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Who was Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya?

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Classical Arabic literature features many stories about a woman named Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya. These stories are mostly humorous and often lewd. Some readers describe them as overly obscene confirmation of early Arabic high literature's tendency to degrade women. One modern scholar has claimed that Ḥubbā "embodies in her essence the female *adab* [classical Arabic belles-lettres] character", in that she is, first and foremost, a body with "uncontrollable sexuality".¹ Other scholars counter this interpretation, arguing that it is predicated upon a misreading of classical Arabic literature and a lack of understanding of its genres.²

The focus here is the literary creation of a quasi-historical character, and its variation across genres. Behind the layers of myth, however, there may be a true lived experience. That conflicting accounts exist does not rule out seeking an answer to the question, who was Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya?

Ḥubbā in 'adab

Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) made Ḥubbā famous – or, rather, infamous – by mentioning her in his book on animals, *Ḥayawān*, and in a humorous epistle, *Mufaḥḥarat al-jawāri wa-l-ḡilmān* (*The boasting match between girls and boys*). According to Jāḥiẓ, Ḥubbā was married to a man named 'Abū Kilāb ibn Lisān al-Ḥummara, also called Ibn 'Umm Kilāb.³ Jāḥiẓ quotes a poem attributed to Hudba ibn Ḥašram al-'Uḍrī (see below), which suggests that Ḥubbā was attracted to the youth and appearance of Ibn 'Umm Kilāb, but did not love him truly:

No mother has loved the way I love her
[My love is] not like Ḥubbā's love for Ibn 'Umm Kilāb

1 Malti-Douglas, *Women's Body*, 45–46.

2 Scott Meisami, "Reading medieval women".

3 Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, vol. 2, 200.

She saw him with long, beautiful forearms
Perhaps she was revived [*inba ʿatāt*] by strength and youth.⁴

Jāḥiẓ also quotes a poem that he attributes to Ḥubbā:

I wish that he was a lizard and I
would be like a lizardess in wasteland [*kudyatin*⁵]
that had found a vacant space.

Jāḥiẓ claims that she recited this poem for her son, who reproached her for having married Ibn ʿUmm Kilāb – a young man – when she was almost fifty.⁶ The poem appears in the section on lizards in *Ḥayawān* and, surprisingly, is there to illustrate the poet's point that lizards have two sets of genitals.⁷ Ḥubbā's poem shows, according to Jāḥiẓ, that "she wished that she had two vaginas and he had two penises."⁸ This interpretation is not obvious; but for Jāḥiẓ, Ḥubbā is a comical character.

Al-Jāḥiẓ uses Ḥubbā to colour his arguments and to embody lively elements of entertainment. In *Mufaḥḥarat al-jawārī wa-l-ḡilmān*, Jāḥiẓ relates an anecdote about Ḥubbā scaring away the camels of the caliph ʿUṭmān ibn ʿAffān.⁹ She is one of the lustful women (*al-muḡtalimāt*), al-Jāḥiẓ writes, whom women from Medina consult about women's groaning (*qab ʿ*) while having sex. They ask if it is an old habit, or something the women – presumably the women of Medina – invented. Ḥubbā responds:

My daughters, I went on the minor pilgrimage with the Commander of the Faithful, ʿUṭmān, May God be pleased with him. As we were returning and came to al-ʿArj¹⁰, my husband looked at me and I at him. He was attracted by what he saw and so was I and so he fell upon me. ʿUṭmān's camels were passing by as I was groaning loudly, having being overtaken by that which happens to the daughters of Adam, whereupon the camels ran away. There were five hundred camels, and none of them have yet been found.¹¹

4 Ibid., 200–201.

5 A piece of land with hard soil, impossible to cultivate; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, s.v. *k-d-y*.

