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‘EARLY FEMALE MUSLIM RENUNCIANTS (8TH-9TH CENTURIES CE)’

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Sufism is the famous Islamic mystical piety. It crystallized in its classical form in Baghdad late in the ninth century C.E.¹ The Sufi historical tradition itself, mainly biographies in rough chronological order, identify it as emerging from an earlier tradition of renunciation (Ar. *zuhd*). No treatises survive from female Sufis or renunciants, nor even do the sources refer to any that have apparently been lost. But some women are treated in Sufi biographical dictionaries, as well as collections of sayings from the Sufi, hadith, and literary (*adab*) traditions. Content analysis suggests that the piety and practical activities of early female Muslim renunciants were overwhelmingly similar to those of early male Muslim renunciants. Whether this is because Muslim men and women of the eighth and ninth centuries had very similar conceptions of piety or because our sources tell us only what men recorded, overlooking signs of peculiarly feminine conceptions, is probably unknowable.

Ruth Roded on biographies of women

¹ A very good summary of the history as presently understood is Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: the formative period*, The new Edinburgh Islamic surveys (Edinburgh: Univ. Press, 2007). Karamustafa says, ‘The Šūfiyya developed as a convergence of many disparate ideas and practices into a distinct movement in Baghdad in the second half of the third/ninth century’ (*Sufism*, 20). Major studies of the renunciant period have been regrettably careless about distinguishing between persons called Sufis and persons not, likewise between ascetics and mystics. But they have other virtues: see esp. Tor Andrae, *In the garden of myrtles: studies in early Islamic mysticism*, trans. Birgitta Sharpe, SUNY ser. in Muslim spirituality in South Asia (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987), Louis Massignon, *Essay on the origins of the technical language of Islamic mysticism*, trans. Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1997), and Richard Gramlich, *Weltverzicht: Grundlagen und Weisen islamischer Askese*, Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission 43 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997). On the emergence of mystical piety only in the mid-ninth century, see Christopher Melchert, ‘The transition from asceticism to mysticism’, *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 51-70, repr. in *Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, Critical concepts in Islamic studies, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 2008).

The earliest survey of the biographies is that of Ruth Roded, a chapter devoted to ‘Mystic women’.² She summarizes accurately enough³:

The most outstanding characteristic of these women is their extreme devotion to God. In their words and deeds, they strive to renounce the distractions of this world and to prepare themselves for the day of reckoning. Fear of the fire of hell and of their own inadequacy permeates their lives. They aspire to gnosis and union with the Lord. Their unequivocal love of Allah provides the hope that He will favor them with His love and mercy. Their lives are marked by a total reliance on God and submission to His will.

Regrettably, she refers to all the outstandingly devout from the eighth century forward as ‘Sufis’, although the term did not become usual until the later ninth century. She also does not distinguish between mystics and ascetics, as in the summary just quoted—exaggerated fear of Hellfire and aspiration to union with God are characteristically quoted of different persons, respectively ascetics and mystics. She goes on to quote examples of piety, mostly from Ibn al-Jawzī (d. Baghdad, 597/1201).⁴ However, ‘devotion to prayer’, ‘lamentation’, ‘poverty’, and so on are common to men and women, so it is not evident that anything in these biographies characterizes feminine religion as opposed to masculine. Roded quotes numerous stories of female superiority, but sensibly observes that whereas biographies of women often use their husbands’ folly to demonstrate their superior piety, ‘In stories about devout men, the opposite would be true.’⁵ She also relates demonstrations of female superiority to ‘the world of mysticism’, in which ‘The doctor requires healing of his soul, and the preacher must be preached

² Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic biographical collections* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 1994), chap. 5.

³ Roded, *Women*, 95.

⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa*, ed. Muḥammad `Abd al-Mu`īd Khān, 4 vols. (Hyderabad: Majlis Dā`irat al-Ma`ārif al-`Uthmāniyya, 1335-6, 2nd edn. 1968). *Ṣafwat al-ṣafwa* is probably a better title, admitted by Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943-9), 1:445, and Supplementband, 3 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937-41), 1:617, and the form used by, for example, al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a`lām al-nubalā`*, ed. Shu`ayb al-Arna`ūṭ & al., 25 vols. (Beirut: Mu`assasat al-Risāla, 1401-9/1981-8), 21:368.

⁵ Roded, *Women*, 100.

to’—that is, reversals of expectations are an expected feature of mystical writing.⁶ More on this to come.

Rkia Cornell on a spirituality of women

Another prominent source for women among renunciants and early Sufis is a collection of 82 biographies by Abū `Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. Nishapur, 412/1021), discovered in manuscript and published as *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta`abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt* not quite in time for Roded’s survey to include.⁷ It was then re-edited and translated by Rkia Elaroui Cornell.⁸ In her long introduction, Cornell does maintain that it documents a distinctive women’s spirituality. Her argument rests heavily on terminology⁹:

Al-Sulamī’s subjects are a distinct group of women (designated by the collective term *niswa*) who are to be included because they practice *ta`abbud*—literally, ‘making oneself a slave’ (*`abd*)—the disciplined practice of servitude. For Sufi women, it is their means to divine inspiration and the spiritual method that distinguishes them from their male Sufi colleagues.

The two important terms here are *niswa* and *ta`abbud*.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to attribute this exact title with *niswa* and *ta`abbud* to al-Sulamī. Arabic manuscripts very often bear a different title from other copies of the same work. As Cornell herself observes, later Sufi writers describe al-Sulamī’s massive *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyya* as having a section at the end treating women.¹⁰ Such appendices are not rare in Arabic biographical dictionaries. Compare, for example, those of Ibn Sa`d and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī; also, among dictionaries specifically devoted to the outstandingly pious, Ibn

⁶ Roded, *Women*, 104.

⁷ Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta`abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1413/1993). On al-Sulamī, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, *L’œuvre d’Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami*, Publications de l’IFEAD 231 (Damascus : Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2009).

⁸ Al-Sulamī *Early Sufi women: dhikr an-niswa al-muta`abbidāt aṣ-ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999).

⁹ Cornell, ‘Introduction’, *Early Sufi women*, 54.

¹⁰ Cornell, ‘Introduction’, *Early Sufi women*, 44.

al-Jawzī.¹¹ The present collection of biographies is much more likely to be that section from the *Tārīkh* than a separate work. Her argument that it is less systematic than al-Sulamī's short *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* and therefore cannot have been a part of it apparently confuses the extant *Ṭabaqāt* with the *Tārīkh*, now lost except in quotation.¹²

Secondly, it is difficult anyway to see that *niswa* has any shade of a technical meaning. According to *Lisān al-`arab*, it is simply a plural of *imra`a* ('woman'), along with and not distinguished from *nisā'*, *nuswa*, *niswān*, and *nuswān*. Cornell particularly asserts a technical meaning from the rhyme of *niswān* with *fityān*, plural of *fatā* ('youth'). To *futuwwa*, the defining quality of *fityān*, Gerard Salinger has ascribed this technical sense: 'a complex of moral virtues, comprising courage, generosity, liberality, hospitality, unselfishness, and spirit of sacrifice, generally tied up with an elaborate ceremonial observed in certain associations.'¹³ The ideal apparently has precedents in pre-Islamic Arabia¹⁴:

the *fatā* in ancient Arabia is the man who personifies in the most perfect manner the qualities which the tribe asks of its sons—a high degree of solidarity to secure cohesion, courage in war to insure adequate defence, and hospitality to maintain the tribal reputation among the neighboring groups.

