid empire.[213] The *qiyān* were most famous during this period, and the levels of fame and notoriety of later Islamic female entertainers do not compare to those which the *qiyān* achieved. Even during the Ottoman period, entertainment skills learned by the women of the *harem* were taken on solely for the purpose of acquiring skills and manners appropriate to their station. These women were not considered entertainers, but would undertake musical performances for the enjoyment of their peers.[214] The ʿAbbasid period serves as the heyday for musical, poetic, and literary achievements in the Islamic empires, and the importance placed on the skills of the *qiyān*, as demonstrated in the anecdotes provided, was a direct effect of that achievement.

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[213] Ibn Ḥazm, *The Ring of the Dove*, trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 30.

[214] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 141.

It is also the level of such skills that aided certain, extremely talented *qiyān* to rise above their peers in a hierarchy of female entertainers. There was an unspoken ranking system amongst the *qiyān* and *jawāri* who acted as entertainers for the caliph. When one *qayna* particularly pleased him with her verses or singing capabilities, she was recognized for her talents by the caliph and his audience. This recognition could be given in the form of vocal praise or tangible gifts, such as *jawāri* like those Ḥabbāba and Maḥbūba were gifted by their masters. The ranking itself was dependent upon the *qayna*'s own ability to delight the caliph with her skills, as well as the caliph's mood and his subsequent reception of the *qayna*'s verses or singing. Thus, the hierarchy of *qiyān* was ever-changing and the most talented of these women competed for the status of favorite by using their artistic and literary skills to attain this coveted level of prestige. Like Sallāmat al-Qass and Ḥabbāba's own playful rivalry, the competition between *qiyān* was a constant amongst the female slave entertainers, and this competitiveness served to heighten the levels of skill that they used to entertain the caliph.

The application of a slave girl's creativity, skills, and wit helped her to obtain a coveted and respected status within her master's household. Whether the royally-owned *jāriya* entered the caliph's household as a musician, a poet, or a concubine, it was the use of her skills that primarily solidified her position as an appreciated and well-loved asset to the court. While her beauty and sexual appeal may have played a role in the acquisition of certain privileges within the household, and while the extant sources sensationalize the power of famous *qiyān* to advance literary or moral agendas, it was her skill and intellect that primarily helped the *qayna* to gain such prestigious standing in the court and to nurture and maintain such a close relationship with her master, the caliph.

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