6 She was above *naṣaf*, which means, according to the editor, 45 or 50 years; *Ḥayawān*, vol. 6, 75, n. 2.

7 Ibid., 72–73.

8 Ibid., 75. Quoted by Yāqūt, *Mu ʿjam*, 1003.

9 Jāḥiẓ, *Rasāʿil*, 2, 129.

10 A place between Mecca and Medina.

11 Jāḥiẓ, *Rasāʿil*, 2, 129–30.

Ḥubbā educates the women of Medina not only about groaning, but also about moving (*ġarbala*) during sexual intercourse.¹² The curious words explained by Jāḥiẓ – *qab*¹³ and *ġarbala* – lend an air of exoticism to the story. What is more, al-Jāḥiẓ continues, when Ḥubbā's own son asks her how to please a woman, she offers him advice as well.¹³ These incidents are retold correspondingly by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Tayfūr (d. 893), al-Jāḥiẓ's somewhat younger contemporary, in *Balaġāt al-nisā'* (*Instances of women's eloquency*), one of the surviving volumes of his *Kitāb al-manṭūr wa-l-manẓūm*. There are some differences, however. In *Balaġāt al-nisā'*, Ḥubbā recounts the story of the caliph's camels to her own daughter, who complains about her husband asking her to groan when they have sex. Furthermore, the story about Ḥubbā's son getting sexual advice from his mother is elaborated upon. Here, "young men from Quraysh" were discussing how to please a woman, and urged Ḥubbā's son to ask his mother about it.¹⁴ Ibn Abī Ṭāhir tells some additional stories highlighting Ḥubbā's lustfulness and licentiousness that are discussed below.

Jāḥiẓ's epistle is an entirely joking debate between an owner of slave boys (*ġilmān*) and an owner of slave girls (*jawārī*). The subject is whether slave girls or slave boys are preferred as sexual partners.¹⁵ The second part of the epistle, where we find the anecdotes about Ḥubbā, contains numerous amusing anecdotes with the explicit aim of entertaining the reader – including stories about sodomites, effeminates, and various anonymous and named men and women.¹⁶ Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's volume on eloquent women is generally more serious. It starts by quoting speeches from 'Ā'isha bint 'Abī Bakr and other famous early Muslim women. The anecdotes about Ḥubbā, however, appear in a chapter devoted to *mujūn*; that is, vulgar, indecent talk intended to be humorous. Contrary to Jāḥiẓ, he introduces his anecdotes with a chain of transmitters (*isnād*), with claims of authenticity – although it is unlikely that they were received as anything more than entertainment.

12 Ibid., 130.

13 Ibid., 131.

14 Ibn 'Abī Ṭāhir, *Balaġāt*, 194. There are other differences. For example, in Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's version, Ḥubbā's husband is not mentioned and the camels were eventually found. See the translation of the anecdotes about Ḥubbā in Borg, "Obscenities," 152–153.

15 Cf. Rosenthal, "Male and female".

16 Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, 125.

The chain of transmitters is not reliable. Ibn ʿAbī Ṭāhir attributes the anecdotes to al-Hayṭam ibn ʿAdī, who, in turn, received some of them from Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān. Ṣāliḥ came from Medina, held a poetry *majlis* in Kufa, and died at the time of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785), a century or so after Ḥubbā, who, as we have seen, presumably lived at the time of Caliph ʿUṭmān ibn ʿAffān (r. 644–656).¹⁷ Ṣāliḥ was also a ḥadīṭ transmitter, but was dismissed as such by al-Nasāʾī, al-Buḥārī, and others. In the words of Ibn Ḥibbān, “He used to have female singers and listen to music, and he used to narrate fabricated reports on the authority of trustworthy narrators.”¹⁸ Ṣāliḥ’s pupil, al-Hayṭam ibn ʿAdī al-Ṭāʾī (d. 821), was also considered unreliable among traditionalists.¹⁹ He was born in Kufa and met with some success at the ʿAbbāsīd court in Baghdad. Charles Pellat suggests that although Jāḥiẓ quotes al-Hayṭam ibn ʿAdī quite often, he “seems to consider him proverbial for the lack of authenticity of his sources.”²⁰ Yet, based on precisely the unreliable anecdotes related by Jāḥiẓ, Pellat does not hesitate to call Ḥubbā one of the “true professionals of love”, which is likely a euphemism for a prostitute.²¹ Perhaps Pellat intended the epithet “true professionals of love” to portray Ḥubbā as a devoted sexual adviser, as both Jāḥiẓ and Ibn ʿAbī Ṭāhir claim that she gave sexual advice to both women and men. The only man she had sex with – according to these and other litterateurs – was her husband, so it is of course farfetched to deduce that she was a prostitute.

In her book about misogynistic attitudes in Classical Arabic literature, *Woman’s body, woman’s word*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas adopts yet another approach to Ḥubbā. Malti-Douglas thesis is that these texts defined women foremost as bodily creatures, whose ability to speak was intrinsically linked to their bodily – especially sexual – functions, whereas men were considered in terms of their mental capacities and skills. Consequently, women in classical Arabic belles-lettres (ʿ*adab*) talked mostly about sex and used their bodies to gain opportunities to speak. According to Malti-Douglas, Ḥubba is the prototype for “the fe-

17 For Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān as one of al-Hayṭam ibn ʿAdī’s authorities, see Leder, *Korpus*, 50–51.