¹¹ Ibn Sa'd (d. Baghdad, 230/845), *K. al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubūr*, ed. Eduard Sachau, &al., 9 vols. in 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904-40) = 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957-68), both covering women in vol. 8 (references to the latter edn. henceforth in *italics*); al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. Baghdad, 463/1071), *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām*, ed. Bashshār `Awwād Ma'rūf, 17 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1422/2001), covering women at 16:616-38; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, covering women after men but at the end of each chronological and geographical subsection. Ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣifa* is offered especially as an improvement on Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. Isfahan, 430/1038), *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1352-7/1932-8). One of Ibn al-Jawzī's complaints is that Abū Nu'aym includes only about 20 women (*Ṣifa* 1:5). The ones he does cover are all concentrated at the end of the chronological section on Companions, *Hilya* 2:39-79. Abū Nu'aym's meager coverage of women is probably related to his stress on hadith transmission alongside piety. Women disappear from the record of transmission after the early eighth century.

¹² Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Johannes Pedersen (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960). Cornell uses the earlier edition of Nūr al-Dīn Sharība (Cairo: Jamā'at al-Azhar, 1953), a transcription of just one manuscript. For the *Tārīkh* and the *Ṭabaqāt*, see Pedersen, *Ṭabaqāt*, 50-60 (Fr.).

¹³ Gerard Salinger, 'Was the *futuwa* an Oriental form of chivalry?' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94 (1950): 481-93, at 481.

¹⁴ Salinger, 'Was the *futuwa*?' 482.

D. G. Tor has shown that nascent Sunnism, what she calls Sufism, and voluntary frontier warfare involved many of the same persons from the eighth century, while persons involved in all three of these called interchangeably *fityān* and *ʿayyārūn* appear in the historical record from the early ninth century.¹⁵ However, although the ideal of self-sacrificing generosity goes back very far, the elaborate ceremonial to which Salinger refers is a feature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not documentable in al-Sulamī's time, let alone that of most of the Sufi women on whom he reports.¹⁶ If *niswān* were distinguished from other women as *fityān* were from other men, it is unlikely to have been because they participated as volunteers in frontier warfare.

Finally, there is no certain reference within the text to *niswān* as a group with a common ethos. Qusayma, wife of Yaʿqūb al-Tinnīsī (*fl.* Egypt, later 4th/10th cent.) comes the closest, being said to be one of the greatest of the *niswān* and the subject of a story of extraordinary generosity: her master Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Rūḍhabārī (d. 369/979-80) came to her house when she was not there, had the lock broken and sold everything in the house, only for her to give them her outer garment as well when she returned a little after her husband.¹⁷ But Cornell seems to be stretching a point when she translates *samiʿtu man ṣaḥibat ḥā min al-niswān*, literally 'I heard one of the women who accompanied her', as 'I heard one of her companions among the practitioners of female chivalry' (of Umm al-Ḥusayn bt. Aḥmad b. Ḥamdān, Nishapurān, *fl.* earlier 4th/10th cent.).¹⁸ To the contrary, Fāṭima bt. Aḥmad b. Hānī' (Nishapurān, *fl.* late 3rd/9th cent.) was a

¹⁵ D. G. Tor, *Violent order: religious warfare, chivalry, and the ʿayyār phenomenon in the medieval Islamic world*, *Istanbuler Texte und Studien* 11 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), esp. chap. 2. In calling her figures such as Sufyān al-Thawrī and Ibn al-Mubārak of the eighth century 'Sufis', Tor follows the tradition of Sufi writers like al-Sulamī, disregarding that they were doubtfully ever called Sufis in their lifetimes and that there were radical differences between their documented piety and that of the classical Sufis around al-Junayd at the end of the ninth century.

¹⁶ See also Lloyd Ridgeon, 'Introduction', *Jawanmardi: a Sufi code of honour* (Edinburgh: Univ. Press, 2011), esp. 8-9, on women and *futuwa* organizations.

¹⁷ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 210-11.

¹⁸ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 238-9.

patroness to the Nishapur Malāmī leader Abū `Uthmān al-Ḥīrī (d. Nishapur, 298/910). As Cornell translates a passage about her,¹⁹

Abū `Uthmān used to say: ‘Fāṭima’s open-handedness towards the Sufis was the same as the open-handedness of the practitioners of Sufi chivalry (*fīṭyān*). She never sought anything in return for it, neither from this world nor from the Hereafter.’

If the *niswān* had been known as a parallel body, Abū `Uthmān would have praised Fāṭima for being a good representative of it, not likening her to the *fīṭyān*. Amat al-`Azīz, known as Hawra (fl. Khurasan? 4th/10th cent.?), is praised by al-Sulamī as *min aṭṭā waqṭihā fī al-niswān*. Cornell translates ‘She was one of the most altruistic practitioners of female chivalry in her day.’ More literally, I would translate ‘among the most *fatā*-like women of her time’—there is no abstract noun in the Arabic corresponding to Cornell’s ‘female chivalry’.²⁰ And while it is clear that al-Sulamī admires *futuwwa* and thinks well of this woman for practicing it, it is significant, again, that he praises her as resembling a *fatā* rather than as an exemplar of *nusuwwa*, or whatever the Arabic might be for ‘female chivalry’. He actually describes Fāṭima al-Khānaqāhiyya (fl. Nishapur? 4th/10th cent.?) as herself one of the *fīṭyān* of her time.²¹

Arezou Azad and one Persophone woman

A more plausible interpretation than Cornell’s is offered by Arezou Azad, who writes especially about Umm `Alī, wife to Aḥmad b. Khidrūya (d. 240/854-5). She observes that Umm `Alī is associated with various seemingly masculine traits, such as proposing marriage to her future husband. Her sometime teacher and husband Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. 261/875?) told her later husband, Aḥmad b. Khidrūya, ‘Learn *futuwwa* from your wife.’²² An anonymous contemporary

¹⁹ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 198-9.

²⁰ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 222-3.

²¹ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 256-7.

²² Arezou Azad, ‘Female mystics in mediaeval Islam: the quiet legacy’, *Journal of the economic and social history of the Orient* 56 (2013): 53-88, esp. 68-77. The story of her marriage to Abū Yazīd and his advice to her husband is earliest found in Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā`*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba`at al-Sa`āda and Maktabat al-Khānjī,

noblewoman shamed a caliph by sending him a richly decorated garment after he had demanded excessive taxes of Balkh. He said, 'This lady has taught us *jawānmardī*', the Persian equivalent of *futuwwa*.²³ What this represents, she says, is 'reverse genderization'.²⁴

One might say with Ruth Roded that the Muslim mystical biographers al-Sulamī, Abū Nu`aym, al-Hujwīrī, and others depicted women such as Umm `Alī as exemplars of *futuwwa* to demonstrate the otherworldliness of Islamic sanctity. (Carol Walker Bynum has found such reversals of presumptively masculine and feminine behaviour a usual feature of medieval Latin hagiography: 'Church writers, however, blended both masculine and feminine characteristics not only in the *vita Christi* but also in the sacred lives of holy women and men in order to demonstrate the otherworldly nature of Christian sanctity.'²⁵ However, it is well beyond the ambitions of this article to test how far generalizations about female sanctity in medieval Latin hagiography extend to female sanctity in medieval Arabic and Persian.) As Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Naysābūrī (d. Nishapur? 270/883-4?) is quoted as saying, 'I always used to dislike women's talk until I met Umm `Alī, wife of Aḥmad b. Khidrūya. Then I learned that God (be he exalted) puts his knowledge wherever he wills.'²⁶ If the highest praise for a woman was to identify her as a paragon of *futuwwa*, then our Sufi authors cannot be said (*contra* Cornell) to have recognized a specifically feminine form of it. However, it also follows that they did not conceive of *futuwwa* as a sort of exaggerated masculinity, much less restricted it to men. Rather, they defined it by a set of characters befitting a friend of God of either sex.

1352-7/1932-8), 10:42. Azad cites the slightly later account of Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, ed. Maḥmūd `Ābidī (Tehran: Surūsh, 1383), 183-4 = ed. Valentin Zhukovskii (Leningrad: Gosydarstvennaya Akademicheskaya Telegrafeya, 1926), 149-50.

