

Codes of Emotion in 9th and 10th-century Baghdad: Slave Concubines in Literature and Life

Writing

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The place and period and its literary conventions

In the ninth and tenth centuries CE, much of the Arabic written culture of Iraq centres on emotions. Dramatic narratives made immediate by dialogue are designed to show what fateful impulses drove historical actors and what feelings moved and motivated humbler individuals. Because of their artful immediacy, it is tempting to take such writings as direct evidence for a history of emotions, and to forget that we are dealing with imaginative writing or writing strongly shaped by imagination and argument. Both dimensions have often been overlooked, and verisimilitude mistaken for passive documentation,¹ while, in a field which has not yet given much consideration to the historicity of emotions, a strong story-line can persuade us that we have grasped far more of the characters' psychology than is actually the case.

Identifying emotions and distinguishing between how they are portrayed and how people actually 'did' them is complicated by the ways in which Arabic writing of this period related to life and functioned in real life. Prose storytelling largely adopts the formats of life writing, often overlapping with biography and narrative historiography. The term life writing is a useful catchall, more appropriate than 'literature' in most contexts, because of the many components and features shared by storytelling, history and biography, all of which are largely constructed from anecdotes or purported reports (*khavar*, pl. *akhbār*) attributed to historical actors or eyewitnesses, which were collected and circulated, orally and in

writing, by named scholars, with pedigrees of transmission (*isnāds*) to situate them on the map of learning.² At a time when books of *akhbār* were being compiled for or by bureaucrats as an aid to self-cultivation and career advancement in an expanding market (thanks to paper, which had become cheap and plentiful), many *akhbār* recur in different books, in slightly differing forms, as building blocks in some larger scheme.³ What writers were trying to achieve for themselves or their readers by curating *akhbār* has, surprisingly, only gradually established itself as a central topic of enquiry.⁴ As well as specific *akhbār*, motifs, situations, story lines and story-telling techniques recur across the life-writing spectrum. How much of their meaning depends on intertextual knowledge and how much arises from each new setting is a key question.

Poetry was implanted intimately in the art-life continuum. It was the backbone of education, and it both consecrated what people had felt in the past and gave expression to how people understood their experiences in the present. Among poetic genres considered 'modern' (*muḥdath*) in our period, the love lyric and wine song challenged tradition, expressing the conflicts arising from the contradictions of modern (that is, urban, Islamicate and multicultural) existence, even though they derived their authority from older Arabic poetry, whose convention of a first-person poetic voice very well served the voicing of 'modernity'.⁵ Equally 'modern', though, is the emergence of impersonally voiced gnomic poetry drawing on the heritage of the Ancients (Indian, Persian and Greek as well as Arab).⁶ Backstories, in the form of *akhbār* with their validating scholarly apparatus, weave poetry and the poets' supposed real-life situations into life-writing;⁷ and poetic attitudes rub off on social behaviour, so that in some circles, dandyism and 'refinement' (*ẓarḥ*) - the aestheticism and exquisite sentiments derived from love poetry - become a philosophy, and the adjective *ẓarīf* becomes a term of socio-biographical shorthand.⁸ Sensibility is demonstrated by the

ability to quote or extemporise poetry, which is universally recognised as a common emotional language. In stories, when a character quotes poetry, this establishes a direct emotional link with us, the readers or listeners, at the same time as triggering emotional reactions from the other characters in the story, a further complicating of the art-life relationship. (When poetry is set to music, the effect is even more powerful, but we can only guess at the original impact on readers when a tune was evoked since the music of this period survives only in reconstructions.)

The *jāriya* as a cultural and emotional hub

This is the backdrop to three passages which I revisit here from the viewpoint of an Arabic history of emotions. All of them centre on women slave musicians, *jawārī* (sing. *jāriya*). The *jāriya* was key figure in ninth and tenth-century Abbasid culture. Highly educated, able to quote, sing and improvise poetry, often skilled in musical composition, she was an essential component of court life as a performer and conversationalist. On the evidence stories such as our three, *jawārī* were also members of wealthy households. There were also establishments and individual businessmen (and women) who owned and hired them out. Such are the putative signatories of al-Jāḥiẓ's (d.868) satirical 'Epistle on Singing-Girls'. This is how they describe their merchandise:

'[*Jawārī*] provide a man with a combination of pleasures such as nothing else on earth does [so that they tend to fall disastrously in love with them and think that they are loved in return. But] . . . the singing-girl is hardly ever sincere in her passion, or wholehearted in her affection . . . her nature is to set up snares and traps for the victims . . . As soon as the observer notices her, she exchanges provocative glances with him . . . dallies with him in

verses set to music . . . Later, she begins to find fault with him, affects to be jealous of his wife . . . But it sometimes happens that this pretence leads her on to turning it into reality, and she in fact shares her lover's torments.'⁹

The slave handlers also claim that 'An accomplished singing-girl has a repertoire of upwards of four thousand songs.'¹⁰ *Jawārī* are the subject of poetry and of storytelling, and regardless of their number and distribution in the population, which we cannot even guess, are the most prominent female figures in the Arabic literature of the ninth and tenth centuries.

The period story types examined here

My three pieces are all ostensibly pieces of life writing, but they are also stories, whose plots derive from a common schema (man sells *jāriya* whom he loves/who loves him; by twists of fate, they are/are not reunited).¹¹ The schema is underpinned by what is evidently a shared commitment to emotional refinement - *ẓarf*, in other words, although the term is not always used - which conditions the characters' behaviour and dictates the plot. Where do these stories fit in the literature-life continuum, and how can they be used for a history of emotions? What do specialists or comparatists who want to use them need to know about their status?

First story

To address the last question first, my first story, which is the earliest by a small margin, is not untypical in being problematic on several levels. Firstly, it is taken from a book, Ibn al-Mu'tazz's (861-908) *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḥdathīn* (roughly, 'Lives of the

Modern Poets'), which is a chance survival. Composed in the last years of the ninth century, it exists in a single, bad, mid-nineteenth-century manuscript which offers no clues to its origin. Virtually unknown before the 1930s because seldom referred to in other medieval works, its authenticity is corroborated by another *unicum*, a late thirteenth-century abridgement of several works, of which this is, again by chance, the only surviving part.¹² Secondly, the authenticity of the preface in which Ibn al-Mu'tazz describes his book's purpose has been disputed.¹³ Thirdly, the story itself has undergone accidents of textual transmission. These points complement my opening generalisations about the ninth and tenth-century Arabic written corpus. It is something of an unknown quantity. Some works are known through unbroken tradition, as with my second and third items. Other major authors or works are recent rediscoveries, as with this text. Much of the vast corpus remains lost, or else unpublished. Even the best-known works are poorly charted territory, not least because since *akhbār* lend themselves to being combined in anything from a few pages to several volumes, books such as the sources of our three stories can be very large, while at the same time the *khbar* as a narrative unit tends to be highly condensed, making it a challenge to achieve in-depth reading of both the parts and the whole.

This first passage is a biographical entry, taken from a work containing 128 (originally perhaps 131) biographies of men and women poets.¹⁴ Ibn al-Mu'tazz was a pioneering 'modern' poet and theorist, son of the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tazz (d.869), who after his father's murder became the ward of his famous, wealthy and politically powerful ex-*jāriya* grandmother Qabīḥa.¹⁵ Perhaps coincidentally, although the subject of the entry is ostensibly the poet Maḥmūd al-Warrāq, it opens not with Maḥmūd but with his *jāriya* Sakan. Typically of the work, the story that follows is not found anywhere else:¹⁶ modern

scholars agree that Ibn al-Mu‘tazz’s *Ṭabaqāt* seeks out lesser-known aspects of its subjects. They also tend to agree that it does more or less stick to the aim of its disputed preface, that of showing the ‘Abbasids and the statesmen who served them as patrons of poetry.¹⁷ If this is true, then a nameless actor who appears late in the story may play more than a peripheral though providential part in it. This is the ‘Tāhirid grandee’ who offers a huge sum to buy Sakan, a renowned artist, and then generously renounces her. The clan of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Tāhir were the greatest power behind the caliphal throne in the first half of the ninth century, when this story is set. They controlled Baghdad, were fabulously rich, and were devoted to the arts.¹⁸

Here is the story:¹⁹

Al-Qāsim ibn Dāwūd said to me: I was told by al-Ḥasan al-‘Alawī:²⁰ Sakan, the slave of Maḥmūd al-Warrāq,²¹ was a most beautiful creature. She was highly accomplished, an outstanding singer, and wrote excellent poetry.