18 Quoted in al-ʿAlbānī, *Salah*, 146.

19 Pellat, “Al-Hayṭam b. ʿAdī”.

20 Pellat, “Al-Hayṭam b. ʿAdī”.

21 Pellat, “Djins”.

male *adab* character."²² Her "biological function is tied to her discursive function" and, accordingly, women represented by Ḥubbā embody "uncontrollable sexuality that expresses itself not only through actions but also through words."²³ Malti-Douglas even argues that Ḥubbā is the archetypical woman in Classical Arabic literature, a characterization based on the fact that al-Maydānī (a twelfth-century writer) claims that the women in Medina called her Eve, the mother of mankind (see below). From this depiction, Malti-Douglas deduces that Ḥubbā has fused with Eve, or, as she puts it, she "becomes Eve, the archetypical female."²⁴

The erotic Ḥubbā

Ḥubbā's "uncontrollable sexuality" is best exemplified by two anecdotes in *Balaḡāt*. Malti-Douglas mentions one of them, but probably also had the other in mind when she refers to Ḥubbā's "overtly (and overly) sexual nature."²⁵ The two anecdotes are told on the authority of al-Ḥayṭam ibn 'Adī and Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān and portray Ḥubbā as outrageously libidinous.²⁶ In the first, she tells the "girls of Quraysh" that she satisfied herself with her grandson's dog – to which the girls respond that she should not be ashamed, assuring her, "it is a noble deed."²⁷ In the second, she asks her three daughters to tell her their most exciting sexual experience. She dismisses the accounts of the two oldest for being too dull, but when the youngest daughter starts to tell her a sexually explicit account, she screams, "Shut up, daughter, shut up immediately, your mother is wetting herself from passion."²⁸ These stories are, indeed, "scabrous, obscene and to a certain extent tasteless", as Gert Borg has described them.²⁹ In fact, this characterization is quite in order, as the stories belong to the genre of *mujūn*.³⁰

22 Malti-Douglas, *Woman's body*, 45.

23 Ibid., 46–47.

24 Malti-Douglas, *Women's body*, 46.

25 Ibid., 47.

26 Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, *Balaḡāt*, 195. Translated by Borg, "Obscenities", 153.

27 See Borg, "Obscenities," 153.

28 The translation in *ibid.*

29 Ibid., 149.

30 See Scott Meisami's criticism of Malti-Douglas' treatment of the comical anecdotes about Ḥubbā; "Writing Medieval Women," 60–61. One of her points is that *mujūn* is meant to be "humorous rather than pejorative," *ibid.* 61.

Probably few who read or heard the story of Ḥubbā having sex with a dog really believed that it had happened – or, yet more incredible, that the Qurayshite girls in her company considered it “a noble deed”. Nevertheless, many readers possibly found it hilarious to think that they did. They may well have found Ḥubbā’s “uncontrollable sexuality” exceedingly amusing as well, as sexual comedy is a cherished *mujūn* topic. But it is inaccurate to claim that this particular kind of literature degrades women. In fact, anecdotes of aberrant sexuality are even more common with male protagonists in such stories. Sex with animals seems to have been a fairly common licentious theme, typically involving men and dogs or mules.³¹ Scores of other medieval stories would likely shock a twenty-first century reader, and most of them are about men.

Irreverent stories about Ḥubbā, were, as we have seen, first told by Ṣāliḥ ibn al-Ḥassān and Hayṭam ibn ‘Adī in early Abbasid Kufa and Baghdad. But these versions were elaborated upon; in the earliest extant erotic compilation, *Jawāmi‘ al-ladḍa*, Ḥubbā is a full-fledged sexual authority and adviser. This book was probably written in late ninth-century Baghdad. The author, ‘Alī ibn Naṣr, often quotes al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn ‘Abī Ṭāhir; for example, recounting the anecdote about Ḥubbā and the caliph’s camels.³² His main material on Ḥubbā, however, must have derived from other sources. She acts as an expert, offering opinions about groaning and men’s and women’s preferences – such as women’s preference for beardless men.³³ Notably, Ḥubbā is an ardent heterosexual. Indeed, in a chapter devoted to lesbianism, she warns women against thinking that they can be sexually satisfied without men.³⁴ One long story about her stands out.³⁵ It is faithful to the theme in the older anecdotes in which she gives advice to her son and talks frankly about sex with her daughters. In *Jawāmi‘ al-ladḍa*, she offers detailed advice to her daughter on her wedding day about how to arouse her husband and satisfy him, how to behave during their sexual union, and what to say. Thereafter, she proceeds to give her son-in-law advice about how to please and satisfy his wife. Ibn Naṣr presents her as one of the ancients (*al-qudamā’*) and Bedouins, comparing her frank conversation to that of modern and settled people, which is much less explicit.