²³ Azad, 'Female mystics', 69fn, citing `Abd Allāh b. `Umar al-Wā`iz al-Balkhī (attrib.), *Faḍā'il Balkh*, trans. `Abd Allāh Muḥammad (attrib.), ed. `Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, *Manābī`-i tārikh u-jughrāfiyā-yi Īrān 37* (n.p.: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1350 sh.), 21, 40.

²⁴ Azad, 'Female mystics', 77.

²⁵ Carol Walker Bynum in *Fragmentation and redemption: essays in gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 257-88, at 257.

²⁶ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 168-9.

It is a question whether Umm `Alī is identified as acting above the law, particularly rules restricting women. She does not actually propose to marry herself to Aḥmad b. Khiḍrūya, which would violate the law, rather proposes that he request her father to marry her to him. Although Azad is correct that no close male relative is named as being with her on her pilgrimage to Mecca—her husband Ibn Khiḍrūya is said to have died before her return—, it would be unwarranted to infer that she broke the law by travelling without any—we just don't know.²⁷ But Abū Nu`aym tells a problematic story of her requesting Ibn Khiḍrūya to marry her to Abū Yazīd. Azad plausibly interprets this as a device to allow her to be alone in a room with him, so that it demonstrates her scruple.²⁸ However, it is followed by a story in which she unveils herself before Abū Yazīd, then reveals herself before Ibn Khiḍrūya. He expresses amazement, but she explains, in Cornell's interpretation, 'When I looked at Abū Yazīd, I lost all sense of self. But when I look at you, I return to my awareness of self (*ḥuḏūḏ nafsī*).'²⁹ By law, she is obliged to veil herself before an unrelated man, not before her husband, but if Abū Yazīd is her husband at this point and Ibn Khiḍrūya only her former fiancé, he should not be puzzled by her behavior, for it is precisely before him that the law requires her to veil. Later accounts in Persian make her downright antinomian, for there she is not married to Abū Yazīd and her explanation is, in Cornell's interpretation, 'you are my natural spouse, but he is my religious consort.'³⁰ 'Natural spouse' translates *maḥram-i ṭabī`at*, 'religious consort' translates *maḥram-i ṭarīqat*. The *maḥram* is the man with whom a woman may travel, in Islamic law. If Ibn Khiḍrūya is still her husband,

²⁷ Azad, 'Female mystics', 66fn.

²⁸ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 10:42; Azad, 'Female mystics', 75-6.

²⁹ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 168fn; Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 10:42. Cornell's interpretation of *ḥuḏūḏ nafsī* as 'my awareness of self' is odd: 'my passionate desires' seems more likely. See Albert de Biberstein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, 2 vols. (Paris: Maisonneuve & C^{ie}, 1860), s.v. *ḥaḏḏ*.

³⁰ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 168fn, quoting Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, E. J. W. Gibb memorial ser. 17 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1911), 119-20. Azad translates the same passage as 'As much as you are my natural partner, he is my spiritual partner': Azad, 'Female mystics', 76. She also quotes `Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*', ed. Reynold A. Nicholson, *Persian historical texts* 3, 5, 2 vols. (London: Luzac & Co. and Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1905-8), 1:288-9, whose version appears to depend on Hujwīrī's.

he is a *maḥram* before whom she need not veil, but Abū Yazīd is not a *maḥram*, so she should be veiled before him.

Azad (who, with Cornell, prefers the later, Persian accounts) poses a question rather than venture a positive assertion: 'Is it possible that Umm `Alī unveiled herself in order to assume the role of a male scholar?'³¹ I doubt whether 'scholar' is the right word, here, since neither law nor hadith is in question (and neither *ḥuḏūḏ al-naḥs* nor *maḥram-i ṭarīqat* has anything to do with scholarship). Rather, it seems to be an example of the antinomianism that aroused opposition to nascent Islamic mysticism at about this time. Examples of persecution in the ninth century have mainly to do with theological offences, especially failure to recognize divine transcendence.³² But reported warnings against antinomianism from ninth-century Sufis indicate that someone was talking lightly of the law. Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. Baghdad, 253/867?) said, 'Whoever asserts that esoteric knowledge contradicts the exoteric rule, he is mistaken.'³³ 'Every esoteric insight that contradicts an exoteric (rule) is null', proclaimed al-Kharrāz (d. Cairo, 277/890-1?).³⁴ The most spectacular example of persecution was the Inquisition of 264/877-8, in which Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888), a popular preacher from Basra, procured the indictment of seventy-odd Sufis for allegedly saying they no longer feared God but rather loved him.³⁵ If Persian Sufi writers made out Umm `Alī as setting aside the law in pursuit of and in consequence of mystical enlightenment, it was probably not about women as scholars but another expression of impatience with the law, of which Abū Yazīd also was sometimes a mouthpiece.

Maria M. Dakake and Laury Silvers on a spirituality of service

³¹ Azad, 'Female mystics', 77.

³² Melchert, 'Transition', 64-6.

³³ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 10:121.

³⁴ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 226.

³⁵ Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder* 1:384-5.

Maria M. Dakake has more recently proposed to identify ‘a specifically feminine brand of Islamic “love” mysticism’.³⁶

While, in many ways, the devotional attitudes of Sufi women are similar to those reported of Sufi men, the words attributed to early Sufi women suggest that they developed their own image of the divine Beloved as both gentle and strong, fiercely jealous and disarmingly intimate, and metaphorically conceptualized as the masculine object of their female longing.

Dakake draws on a good range of primary sources, and anyone with a taste for Sufi stories must enjoy her recounting of many. Her argument has been adequately refuted by Laury Silvers, who points out that Dakake fails to recognize historical change between the eighth and twelfth centuries, such as the absence of references to reciprocated love before the later ninth century, and that she overlooks expressions of sorrow and fear in the earlier period.³⁷

Admittedly, Silvers goes further than I would (meeting Dakake halfway) when she interprets earlier stories of women who fear that God is indifferent and later stories of women who are confident that God will love and protect them as representing respectively negative and positive impressions of patriarchy.³⁸ If the one sort are overwhelmingly earlier, the other later, and the same goes for stories of pious men, surely, I propose, this is evidence of a common, evolving Islamic piety, not a special female experience of patriarchy. Most originally, Silvers argues that Dakake overlooks theological overtones to various stories. She associates early stories of weeping, particularly from Basra, as evidence of belief in free will, by which God is bound to reward good behavior (perhaps including weeping), whereas stories of women outside Basra betray predestinarian confidence. I admire her attempt to associate forms of piety with theological doctrine, but this one looks unconvincing to me. I counted Kufan and Basran men in

³⁶ Maria M. Dakake, “‘Guest of the inmost heart’: conceptions of the divine beloved among early Sufi women’, *Comparative Islamic studies* 3 (2007): 72-97; quotation at 72.

³⁷ Laury Silvers, “‘God loves me’: the theological content and context of early pious and Sufi women’s sayings on love’, *Journal for Islamic studies* (Johannesburg) 30 (2010): 33-59.

³⁸ Silvers, ‘God loves me’, 4607.

Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, and found only a little more weeping among the latter: 25 out of 86 Kufan biographies mention weeping (29%), 33 out of 101 Basran biographies (33%). I saw no evidence of weeping from expectation of reward. Typical, rather, is the answer of seventh-century Basran Harim b. Ḥayyān on being asked what was making him weep: ‘I recalled a night at the morning of which the stars of heaven would be scattered, and that made me weep.’³⁹

More recently still, Silvers has produced a general survey of ‘early pious, mystic Sufi women’ on the basis of two main sources, al-Sulamī and Ibn al-Jawzī.⁴⁰ Her catalogue of the pious sentiments and practices there attributed to women is excellent. My chief reservation is that, if she is more sensitive than Cornell and Dakake to change over time, as before and after the Sufi synthesis of the later ninth century, more willing to recognize literary topoi, still she wants a large proportion of our scant information to be documentary evidence of what pious women were up to. Besides, she says, we might have much more such information if Sufi authors had not deliberately suppressed it.⁴¹ This seems likely, unless one supposes that the suppression in question was about literary sources, not oral that never made the transition to written. However, both the prevalence of topoi and the scantiness of other evidence seem to indicate that we should extrapolate cautiously about what a more extensive record would look like.