It happened that Maḥmūd lost a lot of money and found himself in great difficulties. He said to his slave Sakan: ‘Sakan, I expect you can see that I’m in a bad way and have fallen on hard times. I swear by God Almighty that I don’t mind for myself, but it pains me to see you suffer. I would wish to see you live in wealth and luxury. If I put you up for sale, it may please God to rescue you from this miserable poverty and make you rich and comfortable. Tell me if this is what you wish.’

The slave replied: ‘It is as you please,’ and Maḥmūd offered her for sale.

All the aristocracy wanted to buy her and bid against each other. One of the bidders was a Ṭāhirid grandee who offered a hundred thousand dirhams. Once the cash was brought and Maḥmūd saw the purses, he acquiesced and resigned himself to closing the deal.

He said to Sakan: 'Get dressed and go!'

She put on her things and advanced among them like the full moon rising in splendour²² with Maḥmūd at her side. Eyes streaming, she asked him: 'Maḥmūd, is this how it's to end between us? Do you prefer a hundred thousand dirhams to me?' [In a variant transmitted in the abridgement, Sakan says: '*Will you give up being with me for a hundred thousand dirhams? I curse the fate that has brought you to this!*' and Maḥmūd replies: '*Say that again!*' The narrative continues: *She did so, and Maḥmūd said: 'I declare ...'* (as below).]²³

He replied: 'Do you want to live a life of abject poverty?'

'Yes!' she said. 'I can bear it. You complain if you want!'²⁴

Then Maḥmūd said: 'I declare before you all that I set this woman free unconditionally,²⁵ and that I give her as her dowry my mansion, which cost me fifty thousand dirhams and is all that I possess.—You, sir, take back your money, and may it bring you blessing.'

The Ṭāhirid replied: 'You have earned the money by this action. It belongs to the two of you; I refuse to take it back.'

Maḥmūd accepted the money and lived happily ever after with Sakan.

Maḥmūd composed a great deal of poetry, most of it admonitory and aphoristic, in which he was no less successful than Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs and Sābiq al-Barbarī.²⁶ Here is an example:

He who is firm of purpose envisions misfortune before ever it occurs;

Then, if it strikes, he has no fear, because he has envisaged it already.

Seeing that one trouble leads to another, he expects the end of one to be the start of

the next.

Not so the fool: he feels safe from Fate, for he forgets the downfall of all those who have passed on;

Surprised by vicissitude, he howls in adversity.

Had he only prepared his mind to be firm, he would have known how to be steadfast in misfortune.

Told in the third person with no eyewitness narrator, this story shows readers how the protagonists acted, but leaves them to guess the feelings behind their words and deeds until the sentence: ‘Once the cash was brought and Maḥmūd saw the purses, he acquiesced and resigned himself . . .’ where an omniscient narrator (a rarity in medieval Arabic) briefly steps

in. Up to this point, the story appeared to be posited on a protocol of emotional delicacy and restraint. A couple enjoy a quasi-conjugal relationship, and despite the fact that the man owns the woman and is free to dispose of her, he seems to place her welfare above his own and to defer to her decision, acting as if she controlled the situation. (The self-imposed deference is reminiscent of the poetic conceit of the slave to whom her owner is emotionally enslaved.)²⁷ Readers might ask themselves if this is really a relationship of trust, as it appears to be, or one of manipulation. Is the owner conferring agency on the slave, or is he forcing her into a decision which suits him and which he wants to clothe in moral elegance? He appears to lay bare his feelings to her and to tie them to a logical and practical plan of action, but her response shows the asymmetry of their relationship. Sakan does not say what she feels or respond to Maḥmūd's reasoning, but instead adopts an attitude of obedience followed by silence—a retreat into her actual slave status. Why she behaves like this can only be guessed until her later outburst explains that she loves Maḥmūd and cares nothing for material security—an exceptional attitude in a society where women of her type are usually considered to be gold-diggers,²⁸ and even ascetics and mystics debate the rightness of taking no thought for the morrow.²⁹