31 Cf. Munajjid, *al-Ḥayāt al-jinsiyya*, 93–95.

32 Ibn Naṣr, ms. Aya Sofya 3836 fols. 138a and 87a.

33 Ibid., 137a–138a, and e.g., 79a.

34 Ibid., 87a.

35 Ibid., ms. Aya Sofya 3837, fols. 41a–44a.

Ḥubbā in history writing

Ḥubbā may be a *mujūn* phantasy, but she also claims a place in history books, where we find a very different Ḥubbā – although reports of her are scarce and do not give much information. She is mentioned by al-Balāḍurī (d. 892) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). Al-Balāḍurī mentions her twice. On the first occasion, he relies on al-ʿUmarī, who quotes al-Hayṭam ibn ʿAdī, the man behind more licentious stories about Ḥubbā.³⁶ In this instance, he claims that Ḥubbā helped Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr (d. 691) find a wife. The candidate she presents to him was the aristocratic ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa, whom he marries. Any woman chosen for the task of matchmaking was likely considered reliable and possessing good taste. Moreover, she would have to have had access to aristocratic women and be allowed to meet with men other than her relatives. According to *Kitāb al-ʿaḡānī*, this particular matchmaking was executed by the singer ʿAzza al-Maylā.³⁷ Another report by al-Balāḍurī is more intriguing. He relates:³⁸

ʿAbd al-Malik went on the pilgrimage and passed by the house of Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya in Medina. The young men (*fityān*) of Quraysh sat and talked with her. She looked down at him and he looked at her. Then she called out to him and he got up. He said, “Ḥubbā, I am ʿAbd al-Malik.” She answered, “I know that, may you be ransomed with my father and mother. Thanks to God who let me see your face before I die. How are you, my lord?” He said, “I am fine, Ḥubbā, how is your chilled water and those of the young men of Quraysh who are visiting you?” She answered, “They are fine, Commander of the faithful. You killed your brother, ʿAmr ibn Saʿīd.” He said, “Yes, by God. It pains me, but he wanted my death.” She said, “May he not rise again!” He gave order to give her five hundred dinar. She in turn gave him gifts, and he kissed her.

The caliph ʿAbd al-Malik killed his relative ʿAmr ibn Saʿīd in 689, when the latter tried to take over the government. This event transpired during a turbulent time, especially for the people in Hijāz. The appointment of Yazīd I as caliph in 680 was unpopular among the people of Medina.³⁹ The same year, Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī left Medina with his family, and was killed in Karbalāʾ some months later; the women were taken prisoners. Shortly thereafter, ʿAbdullāh

³⁶ Al-Balāḍurī, *ʿAnsāb*, vol. 5, 203.

³⁷ ʿAbū l-Faraj, *ʿAḡānī*, vol. 11, 122–124.

³⁸ Told on the authority of ʿUmar ibn Bakīr, Hišām ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Miskīn al-Madīnī; Balāḍurī, *ʿAnsāb*, vol. 11, 186.

³⁹ Cf. Buḥārī, vol. 6, book 60, ḥadīṡ 352.

ibn al-Zubayr started a revolt against the Umayyad rule, supported by the people of Medina, and was declared caliph by his supporters in 683, after the death of Yazīd I. ‘Abdullāh, seated in Mecca, was defeated by the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik in 692. When ‘Abd al-Malik conducted this pilgrimage, ‘Abdullāh was still in charge of Mecca. It must have been crucial for ‘Abd al-Malik to know what the young Qurayshite men in Medina thought about his leadership, so he went to the place where he knew he could get information: Ḥubbā’s quite warm welcome must have calmed him somewhat. Whether this report is true or not, it suggests that Ḥubbā had a distinct standing in Medina, which was well-known outside the city.