Comparison of male and female renunciants

Content analysis seems the most likely technique to tell us whether these women are peculiarly distinguished by any devotional form. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find comparable corpora of biographies. For example, we cannot compare the women of al-Sulamī’s section on female Sufis with men of his section on male Sufis because the rest of *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyya* is lost. In the

³⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 3:137, § Followers of Basra.

⁴⁰ Laury Silvers, ‘Early pious, mystic Sufi women’, *The Cambridge companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, Cambridge companions to religion (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2015), 24-52.

⁴¹ Silvers, ‘Early pious’, 26-8.

introduction to *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, al-Sulamī mentions an earlier book, apparently called *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, that had covered Companions, Followers, and the Followers of the Followers.⁴²

Unfortunately, it also is lost. What I have chosen is Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, which is extant and includes an extraordinarily large number of entries for women—23 percent, considerably more than in any other of the 37 biographical dictionaries in Ruth Roded’s survey.⁴³ Leaving out of consideration Companions (contemporaries of the Prophet), persons from the tenth century and later, and two *jinn* (one of each sex), I tallied 595 entries for men, 185 for women. Then I tallied mentions of weeping, fasting, supererogatory prayer, qur’anic recitation, and *khidma* (‘service’). Under ‘fasting’, I counted only references to abstention from food and drink by day (the ritual *ṣiyām*), not to eating little. Under ‘prayer’, I counted only references to the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), not to other invocations (*du`ā`*) and not to staying awake at night without an express reference to the ritual prayer, since nights might also be spent reciting the Qur’an. (We may assume that all of these pious persons fasted when required and engaged in supererogatory ritual prayer, but I tallied only those whose prayer is expressly remarked; similarly for qur’anic recitation.)

Here are the results:

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
weeping	133 (22%)	32 (17%)
supererogatory prayer	80 (13%)	16 (9%)
recitation	33 (6%)	8 (4%)
fasting	34 (6%)	6 (3%)
<i>khidma</i>	4 (1%)	3 (2%)

⁴² Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5.

⁴³ Roded, *Women*, 3, 92-3.

The rank order is about the same for men and women.

Weeping stands out as the most commonly mentioned form of devotion in both men and women. It is conceivably a special concern of Ibn al-Jawzī's, for he himself was a notable preacher and wrote the first separate book on preaching, often associated with weeping. That is, he may have especially liked to mention reports that included weeping. In his separate book on preachers and preaching, his chapter on historic preachers of different regions includes, by my count, 90 biographies, of which 21 (30 percent) include some mention of weeping.⁴⁴ In al-Sulamī's section on Sufi women, omitting those who lived in the tenth century (i.e. into the Sufi period), I count 64 women, of whom weeping is mentioned in connection with just three (5 percent), fasting with two (3 percent), supererogatory prayer with three (5 percent), and *khidma* with eight (12 percent). Al-Sulamī seems to be much less interested in practice, more in wise sayings.

We certainly have stories of impressive weeping by women. An anonymous woman of Medina asked `Ā'isha the Prophet's widow to discover the Prophet's tomb, which she did, whereupon she wept till she died.<sup>45</sup> Ghufayra al-`Ābida (Basran, fl. late 1st/7th cent.) wept till she went blind.⁴⁶ `Ubayda bt. Abī Kilāb (Basran, fl. early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> cent.) wept for forty years till her eyesight went away.<sup>47</sup> But men also injured themselves by weeping. Manṣūr b. al-Mu`tamir (Kufan, d. 132/750) injured his vision (*`amisha*) by weeping.⁴⁸ Yazīd b. Hārūn (Wasiti, d.

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *K. al-Qusṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn*, ed. Merlin L. Swartz (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1971). Lyall Richard Armstrong, 'The qusṣāṣ of early Islam', Ph.D. diss'n (Univ. of Chicago, 2013), is now our most extensive treatment of preaching outside the formal Friday sermon (*khuṭba*). Regrettably, Armstrong mentions weeping only in passing (216).

⁴⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 2:115, § anon. women of Medina.

⁴⁶ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 96-7.

⁴⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:22, § women of Basra.

⁴⁸ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:235 6:337; Abū l-Ḥasan al-`Ijlī, *Tārīkh al-thiqāt*, arr. Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, add'ns by Ibn Ḥajar, ed. `Abd al-Mu`ṭī Qal`ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyya, 1405/1984), 441.

206/821) explained that weeping by night had done away with his eyes.⁴⁹ No prolonged period of grieving was needed for Maryam al-Baṣriyya (fl. mid-2nd/8th cent.): ‘One day she attended the session of a preacher. When he started to speak about love, her spleen ruptured and she died during the session.’⁵⁰ But the preacher who had talked so movingly of love was a man, and other men are described as dying in response to particularly moving sermons. For example, one night in Ramadan, `Umar b. Dharr (Kufan, d. 153/770?) spoke on the Last Judgement and interrogation by angels such that a youth leapt up shrieking and shaking till he died.⁵¹

Moreover, the demonstrativeness of women’s weeping was not always taken to be a good sign. Ibn al-Jawzī includes a story from al-Sha`bī (Kufan, d. 109/727-8?) of the famous qadi Shurayḥ (d. 79/699-700?): ‘I witnessed Shurayḥ when there came to him a woman who had a suit with a man. She let fall her tears (*arsalat `aynayhā*), weeping. I said, “Abū Umayya, I do not think but that she has been wronged.” He said, “Sha`bī: Yūsuf’s brothers came to their father weeping.”’⁵² Still, reported critics of women for their overdoing it do not always have the last word. Burda al-Ṣarīmiyya (Basran, fl. early 2nd/8th cent.) was reproached by the famous renunciant al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728): ‘Burda, your body has a claim on you and your sight has a claim on you.’ She said, ‘Abū Sa`īd, if I am among the people of Paradise, God will substitute for me better eyesight, whereas if I am among the people of the Fire, may God make far my sight.’⁵³ Similarly, Mālik b. Dīnār (Basran, d. 130/747-8?) warned an anonymous woman

⁴⁹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh* 16:499.

⁵⁰ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 184-5.

⁵¹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*, ed. `Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qāsim (Mecca: Maṭba`at Umm al-Qurā, 1357), 356 = (repr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyya, 1396/1976, 1403/1983), 427 (addition by `Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad; references to the latter edn. henceforth in *italics*).

⁵² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 3:20, § Followers of Kufa; with allusion to Q. 12:16.

⁵³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 2:23, § women of Basra. The reference to claims recalls a reported conversation between the Kufan Maṣṣūr b. al-Mu`tamir (d. 132/749-50) and his mother, who used to say, ‘O my son, your eye has a claim on you and your body has a claim on you.’ Maṣṣūr would say to her, ‘Leave Maṣṣūr alone, for between the two breaths there is a long sleep’: Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 5:41. It also recalls a Prophet hadith report in which the Prophet commands `Abd Allāh b. `Amr to desist from fasting every day and staying up every night. In one version, he says, ‘Your body has a claim on you, your eye has a claim on you, and your visitors (*zawr*) have a claim’: Bukhārī,

of Mecca that her weeping would destroy her eyes. She said, 'If I am among the people of Paradise, God will give me eyes better than these. If I am among the people of the fire, worse than this will befall them.' So she wept till she lost one of her eyes.⁵⁴

