

BOOK REVIEWS

Islamicate sexualities: translations across temporal geographies of desire, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, Cambridge, MA, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 2008, 376 pp., £14.95 (paperback), ISBN 9-78-067403-204-0

When I heard the Lebanese oud player Rabih Abou-Khalil in London in 2008 I was puzzled by his remark linking the French with cross-dressing. Sahar Amer's paper in this anthology partly explains the remark. She describes how cross-dressing appears in much Arab literature, linked to identity, status and power. Partly continuing the tradition of Arab homoerotic (including female–female) literature, female cross-dressing could be seen as 'normal' and culturally 'logical', in that wanting to 'be' male implies acceptance of male superiority. But there are also considerations of anonymity, escape, safety and adopted identity – sexual, social, cultural, national. The 'disguise' aspects of cross-dressing are reflected in French and Spanish literature – Leyla Rouhi's paper cites 'Don Quixote' – and in Shakespeare, although these reflections misunderstand or neuter the original Arab significances, which challenge historical and ideological power structures.

Amer's paper is one of nine in this anthology, originating in a May 2003 Radcliffe Seminar organised by the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies. The seminar attempted to broaden the established disciplines of Middle Eastern studies by linking conventional areas of interest to comparative literature studies and queer theory. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds – including Arabic, Persian, French, Spanish, Christian, and Islamic.

The term 'Islamicate' was adopted parallel to the term 'Italianate', indicating a combination of geographical, cultural, linguistic and literary contributions to understandings of Islam and the Islamic world that are not solely religious or theological. One specific aim was to link western 'sexuality' (science of sexuality) scholarship with a, possibly theoretical, eastern counter of 'erotica' (art of love), a polarity contested by some contributors. This theme, of how terminology both helps and constrains, runs through many of the contributions.

Participants were invited to explore male and female sexual desire; power relations; and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. Most have close readings of literary texts or genres, with intriguing revelations and subject matter. The opening and closing papers, by Valerie Traub and Dina Al-Kassim, take a wider view of the topics and themes, looking at the wood rather than the trees – the book rather than the chapters. Traub refers to 'the intricate dance between erotic desires, acts and identities' (p. 13), indicating the concerns explored.

Traub sees the linkage of queer studies and the Arab–Persian nucleus of the Islamic world as potentially provocative or contradictory. She and others (cf. Epps) question whether queer studies is relevant to any cultures other than that of the United States–United Kingdom, where the discipline originated. Rouhi explains how in Iberia the notion of 'outing' refers to an individual's actual or perceived Moorish or Jewish roots.

(The involvement of Islam in Spanish history and culture is greater than in any other European country.) The papers by Epps, Najmabadi, Rouhi and Traub question the validity of homosexual and heterosexual identities as fixed binary points, seeing the depiction or fantasising of same-sex practices in Arab literature as expressing a range of desires and acts, not fixed, for-life sexual identities.

Sexuality studies both help and hinder understanding by the identification of distinctions and opposites that do not always apply to individual identities or national/religious cultures and norms. Rather than attempting to identify and understand practices, norms and cultures for themselves, they may be 'fitted' into established Anglo-American terminologies which have developed through sexuality and queer studies. Thus sexual practice is not to be equated with sexual orientation – making the public health and epidemiological term 'men who have sex with men' apt and accurate.

So, rather than concentrating on sexual identity, it would appear from the contributors' combined efforts that it is more realistic and accurate to focus on gender identities, recognising that in the Islamicate context they are male or masculinity oriented. Rouhi points to 'patriarchal marriage' as an expression of male power, echoing Traub's observation that 'Men seem to have had the opportunity to lead a sexual double-life, combining marriage, reproduction and family with same-sex sex' (24). Epps describes the traditional view of beauty based on gender, being seen as both aesthetic and visual (appreciated and observed/gazed at or on), and erotic and arousing. This appreciation can be of either sex, with androgyny and pre-pubertal male beauty also playing significant roles. The paper by Lagrange suggests that literary depictions of male beauty may be solely an expression of aesthetic appreciation, not of desire.

Epps describes gender as 'a matter of social perception veiled as it is by prejudice, fantasy, fictions and wishes' (151). Najmabadi sees gender defined around penetration and non-penetration – male–male sex being part of a continuum where disapproval may be based on the role (penetrator/penetrated) and the social and power status of those involved. To be male, of high social and political status *and* penetrated is crossing the boundaries of what is acceptable – what Rowson effectively describes as too sexual. The higher the status, the less acceptance there is of transgressive sexual and social behaviours: what you do and its acceptability or toleration is largely defined by who you do it with.

Lagrange pursues this aspect of sexual practices, examining how banter and insult serve to reinforce codifications, social and religious, of acceptable and transgressive sexuality. He extends the consideration of power and status in male–male sex by suggesting that the 'inferior' partner – socially and penetrated – also serves the role of attracting disapproval of the act. This is not because of the act itself but because of the more 'feminine' behaviour of a male being penetrated by another male – same-sex sex and the roles and superiorities involved reinforcing heteronormativity.

Babayn's focus on female companionship, love, desire and sexuality adds the dimensions of nationality and diaspora. She discusses the sense of national belonging and familiarity, leading to feelings of strangeness and displacement in neighbouring Islamic countries or states.

Much of this book is, in effect, a discourse on pleasure, which for some lies in considering, not doing. In the face of some religious codes, celibacy can be seen as a threat to marriage, and the associations – of abstinence, celibacy and mysticism – a threat or challenge to social norms.

This book does not clarify Islamicate sexualities – because there are too many unknowns (do the texts studied describe fantasy and desire or practice and acts?) and because there is so much variation, across history, nations and regimes. This is perhaps the

book's major 'lesson' and contribution – that, historically, Islamicate sexualities and attitudes are as varied and wide-ranging as those living in cultures and countries other than Islamicate know, inhabit and understand. And although this conclusion draws on the historical evidence in this collection, present-day UK realities are that there is no one universal Muslim view of sex, sexuality (and sex education) but rather a range, based as much on nationality and culture as on religion.

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