Next time we meet Ḥubbā in the history books is in 691, after the killing of Muṣ‘ab ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abdallāh’s brother. ‘Abdallāh had appointed him governor of Basra, and he was popular among the people of Medina. Ḥubbā had also been personally involved with him – at least according to the report by al-Balāḍurī. Al-Ṭabarī recounts that when ‘Abd al-Malik made the pilgrimage in 691, “Ḥubbā approached him and said, ‘Did you kill your fellow tribesman Muṣ‘ab?’ He replied: Whoever tastes war, finds its taste / bitter, and it leaves him in a rough country.”⁴⁰

Al-Ṭabarī says nothing more about Ḥubbā; but even if this incident does not reveal who she was, read together with the incident recounted by al-Balāḍurī, it suggests that she held a position of influence. Fictional character or no, she incorporates the feelings of Medina, or at least those of the *fiṭyān*, in these historical texts. ‘Abd al-Malik is eager to know her sympathies after he killed ‘Amr. After he had killed Muṣ‘ab, however, he has strayed too far from Ḥubbā’s point of view, and she confronts him directly.

In addition to the reports by al-Balāḍurī and al-Ṭabarī, Ḥubbā is mentioned in connection to the poet Hudba ibn Ḥašram al-‘Uḍrī and the poem quoted in the beginning of this essay. Hudba was a famous poet in Hijaz in the early Umayyad era. He killed his relative in a dispute, and was executed in 674, after some years in prison.⁴¹ Al-Mubarrad (d. 898) and ‘Abū l-Faraj al-‘Iṣfahānī (d. 967) claim that he recited the poem as he was walking toward the site of his

40 Translated by Michael Fishbein in Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. 21, 187.

41 Sezgin, *GAS*, vol. 2, 265. ‘Abū l-Faraj al-‘Iṣfahānī devotes one article on him in *‘Aḡānī*, vol. 21, 179-92.

execution, passing Ḥubbā along the way.⁴² Ḥubbā purportedly accused him of neglecting his wife, who was very beautiful – according to our chroniclers – and shed many tears for her ill-fated husband. When Hudba passes Ḥubbā on the way to the execution site, his wife is walking behind him, sobbing. The story in *ʿAḡānī* goes:

Hubda walked past Ḥubbā and she said to him, “I counted you as one of the *ḥityān*, but I renounce you today, because I do not deny that men should meet death with serenity (*yaṣbiru ʿalā l-mawt*), but how can you refrain from (*yaṣbiru ʿan*) this woman?” He answered, “By God, Ḥubbā, she has a strong [case/verse?]. If you want, I will describe it for you.” The people stopped, and he recited:

“I have loved her ardently in a way that no mother could love/
Not like Ḥubbā’s love for Ibn ʿUmm Kilāb
She saw him with long, beautiful forearms/
Just as the strength and youth that she desired”

After his poem, she turned around and fled in to her house, locking the door behind her.

This story suggest that Hudba used to be one of the *ḥityān* who visited Ḥubbā, and that a real member of this group would never chose death to save his honour over life with a beautiful woman. If it is correct, this interpretation contradicts reports about his execution that maintain he tried to be pardoned and thus escape the death penalty. He even asked the prophet’s wife, ʿĀʾisha bint ʿAbī Bakr, to help him, but the relatives of his victim refused to pardon him. In Mubarrad’s version of the story, Ḥubbā makes a somewhat stronger case. When Hudba is escorted to the execution site, he starts to recite poetry. Ḥubbā then says to him, “I have never seen someone with a harder heart than you. How can you recite poetry when you are walking towards your death, with her behind you, mourning like a thirsty gazelle?”⁴³

So who was Ibn ʿUmm Kilāb, whom Hudba in this story apparently accuses Ḥubbā of not having loved enough? The man suggested by Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Lisān al-Ḥummarā, is mentioned in connection to the caliph Muʿāwīya (r. 661–680), and was known for his “wisdom, his eloquence, his gift for lively repartee and his

42 Al-Mubarrad, *Faḍīl*, 766–767; ʿAbū l-Faraj, *ʿAḡānī*, vol. 21, 188 and 190. The chain of transmitters in *ʿAḡānī* is Ḥammād ibn Ishāq – his father – Ibn Kunnāsa.