Sometimes, weeping was specifically identified as a feminine activity. Ḥakīma al-Makkiyya would shriek (*taṣrukhu*) like a woman who had lost her child (*thaklā*) when she saw the doors of the Ka'ba opened. She was once told by a woman who used to sit with her that the doors had been opened in her absence so that those circumambulating had seen the mercy of their king. She thereupon shrieked and kept shaking till she died.⁵⁵ Ibn `Umar (d. 74/693-4) said, 'Mecca has wept, the male in it like the female', as if weeping were expected mainly of the female part.⁵⁶ Occasionally, the severity of a man's sadness makes it resemble a woman's, as when someone said of Shaqīq b. Salama (Kufan, d. 99/717-18?), 'he would enter the mosque to pray, then sob (*yanshiju*) as a woman sobs.'⁵⁷ Sarrār (Basran, d. 165/781-2) describes `Aṭā' al-Salīmī, 'I never saw `Aṭā' save with his eyes flooded. I did not liken him to anything, when I saw him, but a woman who has lost her child.'⁵⁸ But then when Ziyād b. Ḥudayr al-Asadī (Kufan, fl. late 1st/7th cent.) thought on hearing Q. 94 of the Prophet's early travails, he was said to begin crying 'as boys cry'.⁵⁹ Also, the greatest exemplars of weeping in the Islamic renunciant tradition were men. Adam's tears were said to have exceeded those of Dāwūd and all others

Ṣaḥīḥ, al-ṣawm 55, *bāb ḥaqq al-jism fī l-ṣawm*, no 1975, among many variants. However, the word *ḥaqq* ('claim') is not in all versions; e.g. compare one with *ḥazz* ('share'), Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 4/2:9 4:262-3.

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 2:157, § unk. women of Mecca.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 2:155, § women of Mecca.

⁵⁶ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, al-ḥajj 218, *fī bakka mā hiya*; ed. Ḥamad `Abd Allāh al-Jum`a and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Luḥaydān. 16 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1425/2004), 5:382 = ed. Muḥammad `Awwāma, 26 vols. (Jedda: Dār al-Qibla and Damascus: Mu'assasat `Ulūm al-Qur'ān, 1427/2006), 8:389 (these are the two good editions available of the *Muṣannaf*; henceforth, references to the `Awwāma edition in *italics*).

⁵⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 3:12, § Followers of Kufa.

⁵⁸ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 6:220. His distress on hearing thunder is elsewhere likened to that of a woman in labor: Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 6:225.

⁵⁹ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 4:197. The printed version calls him Ziyād b. Jarīr al-Aslamī.

combined.⁶⁰ The Companion Burayda (d. 63/682-3) said, alternatively, ‘If the weeping of the people of the earth were weighed against Dāwūd’s weeping, it would not be equal.’⁶¹ Advice to weep is general, as from Abū Mūsā l-Ash`arī (d. 50/670-1?): ‘O people, weep. If you do not weep, pretend to weep. The people of the Fire are weeping tears till they are cut off, then they weep blood such that if a boat were sent among them, it would float.’⁶²

As for reciting the Qur’an, there are stories of women who were outstandingly devoted to it. Two Basran women named Ghaḍna and `Āliya would recite Q. 2-7, almost a third of the whole Qur’an, in one bowing.<sup>63</sup> An anonymous woman recited Q. 112 a thousand times by day alongside praying without letup by night.<sup>64</sup> Qur’anic recitation seems to be an easier alternative to contemplation in a story from `Aṭā’ al-Khurāsānī (b. Abī Muslim, l. Damascus, d. 135/752-3)⁶⁵:

There was a worshipping woman called Ṭāfiya, who would come to Jerusalem to worship there. Wahb b. Munabbih (Yemeni, d. 113/731-2?) used to ask her, ‘O Ṭāfiya, what work is hardest on you?’ She would say, ‘I don’t find that anything is harder on me than long thinking.’ He said, ‘How so?’ She said, ‘When I think of God’s greatness and the matter of the Afterlife, my reason becomes confused, my sight is darkened, and my joints loosened.’ Wahb b. Munabbih told her, ‘If you have found that, take refuge in reading the Qur’an from the bound copy.’

An anonymous Meccan woman is reproached for not speaking save to recite the Qur’an, as by answering the question ‘Hey you—where are you going?’ (from the narrator, who thought she had lost her way) by reciting Q. 17:36, ‘Do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. The hearing and the sight and the heart—of each of these there will be a questioning.’ On

⁶⁰ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 47 61; Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 7:257; sim., Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, *al-zuhd* 92, *mā qālū fī al-bukā’ min khashyat Allāh*, 12:425 19:456.

⁶¹ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, *al-zuhd* 2, *mā dhukira `an Dāwūd*, 12:14119:33. But Umm Sa`īd bt. `Alqama al-Nakha`iyya (Kufan, fl. mid-2nd/8th cent.) wept the weeping of Dāwūd—Dāwūd al-Ṭā`ī, according to Cornell, but more likely the prophet (Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 114-15). On the prophet Dāwūd as the paradigmatic penitent, see Jean-Louis Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, Patrimoines Islam (Paris: Cerf, 1999), chap. 10.

⁶² Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 4/1:81 4:110; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 199 247.

⁶³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:27, § women of Basra.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:395, § women of unk. name and place.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:224, § women of Jerusalem.

inquiring, the narrator (ʿAbd Allāh b. Dāwūd al-Wāsiṭī, fl. late 2nd/8th cent.) hears that she has been speaking so for thirty years. He recognizes that her intention is good but protests that she is doing something forbidden, wrongly applying the Qurʾan (*istaʿmalat al-Qurʾān fīmā lam yūḍaʿ lah*).⁶⁶ This is in line with the position of the Ḥanbali school, says Ibn al-Jawzī, quoting Ibn ʿAqīl (Baghdadi, d. 513/1119).⁶⁷

Naturally, there are many stories of devotional recitation by men. The caliph ʿUthmān (d. 35/56) would recite the Qurʾan in a single bowing by night.⁶⁸ The Kufan Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/713?) was observed to have a thick tongue. He explained, ‘Yesterday, I recited the Qurʾan two and a half times.’ Someone else observed that he recited the whole Qurʾan in one bowing in the Kaʿba. In the second bowing, he recited only Q. 112.⁶⁹ Another Kufan, Maʾrūf b. Wāṣil al-Taymī (fl. earlier 2nd/8th cent.), recited the Qurʾan every three days whether travelling or settled.⁷⁰ Controversial questions were whether it was permitted to recite the Qurʾan in some postures or more often than over three days. For example, the Kufan renunciant ʿAwn b. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUtba (d. 110s/729-37) rebuked Nāfiʿ, the leading Medinese reciter of his time (d. 169/785-6?), for reciting the Qurʾan while sitting.⁷¹ The Prophet is quoted as saying, ‘He has not understood (*lam yafqah*) who has recited the Qurʾan in less than three days.’⁷² Recitation is

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:369-70, § women encountered at ʿArafa.

⁶⁷ Confirmed by Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw, 15 vols. (Cairo: Hajr, 1406-11/1986-90), 4:482-3.

⁶⁸ Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt* 3:53 3:75-6; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 127 158; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, *al-ṣalāt* 827, *man rakhkhaṣa an yuqraʾa al-Qurʾān fī layla*, 3:579 5:513; Tirmidhī, *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* 13, no 2946.

⁶⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 3:43, § Followers of Kufa; sim., Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:181 6:259; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 370 443 (addʿn < ʿAl.); Tirmidhī, *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* 13, no 2946.

⁷⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 3:66, § Followers of Kufa.

⁷¹ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrāʾ*, ed. Gotthelf Bergsträßer, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1351-2/1932-3, repr. Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, n.d.), 2:333, ll. 7-13. On recitation at the bowing and prostration in the course of the ritual prayer, see Christopher Melchert, ‘When not to recite the Qurʾan’, *Journal of qurʾanic studies* 11/1 (2009): 141-51, at 143-6.