As soon as money enters the picture in tangible form, Maḥmūd, for whatever reason, drops the respectful language he spoke in private as Sakan's lover and barks orders at her. She has now moved into the public sphere as a chattel, though still in her own home, not the slave market, which Maḥmūd has spared her. She breaks her silence, addressing Maḥmūd intimately (as we have never seen her do before), in front of strangers, in her last moments as his quasi-wife. In the variant, Sakan's outburst: *'I curse the fate that has brought you to this!'* and Maḥmūd's reply: *'Say that again!'* reveals that he had mistaken

her consent for indifference and that his feelings were as wounded as hers - perhaps the reason for his rough 'Get dressed and go!' In both versions, Maḥmūd ends up putting material considerations behind him and undergoes a reversal of feeling and behaviour. His whirlwind courtship transforms make-believe domesticity and deference into the real thing. Sakan will become his wife, not in itself a very secure position in law, it should be remarked,³⁰ but he makes it so by giving her all his property. The Ṭāhirid restores a measure of equality by insisting that the pair accept and share his hundred thousand dirhams; but with Maḥmūd's fifty thousand, this will still leave Sakan twice as rich as her husband and, in law, fully in command of her property.

The money as such, and the arithmetic, are both important. In Abbasid society, financial generosity towards inferiors was expected of the powerful, was indeed institutionalised as a means of creating gratitude, loyalty and a public image. This is what the Ṭāhirid's gesture - and perhaps Ibn al-Mu'tazz's relating of it - is designed to do. Maḥmūd's gesture cannot have this impact. He stands too low in the social scale. He cares about money - on one level, the whole story is about money and what it means to him. In this story as in many others, money can mean many things.³¹ Maḥmūd's character is mirrored in his attitude to money on the one hand and to Sakan on the other. When he ceases to instrumentalize money and to preempt Sakan's options in the light of money, its value becomes purely emotional, as well as underlining Sakan's moral victory when her outburst makes him yield, as a *ẓarīf* should, to the overwhelming imperative of love.

Does the emotional high point on which the story ends help to explain the particular poem that Ibn al-Mu'tazz selects to quote, and where he positions it? Himself an author of aphorisms,³² his appraisal of Maḥmūd's gnomic verse reflects on his own expertise. But

more than connoisseurship is involved. Surely there is irony in the contradiction between Maḥmūd's stoic poetic persona and the emotional volatility we have just witnessed, and between the poem's assertion that 'one trouble leads to another' and the happy ending of the story. Is Ibn al-Mu'tazz suggesting something about the difference between emotions in art and in life?³³

Second story

The duration of the action in this story is unspecified, but there is enough emotional work and development going on to fill a novel, had the form existed; and in fact there are versions of the story-type that stretch the action over months or years, with additional twists and turns. When extended in this way, the same schema can be premised on a significantly different initial set of emotions, giving a different meaning to the outcome of the lovers' work at developing their emotions from a romantic ideal to something practical and durable. Here in summary is one such story, collected or composed some fifty years after the 'biography' of Maḥmūd. It is one of several which al-Tanūkhī (939-94) included in his perennially popular collection of stories of deliverance, *al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda*. He relates it on the authority of a rather obscure poet, al-Ṣarawī, who was told it by his father.³⁴

Once upon a time in Baghdad there was a young man (unnamed) who inherited a fortune from his father (a state scribe, we later learn) and spent it on an (also unnamed) *jāriya* he had fallen in love with and who loves him. He ends up buying her.³⁵ The young man lavishes money on perfecting her musical education and learns music himself so that

he can accompany her.³⁶ His fortune exhausted, a friend advises him to earn his living as a professional musician. 'I'd rather die!' he tells the *jāriya*; so instead she proposes that he sell her, putting a brave face on it by declaring that she is bound to find a rich buyer who will keep her in luxury. He takes her to the slave market where she is bought for one and a half thousand gold pieces, cash down, by an Abbasid prince from Basra who is a *ẓarīf* and a music lover.