43 Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, 766–767.

profound knowledge of men and women”.⁴⁴ I have not found that he is called by the *nasab* Ibn ‘Umm Kilāb, however. The history books mention another man with this *nasab*, namely an Ibn ‘Umm Kilāb, who informed ‘Ā’isha that the people in Kufa had pledged allegiance to ‘Alī after the murder of caliph ‘Uṭmān ibn ‘Affān, in 656.⁴⁵ His name was ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Abū Salama al-Layṭī, according to Ibn Sa‘d, who mentions him briefly in his compendium of companions and successors.⁴⁶

Ḥubbā also appears as a character in a book that contains rather long quasi-historical tales, namely *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-‘aḍḍād*, by an unknown writer.⁴⁷ Here, she is called Ḥawwā’, that is Eve. The book was written no earlier than the middle of the tenth century, so it may be contemporary with *Jawāmi‘ al-ladda*.⁴⁸ The author relates the story of a woman in Medina called Ḥawwā’, who is obviously our Ḥubbā, attributing the story to Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān, the transmitter in Ibn ‘Abī Ṭāhir’s *Balaḡat*:⁴⁹

I saw a woman in Medina who was called Ḥawwā’. She was the one who taught the women in Medina *al-naq’*, which is snoring and moving, *al-ḡarbala*, and *al-rahz*.⁵⁰ She had a porch with a roof [*saqīfa*] where important men from Quraysh used to talk to her. Every family in Medina let their boys suck her breast, or one of her daughters’ breasts. The people in Medina called her Ḥawwā’. Every noble man in Medina who had sat in her shelter sent her thirty loads or more each year of food, dates, money, servants and garments.

One day, Ṣāliḥ narrates, according to the author of *Maḥāsin*, Muṣ‘ab ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Amr ibn Sa‘īd ibn al-‘Āṣ, and a son of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abī Bakr come to her and ask her to have a look at the women they are about to marry. They had proposed to three aristocratic women, but could not gain access to them before the wedding night. Muṣ‘ab’s fiancée was, of course, ‘Ā’isha bint

44 Pellat, “Ibn Lisān al-Ḥummara”.

45 Balāḡurī, ‘*Ansāb*, vol. 2, 217–218, vol. 5, 91. Ṭabarī, vol. 16, 38.

46 Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 5, 65.

47 The book was attributed to Jāḥiẓ early on, but this attribution is now definitely refuted, see Pellat, “Nouvel essai”, 147.

48 Parts of the book rely on *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-masāwī* by al-Bayhaqī (3rd-4th/9th-10th century); see Gériès, *Maḥāsin*, and Gériès, Bayhaqī.

49 Ps.-Jāḥiẓ, *Maḥāsin*, 221.

50 According to Jāḥiẓ, this two words have the same meaning, i.e. movements in sexual intercourse.

Ṭalḥa, whom we met before. Ḥubbā goes to see them and asks them to undress and show all parts of their bodies to her, which she is then able to describe eloquently to the men.

This story in *Maḥāsin* is, in fact, a blend of several earlier anecdotes. Ḥawwā', Eve, may be a misreading of Ḥubbā. She teaches the women the exotic activities *al-naq'*, which must be al-Jāḥiẓ's *al-qab*, *al-ḡarbala*, and *al-raḥz*, which are all mentioned by Jāḥiẓ. The incident with Muṣ'ab and his two noble companions is, in fact, found in 'Aḡānī – but in that version, the singer 'Azza al-Maylā' gets to look at the three aristocratic women. The story in 'Aḡānī has the same narrator, Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān, who relates that 'Azza was very popular in Medina and used to sit with noble men, just as Ḥubbā is depicted in *Maḥāsin*. Al-Balāḍurī's account of Ḥubbā acting as matchmaker to Muṣ'ab is much more sober. The story about Ḥawwā' in *Maḥāsin* is obviously fictional, enhanced by the imaginative details provided by the storyteller, which present her as immensely popular and rich.

Proverbial Ḥubba

In addition to historical reports and stories, traces of Ḥubbā as a wise woman show up in early Arabic literature. She appears as a sage, with answers to all sorts of (non-sexual) questions. Ibn 'Abī Ṭāhir quotes Ḥubbā's more decorous sayings in a section on judicious and eloquent women, which is virtually the opposite of that of *mujūn*.⁵¹ Ibn 'Abī Ṭāhir writes on the authority of Ishāq al-Mawṣilī that, "Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya was asked, 'What is the wound that cannot be healed?' She answers, "The noble man's need for the wretched man, and then he does not repay him." A similar saying is attributed to her in 'Uyūn al-'aḥbār by Ibn Qutayba.⁵² She is also asked about the nature of honour and humiliation, which she responds to in the same concise manner.