⁷² Abū Dāwūd, *shahr Ramaḍān* 8, *bāb fī kam yuqraʾu al-Qurʾān*, no 1390; Tirmidhī, *al-qirāʾāt* 11, no 2946; Ibn Māja, *iqāmat al-ṣalāt* 178, *bāb fī kam yustaḥabbu yakhtimu al-Qurʾān*, no 1347; Nasāʾī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Sulaymān al-Bundārī and Sayyid Kisrawī Ḥasan, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1411/1991), no 8067.

perhaps made out to be a characteristically masculine activity in a statement from the Damascene qadi Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza (d. 183/799-800): ‘Whoever recites the Qur’an much will copulate much.’⁷³

Service is the one activity that I have noticed as coming up more often in the biographies of females than of males. It is mainly al-Sulamī who mentions service to humans. Unaysa bt. `Amr al-`Adawiyya served Mu`ādha bt. `Abd Allāh al-`Adawiyya (Basran, d. 101/719-20?).<sup>74</sup> Several women are named as serving the famous Rābi`a al-`Adawiyya (d. 185/801-2?), herself said to have been a freedwomen: Maryam al-Baṣriyya,<sup>75</sup> `Amra bt. Abī Shawwāl,⁷⁶ and an anonymous woman who kept herself awake at night by pacing.⁷⁷ Kurdiyya bt. `Amr (fl. Basra or al-Ahwāz, early 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> cent.) served Sha`wāna.⁷⁸ Only a few men are remembered as serving male renunciants. For example, Ibrāhīm b. Adham associated with an attendant called Ibrāhīm b. Bashshār al-Ṣūfī.⁷⁹ A theological tract by the Nishapurī Muḥammad b. Aslam (d. 242/856) was transmitted from him by his ‘servant’ (*khādim*) and ‘disciple’ (*ṣāhib*).⁸⁰ Al-Junayd (d. 298/910?) said,⁸¹

I saw with Abū Ḥafṣ al-Naysābūrī [d. 270/883-4?] . . . a bald man who was mostly silent, not talking. I asked his companions, ‘Who is this?’ I was told, ‘This is a man who accompanies Abū Ḥafṣ, serving him. He has spent on him 100,000 dirhams of his own and borrowed another 100,000 to spend on him. Abū Ḥafṣ will not allow him to speak one word.’

⁷³ Yaḥyā b. Ma`īn, *Tārīkh*, rec. of al-`Abbās al-Dūrī, ed. `Abd Allāh Aḥmad Ḥasan, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, n.d.), 2:359, no 5332.

⁷⁴ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 102-3.

⁷⁵ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 84-5.

⁷⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:19, § women of Basra.

⁷⁷ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 88-9.

⁷⁸ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 116-17.

⁷⁹ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 7:346.

⁸⁰ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilya* 9:244.

⁸¹ Al-Sarrāj, *The Kitāb al-Luma` fi 'l-taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, E. J. W. Gibb memorial ser. 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill and London: Luzac & Co., 1914), 177.

‘Service’ here is evidently a combination of patronage and training in humility. With Abū Ḥafṣ and especially al-Junayd, however, we are moving out of the renunciant period into the mystical, Sufi period.

As for intersexual service, Umm Saʿīd bt. ʿAlqama al-Nakhaʿiyya (Kufan) served Dāwūd al-Ṭāʾī.⁸² However, most instances of women’s serving men are from the Sufi period. Amat al-Ḥamīd bt. al-Qāsim was disciple to Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz and served him (*ṣaḥibat, kānat takhdumuh*).⁸³ ʿAbdūsa bt. al-Ḥārith (*fl.* 4th/10th cent.?) was servant (*khādima*) to the Sufis (*fuqarāʾ*) of her city for 30 years.⁸⁴ ʿUnayza al-Baghdādiyya served Abū Muḥammad al-Jarīrī the Baghdadi Sufi (d. on way to Mecca, 311/923-4?).⁸⁵ ʿĀmina al-Marjiyya (*fl.* Nishapur? 4th/10th cent.) said, ‘In service to the Sufis (*fuqarāʾ*) is the illumination of the heart and the rectification of the quintessence of one’s soul (*sirr*).’⁸⁶ Servant girls are certainly mentioned in connection with earlier renunciants. But there are few stories of free volunteers, such as the Basran Zajla (*fl.* 2nd/8th cent.?), ‘who would not raise her sight to heaven. She would go to the coast to wash the clothes of the men in garrisons (*al-murābiṭūn*).’⁸⁷ Not to look up is also found among men, such as the prophet Sulaymān,⁸⁸ but washing sounds more feminine. Likewise, al-Sulamī reports cross-sexual discipleship (*ṣuḥba*) almost solely in the Sufi period.⁸⁹

⁸² Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 114-15.

⁸³ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 155-6.

⁸⁴ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 236-7.

⁸⁵ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 248-9.

⁸⁶ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 254-5.

⁸⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥa* 4:27, § women of Basra.

⁸⁸ Hannād, *K. al-Zuhd*, ed. ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Faryawāʾī, 2 vols. (Kuwayt: Dār al-Khulafāʾ lil-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1406/1985), 1:263.

⁸⁹ Baḥriyya was disciple to Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/809-10; 48-9). Umm Kulthūm, known as Khāla, was disciple to Abū ʿAlī al-Thaqafī (d. 328/940) and ʿAbd Allāh b. Manāzil (d. 331/942? 240-1) of Nishapur (240-1). ʿAzīza al-Harawiyya (*fl.* later 4th/10th cent.) was disciple to ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Shahrān in Herat (242-3). Umm ʿAlī bt. ʿAbd Allāh b. Hamshādh was disciple to Abū l-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādhī (d. Mecca, 367/978), among others (244-5). Surayra al-Sharqiyya was disciple to Abū Bakr al-Fārisī (al-Ṭamastānī, d. after 340/951-2) of Nishapur (246-7). Jumʿa bt. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿUbayd Allāh, known as Umm al-Ḥusayn al-Qurashiyya, was disciple to Abū l-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādhī and Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Khiḍrī (250-1). Extraordinarily, ʿAbd al-Wāhid b. Zayd (*fl.* mid-2nd/8th cent.) was disciple to the Basran Rābiʿa al-Azdiyya (128-9) and related stories of her. At this early period, however,

More common are reports of service in the form of devotions to God, especially from Ibn al-Jawzī. Umm al-Aswad bt. Zayd al-`Adawiyya (Basran, fl. early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> cent.) was nursed by Mu`ādha al-`Adawiyya, who told her, ‘Make every effort after this to eat only what is lawful. Perhaps you will succeed in your service (*khidma*) to your master and in your acceptance of His will.’⁹⁰ Umm Sālim al-Rāsibiyya (Basran, n.d.) made the pilgrimage from Basra 17 times in the sacralized state (*iḥrām*, not required till one reaches the precincts of Mecca). She would say, ‘It is not meet for the slave to seek his lord save by a contract to see on himself the traces of his service (*āthār khidmatih*). If the slave puts off the traces of his service at first, he puts it off.’⁹¹ Pilgrimage is evidently seen as service, the pilgrim’s special dress a visible sign of being about it. In the sample from Ibn al-Jawzī, service is mentioned up twice as often among women as men. The numbers are so small, though, it seems unsafe to infer any definite pattern. As for al-Sulamī’s women who served women, it must also be said that servants made convenient informants, especially from women, which may be another reason for service to come up more often in women’s biographies.

We may also have a few more stories of women who renounce marriage than men who do. `Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd asked Rābi`a al-Azdiyya to marry him. She refused and asked him what he saw in her of lust (*ālat al-shahwa*), then ‘Why haven’t you asked a lustful women like yourself to marry you?’⁹² Of a Basran called Ḥasana (fl. early 2nd/8th cent.) it was said,⁹³

She was beautiful. A women told her, ‘Marry.’ She said, ‘Bring me a renunciant man who will not charge me with anything of the world. I don’t think you will be able. By God, I have no desire to serve the world or have comfort (*atana``amu*)

the term *ṣaḥiba* probably means more literally that he was often in her company, as the word is often used of contemporary traditionists, the technical category of discipleship not developing until the next century.