The narrative now moves into the first person, and scenes of popular life and elite life alternate. The young man relates his remorse and misery and how one disaster follows another. He is robbed of the cash from the sale of the *jāriya* while he tries to sleep off his sorrows. He tries to drown himself but is rescued. Still suicidal, he is given a little money by another friend who advises him to leave Baghdad and go south, where some senior government official may employ him for his inherited scribal skills. The boat on which he gets a passage happens to belong to the Abbasid prince who bought his *jāriya*. Disguised as a crewman, the hero realises she still loves him when he overhears the prince scold her for sulking and try to coax her to sing. Each time she begins, she bursts into tears and, hidden in the background, the young man faints (to the annoyance of the crewmen). Eventually he finds an opportunity to retune her lute in a way that she will recognise as his, and when he steps out of his disguise, the prince promises to free her and marry the couple as soon as they reach Basra. In return, they are to perform for him privately. Meanwhile, everyone gets drunk in celebration, and the young man, who has left the boat to relieve himself, finds that it has sailed on without him - and that he has no idea what the prince is called or where he lives in Basra.

The second half of the story sees a much changed young man give up any idea of returning to his own rank in life. His good handwriting gets him employment not with a

government grandee but with a shopkeeper when, on reaching Basra, he buys a sheet of paper to write a letter and the illiterate shopkeeper engages him as his book-keeper in return for bed, board, clothing and half a dirham a day. In two months, the shopkeeper's profits have risen, as his employees can no longer cheat him, and he doubles the hero's wages. A year later he makes him his partner and marries him to his daughter. For two more years the hero is a faithful employee, but leads a sad existence. To cheer him up, his father-in-law sends him on a Palm Sunday picnic on the river, and there, at last, he finds the prince again. But the *jāriya* is not on the boat. Like the hero, she has fallen prey to sorrow.

Honouring his vow to the pair to renounce her, the prince, who was only ever interested in her as a musician, has bowed to her wish to live out the rest of her life alone, mourning her former master as if she were his widow. The lovers are reunited, married, and given a handsome competence by the prince; the hero divorces and compensates the shopkeeper's daughter, and the prince holds the couple to their earlier promise to perform for him once a week. The hero becomes a landed gentleman, 'nearly as rich' as before, and he and the *jāriya* live happily ever after.

Pride and snobbery are the flaws that the hero of this story has to learn to recognize and get the better of. The plot and narrative details are designed to test his 'refined' emotions in down-to-earth situations and to show him what part of them is false. His trajectory of self-discovery and moral growth is quite different from that of Maḥmūd al-Warrāq. The anonymous young man's story is about learning to take responsibility for his life, not about learning to recognise mutual love, because that recognition was never in doubt and only grows as his love becomes more hopeless. Money too has a different value here: for the hero, a small sum bestowed out of friendship proves instrumental, a paltry

wage honestly earned still more so. Princely generosity merely adds a finishing touch. The prince's greatest generosity is in his honouring of the heroine's feelings. Financial and emotional excess and exact accounting, which might seem to belong to two different cultures, are shown to be two equally valid ways of enacting *ẓarf* and deepening its ethical authority in a narrative that gives equal weight to emotional indulgence and to stoicism.

Despite some major differences, the stories of Maḥmūd al-Warrāq and the anonymous young man share a set of values. Love between a man and a woman, physical (as must be inferred from the circumstances, although no details are mentioned) and intimate (even though restraint characterises the initial exchanges that we are shown) , is posited as an absolute value. There is no discussion or argument about it, and it is recognized and rewarded by socially authoritative figures, the Ṭāhirid and the Abbasid prince. It is reciprocal, not one-sided, whatever misunderstandings and failures of communication may arise. It is exclusive, and it is symmetrical and equal, either from the outset or by the end of the story. Lastly, equality is achieved by acts of unselfishness on the part of the lovers, aided by the providential intervention of outsiders.

These values - reciprocity, equality, unselfishness, exclusivity - presuppose three principles. Firstly, it is understood in both stories that those who are strong through having the law and custom on their side, that is, men, should disregard their legal and customary entitlements. Owners should not treat their *jāriyas* like chattels. Furthermore, rich men should not take advantage of their purchasing power to separate lovers. It is also shown that the weak - slave women - have a code of honour which dictates and explains their actions. It rests on making a strength of their very weakness. Slave women, in these stories,

are not venal and do not renounce moral agency even when (or especially when) their chatteldom is most to the fore.