Ḥubbā's image as a wise woman, however, has not become famous. The most common later image of her, I believe, is the one spread by al-Maydānī (d. 1124) in his collection of proverbs. Malti-Douglas refers to this book when she discusses Ḥubbā, and so does al-Munajjid. Al-Maydānī has his version from earlier collections of proverbs, and possibly from other sources as well. Hamza al-'Iṣfahānī (d. after 350/961) first mentioned her in his collection of proverbs,

51 Ibn 'Abī Ṭāhir, *Balaḡāt*, 176.

52 Ibn Qutayba, 'Uyūn, vol. 3, 156.

ʿAmṭāl ʿalā ʿafʿāl, in the saying “Hornier than Ḥubbā” (ʿašbaqu min Ḥubbā).⁵³ Hamza al-ʿIṣfahānī was born in Isfahan around 893 and lived there all his life, with the exception of a few visits to Baghdad.⁵⁴ His collection of proverbs is the first to deal with comparative proverbs, and was used by the later collectors ʿAbū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī and the more famous al-Maydānī. The following is Hamza’s version:

She was a woman from Medina who was married several times. At old age, she married a young man who was called Ibn ʿUmm Kilāb. Her middle-aged son got up and walked to Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, who was governor of Medina.⁵⁵ He said, “My shameless mother married a youngster in the prime of youth and of young age, in spite of her and my age. She has made me and herself a subject of gossip.” Marwān asked her and her son to come to him, which she did. She did not, however, pay attention to his talk, instead she turned to her son, and said: “You son of the donkey saddle, have you seen that tall young man? By God, let him throw down your mother right in the doorway, so that he may cure her ardent desire and may her soul go forth below him. I wish that he was a lizard and that I was his little friend⁵⁶, then we would have found a vacant place. Her words were spread and she became the subject of proverbs. One of those who made an example of her is Hudba ibn Ḥašram. He said, “No mother loved passionately like my love for her / Not Ḥubbā’s love for Ibn ʿUmm Kilāb / She saw him tall and with bulky forearms / perhaps she was revived [inbaʿat] by strength and youth.

In the printed version, the section on Ḥubbā is longer, but the editor notes that the extended version is omitted in three of the four manuscripts he used for the edition. In the extension, it is claimed that the women of Medina called Ḥubbā Eve (Ḥawwāʾ), the mother of mankind, as she taught them different types of coition. This is the name given to Ḥubbā in the quasi-historical *Maḥāsin*, as we have seen. We can be quite certain that the extension is a later addition. It is a *verbatim* copy of al-Maydānī’s version, and must have been added by a copyist who compared the two authors. Al-ʿAskarī’s version is short, like Hamza’s version quoted above, but with some variances. For example, the poem is attributed to Ibn Harma instead of Hudba, which alters the interpretation of it, as Ibn Harma was born in 709, when Ḥubbā probably was

53 Al-ʿAskarī, *Jamhara*, vol. 1, 562–563.

54 Rosenthal, “Ḥamza al-ʿIṣfahānī”.

55 Marwān was governor of Medina under Muʿāwiya I (r. 661–680).

56 *ḍabb* is lizard; here: *ḍabayba*, which I have chosen to translate as “little friend”.

no longer alive.⁵⁷ In fact, al-‘Askarī got much of his material from his relative ‘Abū ‘Aḥmad al-‘Askarī (ca 906-993), who studied in Isfahan and may have met Hamza al-‘Isfahānī there. If Hamza al-‘Isfahānī had really written the longer version, al-‘Askarī would probably have quoted some of it.

The version of al-Maydānī, which would become the most widespread account, seems to be a synthesis of various licentious traditions. For example, he has Ḥubbā’s daughter saying that her husband “filled her house with wealth and her cunt with prick”, which is a saying otherwise attributed to ‘Umar ibn ‘Ubaydallāh al-Taymī, when he asked ‘Ā’isha bint Ṭalḥa to marry her.⁵⁸ ‘Ā’isha bint Ṭalḥa appears elsewhere together with Ḥubbā, as we have seen. These early Umayyad personalities were often used as characters in humorous stories and statements such as this one should probably not be read as truth. The claim that Ḥubbā was called Eve is possibly taken from *Maḥāsin*, a thoroughly unreliable book.