⁹⁰ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 166-7.

⁹¹ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 132-3, substituting my own translation for Cornell’s: ‘A slave should not seek his Lord unless he resolves to see himself fulfill all of his service to God. For if the slave delays fulfilling his service near to his goal, it is as if he had failed to fulfill any of it.’

⁹² Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 128-9.

⁹³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:26, § women of Basra.

with the men of the world. If you find a man who weeps and makes me weep, who fasts and commands me (to fast), who gives alms and urges me (to give alms) Otherwise, good-bye to men (*`alā l-rijāl al-salām*).’

Kurdiyya bt. `Amr told a man what blessing her service to Sha`wāna had brought her. ‘I have never loved the world since serving her; I have never preoccupied myself with my sustenance; I have never exalted in my sight any of the greats of the world out of greed for what they possess (*li-ṭama` lī fīh*).’<sup>94</sup> Rābi`a bt. Ismā`īl (d. Damascus, 229/843-4) proposed to Aḥmad b. Abī l-Ḥawārī (d. 230/844-5?), saying she had no desire but wanted to spend her (late) husband’s wealth on him and his brethren. Aḥmad got permission from his master Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830-1) and married three other women besides.⁹⁵ She told Aḥmad, ‘I do not love you with the love of spouses but rather with the love of brothers. I desire you only as a desire to serve you.’⁹⁶ Normal wifely obligations could be a hindrance to a strenuous routine of worship, as in the story of Nasiyya bt. Salmān, wife to Yūsuf b. Asbāṭ (Antiochene, *fl.* late 2nd/8th cent.). When she gave birth, she said, ‘Oh, Lord! You do not see me as someone worthy of Your worship. So for this You have preoccupied me with a child!’⁹⁷ The distraction of children comes up in a reported conversation between the two Basran renunciants Mu`ādha al-`Adawiyya and Abū l-Sawwār al-`Adawī (*fl.* late 1st/early 8th cent.). He asks why women go to the mosque, lower their heads, and raise their backsides. She tells him not to look. He says he cannot help it. She says that if she stayed home, she would be distracted by children, whereas being in the mosque is invigorating (*idhā kuntu fī l-masjid kāna anshaṭ lī*). Unsurprisingly, his final word is not ‘You’re

⁹⁴ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 116-17; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:27-8, § women of Basra. I think Cornell misinterprets the last pronoun suffix, whose natural antecedent seems to me to be ‘anyone’ (*aḥad*); that is, I see no reference here to the great ones’s possessions, rather Kurdiyya reports having no lust directly for any of the great ones (lit. ‘lords of the world’).

⁹⁵ Ibn `Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn Abū Sa`īd `Umar b. Gharāma al-`Amrawī, 65 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1415/1995), 69:115-16.

⁹⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:274, § women of Syria; also translated by Cornell, *Early Sufi women*, 316.

⁹⁷ Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 92-3. Should be at least ‘my lord’. Cornell interprets her name as Nusiyya, a strange form (*fu`īla*) I do not find in dictionaries.

right—you should get your husband to share the responsibility’ but ‘Invigoration is just what I fear for you.’⁹⁸

There were some male renunciants who renounced marriage, but they seem to be proportionately fewer. Sulaymān b. Yasār (d. ca. 100/718-19), one of the seven jurists of Medina, was congratulated by the prophet Yūsuf in a dream or in person for resisting women’s advances. ‘I was aroused’, he said, ‘but you were not aroused.’⁹⁹ Dāwūd al-Ṭā’ī, Kufan (d. 165/781-2?), was celibate for 64 years.¹⁰⁰ Reproached for not marrying, he asked how he could take on a second concern.¹⁰¹ Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī, master to Aḥmad b. Abī l-Ḥawārī, was celibate himself. ‘Whoever wishes for children is stupid,’ he said, ‘as to both the world and the hereafter. If he wishes to eat, sleep, or have sex, his pleasure will be spoilt; if he wishes to worship, it will distract him.’¹⁰² Or at least he was unmarried for a long time, for he was reportedly sceptical when someone told him his son had gone back to making a living (*al-kasb*), seeking to live on the licit and what agreed with the Prophet’s example (*al-ḥalāl wa-l-sunna*). ‘He will not prosper whose heart is concerned with gathering carats.’¹⁰³

I have come across one devotional form likely to have been practised mainly by women: not to speak by day. The obvious model is Maryam in the Qur’an, who tells her accusers, ‘I have vowed a fast to the Merciful, and I shall not speak to any person to-day’ (Q. 19:26). Qur’anic commentators and jurists explain that the word for fasting (*ṣawm*) referred in the early

⁹⁸ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 318 385.

⁹⁹ Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* 2:190-2, two stories. The Qur’an says of the Egyptian’s wife (unnamed in the Qur’an, Zulaykhā’ in hadith), ‘She had designs on him; and he would have had designs on her, had he not seen the proof of his Lord’ (Q. 12:24, Jones transl.). Al-Qurṭubī states that the majority of qur’anic commentators held that Yūsuf, although a prophet, was indeed tempted to the point of allowing his trousers to be drawn down before his vision (unspecified in the Qur’an but elaborated in hadith) made him draw back from actual adultery: *al-Jāmi’ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī, 20 vols. in 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1418/1997), 9:142-6.

¹⁰⁰ Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* 7:349.

¹⁰¹ Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* 7:356.

¹⁰² Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* 9:264.

¹⁰³ Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* 9:267-8.

period (or at least among the Israelites) only to silence, becoming a technical term for fasting from food and drink only after the Prophet had transferred to Medina and Q. 2:183-7 was revealed.¹⁰⁴ Qatāda (Basran, d. 117/735-6?) is quoted apropos of Maryam's vow, 'You will never meet an ignorant woman who has made a vow as did Maryam but that she speaks all day until night. God made that a sign only for Maryam and her son. It is not licit for anyone to vow silence for a day until night.'¹⁰⁵ Obviously, some women did so vow. A certain Abū Ja'far al-Sā'iḥ (fl. 3rd/9th cent.?) reported that he had seen many women in Jerusalem who wore wool, lived in the mosque, and would not speak by day.¹⁰⁶ A partial fast from speaking is related by the Basran traditionist Abū Khalda Khālīd b. Dīnār (fl. 1st half 2nd/8th cent.) of Umm Ḥayyān al-Salmiyya: 'She recited the Qur'an daily. She would not speak except after the mid-afternoon prayer, when she would command her need and order what she wanted.'¹⁰⁷ (Implicitly, she had servants, a good example of how the early renunciant life was suited to a tribute-taking social élite.) On the other hand, a man's vow of silence is repudiated in a famous Prophet hadith report¹⁰⁸:

The Prophet saw a man standing in the sun, so he said, 'What is this about?' They said, 'He has vowed not to speak, not to shade himself from the sun, not to sit, and to fast.' The Prophet . . . said, 'Command him to speak, shade himself, and sit. Let him complete his fast.'

¹⁰⁴ e.g. al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥawā l-kabīr*, ed. Maḥmūd Maṭrajī, &al., 24 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1414/1994), 3:239, beg. of k. *al-ṣiyām*.

¹⁰⁵ Abd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīz*, ed. `Abd al-Mu`ṭī Amīn al-Qal`ajī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma`rifa, 1411/1991), 2:8-9; Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-bayān fī ta`wīl āy al-Qur`ān*, ad Q. 19:26.

¹⁰⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:226; § unk. women of Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:25, § women of Basra.

¹⁰⁸ Mālik, *Muwaṭṭa`*, rec. of Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā, *al-nudhūr wa-l-aymān* 4, *bāb mā lā yajūzu min al-nudhūr fī ma`ṣiyat Allāh*, no 1363; rec. of Abū Muṣ`ab al-Zuhrī, *al-nudhūr wa-l-aymān* 8, *bāb mā lā yajibu min al-nudhūr fī ma`ṣiyat Allāh*, no 2214. Sim., Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *al-aymān wa-l-nudhūr* 31, *bāb al-nadhr fīmā lā yamliku wa-fī ma`ṣiya*, no 6704, Basran/Medinese *isnād*.