Concluding remarks

The historical reports and the anecdotes provide us with a timeline of the life of Ḥubbā. She was married at the time of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (r. 644–656), when she accompanies the caliph on his pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca. About twenty years later, in 674, she is arguing with the poet Hudba ibn Ḥašram in Medina, who accuses her for having been attracted to Ibn ‘Umm Kilāb. According to Jāḥiẓ, she was almost fifty years old when she married this man. In 689, she meets with the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik. She is now a well-known socialite and the young aristocratic men of Medina use to gather in her house. She meets with the caliph again in 692, around forty years after the pilgrimage with ‘Uṭmān.

This powerful woman, who dared to defy the caliph, was defamed by Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥassān, who was himself born in Medina under the Umayyads, but made his fortune in early ‘Abbāsīd Kufa. His reports about her shamelessness are elaborated upon in classical Arabic literature. She was shameless already in the stories recounted by Jāḥiẓ and Ibn ‘Abī Ṭāhir, but at least she was sitting indoors talking to a select audience. In *Nihāyat al-‘arab* by al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), she walks out in the middle of the night and meets someone who asks

⁵⁷ Pellat, “Ibn Harma”.

⁵⁸ ‘Abū l-Faraj al-‘Isfahānī, *‘Aḡānī*, vol. 11, 127.

why she is out that late. She answers, “I don’t care. If I meet a *šayṭān*, I will obey him, or if I meet a man, I will crave him.”⁵⁹

Already in the late tenth century, the erotic Ḥubbā was elaborated upon through explicit sexual details – if, indeed, *Jawāmī‘ al-ladḍa* was written then. For Ibn Naṣr, Ḥubbā is one of the old Arab authorities, and his representation of her is entirely positive – in line with his positive attitude toward sexuality, not least female sexuality. For him, it might have been a sign of civilization that this Ḥubbā taught her daughter and her son-in-law how to please each other and thus secure their marital love. She is less positively depicted by al-Maydānī, who is the main source of information for modern scholars. The claims al-Maydānī makes in his notice on Ḥubbā, however, are not particularly trustworthy. The claim that she was called Eve may be a misreading, and the claim that she taught the women different types of coition is a later interpretation of al-Jāḥiẓ’s words for groaning and moving. It is remarkable that Fedwa Malti-Douglas considers her a “prototypical character” embracing all women in *adab* on the basis of the twelfth-century al-Maydānī’s account. The much earlier Ibn ‘Abī Ṭāhir, whom she also refers to, might have been countered with representations of Ḥubbā by his contemporaries, al-Balāḍurī and Ibn Qutayba, or the somewhat later al-Ṭabarī. Ibn ‘Abī Ṭāhir himself quotes Ḥubbā’s wisdom, which Malti-Douglas notes, which should have made her consider that the obscenities attributed to Ḥubbā have more to do with genre than with her person.

Yet, the creation of Ḥubbā’s erotic persona is problematic, and I concur with Malti-Douglas’s line of argument to a certain degree. Why was she assigned those obscene scenarios, such as having sex with a dog, if she was, as al-Balāḍurī claims, a society lady and type of spokeswoman for the *fityān*, the young men of Quraysh? The wisdom attributed to her indicates that she was considered a judicious and knowledgeable woman, which may be the cause for the *fityān* to visit her; yet, later authors of collections of proverbs maintain that her fame comes from being horny. There seem to be at least some degree of misogyny operating here; perhaps she was defamed because she was a social woman with younger husband.

Jāḥiẓ asserts that Ḥubbā married a man who was younger than she, and later authors make the age difference even bigger. However, the poem that suggests Ḥubbā loved Ibn ‘Umm Kilāb for his youth and strong arms is a lampoon

59 Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, vol. 4, 22.

and nothing guarantees that it is true. We do not know for certain the name of Ḥubbā's husband, but Jāḥiẓ claims that Ibn 'Umm Kilāb is another *nasab* for Ibn Lisān al-Ḥummara, a man with a degree of fame. He was renown in his time for wisdom and eloquence. Like Ḥubbā, he became proverbial and is mentioned by al-Maydānī, but for his profound knowledge of genealogy.⁶⁰ He was also known for his "gift for lively repartee", like Ḥubba.⁶¹ He never made it into the famous history books; however, in contrast to Ḥubbā, whose persona might have been easier prey for storytellers.

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