There is no express connection here with the daytime, but mention of fasting and standing in the sun suggest it.¹⁰⁹ This man's silence seems to be one of several austerities, the others not mentioned in Q. 19. Still, his vow somewhat weakens the identification of silence as a peculiarly feminine austerity.

It has been proposed that healing is of special concern to women; for example,¹¹⁰

Cross-culturally women of differing social groups share concerns such as childbearing and motherhood Connected to this explicitly is child rearing and related child rearing is healing. These appear to be issues that are often at the center of women's religiosity and as such suggest a gender/sex difference.

Healing stories are prominent in the Christian tradition, and they seem to be common among Muslims today; for example,¹¹¹

The tombs of saintly women, especially the women of the Prophet's family, were (and are) so commonly believed to cure disease and infertility that, even on the general pilgrim route to Medina, such shrines have become an almost exclusive preserve of women seeking healing, who are frequently accompanied by small children.

But healing stories seem to be conspicuously rare in the early Islamic tradition, whether involving men or women. (So is visiting tombs, for that matter, at least for the sake of blessings as opposed to mourning or being reminded of death.) The article just quoted relies at this point on modern evidence, not medieval. Probably, we should be cautious about projecting the observations of modern anthropologists back to the eighth century especially because Islam was still, then, concentrated in the cities of the Middle East.

Literary convention

¹⁰⁹ The Ḥanbali school in particular seems to have discussed the legal status of a vow of silence by daytime, which the majority considered forbidden. See al-Mardāwī, *al-Inṣāf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiqī, 12 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1955-8, repr. Dār Ihyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1419/1998), 3:272.

¹¹⁰ Darlene M. Juschka, 'Gender', *The Routledge companion to the study of religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2010), 245-58, at 253.

¹¹¹ Marina Tolmacheva, 'Female piety and patronage in the medieval "hajj"', *Women in the medieval Islamic world*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly, *The new Middle Ages* 6 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 161-79, at 165.

From time to time Silvers acknowledges literary convention; for example, ‘A common narrative trope depicts slaves used for sex teaching their more sophisticated, and sometimes scholarly, owner a truth about God’s love through their simple purity of faith.’¹¹² An example might be ‘Ubayd Allāh b. al-Ḥasan al-‘Anbarī, Basran qadi (d. 168/784-5)¹¹³:

I had a clean, non-Arab (*a jamiyya*) slave girl with whom I was pleased. One night she was sleeping next to me. Then I woke up and did not find her. I looked for her and lo, she was prostrating herself, saying, ‘By your love for me, forgive me.’ I said, ‘Girl: don’t say “by your love for me” but “By my love for you, forgive me.”’ She said, ‘You good-for-nothing—his love for me took me out of polytheism to Islam, waking up my eye but putting your eye to sleep.’ I said, ‘Go, you are free, for the face of God.’ She said, ‘Master, you have done ill to me. I did have two rewards but now it has become one reward.’

‘Ubayd Allāh gets credit for freeing a slave, the anonymous slave for taking comfort in her servile status.

Another trope I have often noticed is for a conceited or at least complacent man to be brought down by a woman. Umm Sālim al-Rāsibiyya (*fl.* 2nd/8th cent.?) warned a man who had come to visit her and waited while she prayed between the noon and mid-afternoon prayers, ‘If you have some need, do not come to me at this time, for whoever leaves a prayer at this time squanders his own fortune.’¹¹⁴ Similarly, Abū Khālid al-Qurashī (‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Abān, Kufan, l. Bagh, d. 207/822-3)¹¹⁵:

We called on ‘Alīla bt. al-Kumayt . . . at noon. They said, ‘She is performing the ritual prayer.’ We waited for her till the mid-afternoon. When she had prayed the mid-afternoon prayer, she called us in. We went in and said, ‘God have mercy on you—we have sat here since noon waiting for you.’ She said, ‘Praise God—sitting? Didn’t you pray between noon and the mid-afternoon?’ We said, ‘No.’ She said, ‘I didn’t think anyone did not pray between noon and the mid-afternoon.’ She emphatically pulled back from us (*inqabaḍat ‘annā inqibāḍan shadīdan*).

¹¹² Silvers, ‘Early pious’, 42, citing her own earlier article, “‘God loves me’”, 53-8.

¹¹³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:31, § Basran women named for others.

¹¹⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:351, § women of the desert.

¹¹⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥā* 4:352, § women of the desert.

In both cases, the rebuke for not performing supererogatory prayers seems all the sharper for coming from a woman (although the second is evidently a householder, no concubine). Sufyān al-Thawrī (Kufan, d. 161/777?) and Ibn al-Mubārak (Khurasani, d. 181/797), having been told of the exertion and worship (*ijtihād*, *ibāda*) of Umm Ḥassān al-Kūfiyya, went to her house. Ibn al-Mubārak reports,¹¹⁶

We saw in it nothing but a ragged fragment of a mat. Al-Thawrī said to her, ‘If only you wrote to one of your cousins to change your poor condition.’ She said, ‘Sufyān, you were greater in my eyes and in my heart before this. I would not ask for the world from the one who has power over it, possesses it, and governs it, so how could I ask someone who does not have power over it, judge it, or govern it? Sufyān (by God), I do not wish that a time should come to me when I am pre-occupied from God (be he exalted) by anything other than God.’ She made Sufyān weep. I heard that Sufyān married her.’

Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya simply rebukes Sufyān for exaggerating his sadness or for not acting as if he realizes how close he is to extinction.¹¹⁷

Women have this function of deflating complacent men outside the literature of renunciation as well. Some traditionists were unable to answer a woman’s question but Abū Thawr (d. Baghdad, 240/854) could.¹¹⁸ In a famous story, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935-6?) prompts a woman to ask a question sure to discredit the Muʿtazili theologian al-Jubbāʾī (d. 303/915-16).¹¹⁹ Fedwa Malti-Douglas’ assessment is based on *belles lettres*, not the literature of renunciation, but it clearly applies to both¹²⁰:

These cases of eloquent women clearly demonstrate a form of narrative male-female encounter: the woman may speak, but it is at the instigation of the man. The latter directs his words or his actions at a specific member of the opposite

¹¹⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 3:114-15, § women of Kufa. A similar dialogue is reported between Sufyān and an Umm Ḥassān al-Asadiyya of Basra, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:30, § women of Basra known by relation to men.

¹¹⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa* 4:18-19, § women of Basra.

¹¹⁸ Al-Rāmāhurmuzī, *al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAjjāj al-Khaṭīb (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1391/1971; 3rd printing 1404/1984), 248-50.

¹¹⁹ Rosalind Gwynne, ‘Al-Jubbāʾī, al-Ashʿarī and the three brothers: the uses of fiction’, *Muslim world* 75 (1985): 132-61.

¹²⁰ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Man’s body, woman’s word: gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing* (Princeton: Univ. Press, 1991), 44-5.

gender, rather than at women as a category. This cross-sexual verbal interaction often takes the form of a response on the woman's part, rather than a true dialogue between the male and female.

What has come down to us is entirely mediated through men. The Damascene Yazīd b. Maysara (*fl.* earlier 2nd/8th cent.) is quoted as saying, 'A reprobate woman is like a thousand reprobate men, while a virtuous woman will be credited with the work of a hundred male saints.'¹²¹ There is no room here to say that surprisingly many saintly women are named, or that the tradition systematically suppressed reports of saintly women from disbelief in female saintliness. On the contrary, saintly women are part of the prevailing ideology, at least of the renunciant tradition as represented by the male-authored literature. Pious Muslim men expected to hear of pious Muslim women. Whether women would have transmitted different sorts of reports if they had written books can only be guessed at.

¹²¹ Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya* 5:236.