Secondly, this set of principles is evolutionary. At first it is observed in conditions of stability and security, but it is proved when these conditions are overturned and a couple has to learn in adversity what equal and faithful love really means. Once the lovers achieve unselfish recognition of each other, providence steps in to reward them with lasting happiness.

Thirdly, these principles of behaviour and the feelings that they serve and cultivate demand a domestic setting. But in our two stories and a number of similar ones, domesticity seems to be an abstraction, a symbol of total reciprocal commitment, for despite cohabiting, the lovers have no children, and they have no pursuits to distract them from their absorption in each other. Given how unrealistic this is, it would be better to call what I have termed principles of behaviour (behaviour which is possible only in fictional conditions) a code of emotion instead. A code of emotion can exist independently of, and even in dissonance with, behaviour. This is illustrated by a third story, this time about an unequal relationship between a *jāriya* and her owner, which hinges on the *jāriya*'s hope that if she makes the right gesture he will recognise the emotional code behind it and behave as she desires. He fails to do so, and the story, which has the same basic ingredients as the first two, has a very different emotional outcome. It is taken from the tenth-century 'Book of Songs' of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, who was a contemporary and teacher of al-Tanūkhī, the author of our second story.³⁷

Third story

I³⁸ was told this by al-Ḥusayn ibn Yaḥyā.³⁹ He had it from Ḥammād,⁴⁰ whose father was told it by a man from Basra, who said:

I once bought a slave woman (*jāriya*) who had been trained to sing. I kept her for a while, and she ended up falling in love with me. Not wanting (*karihtu*) my wife to find out,⁴¹ I put her up for sale. In her grief (*jazi'at*), she cried: 'I hated you (*ana laka kāriha*) for buying me, and now I hate you selling me (*ana li-dhālika kāriha*).'

A friend said: 'Let me look her over.' I said. 'You can see her at X's'.⁴²

I was with him while he inspected her, and when he had finished, she sang:

Though all who loved you longest let the bond of friendship fray, and all
abandon you,

Yet I alone, though all else waste away, for ever am content with loving
you.⁴³

Then she burst into tears and flung down her lute, shattering it.

I asked her which she would prefer: for me to set her free, or to be sold to someone of her own choosing. She asked to be sold, and at her request I sent her away to a place where she could be comfortable until someone bought her.

Even shorter than the story of Sakan and Maḥmūd, this story is even more complex and ambiguous in its emotional choreography. The *jāriya* seems to mistake the emotional code she has absorbed in the course of her professional training for a reality, and tries to use it to alter reality. The poem she sings is well-known, and in a variant iteration of the story-type it signals the lovers' affinity and brings about a happy ending similar to that of Maḥmūd and Sakan.⁴⁴ In this story, however, the code has no power over the man the *jāriya* loves. Having decided to get rid of her to avoid disturbing his domestic life, after she has declared her love for him in front of a possible purchaser (presumably spoiling the sale), he allows her to choose her own future (a more genuinely free choice than that which Maḥmūd offered to Sakan, we may note). His offer of manumission apparently stands for rejection, not a proposal of marriage. Current scholarship gives us no idea how a freed *jāriya* might have supported herself on her own. At all events, this *jāriya* opts to be sold. If she does so in hopes of finding a rich buyer, she is now prepared to adjust to real life, in a reversal of the claim that *jawārī* are realists who sometimes end up as romantics, and of course in reversal of the romantic programme of our first two stories.

Functions of the story type

Versions of this story type which have a happy ending are doubly unreal, not only in the complete mutual absorption which the lovers enjoy but also, as I have argued elsewhere, in what they stand for. To a privileged social class living in disturbed and unpredictable times, they offered a contrasting and consoling ideal of stability attainable by

moral effort and underwritten by benevolence from on high.⁴⁵ Stories which lack a romantic happy ending may seem more realistic, but they are still stories, which prompts the question: what are stories, and what are they for? Remarkably, we have as yet no general theory of the storytelling for this period of Arabic writing.⁴⁶

As isolated *akhbār*, the three stories we have examined do not claim to belong to or to justify any wider moral, theological, philosophical or epistemological scheme. They appear self-justifying. Even when, by including it in *Faraj*, al-Tanūkhī makes our second story serve to prove that it is God's will to deliver His creatures from misfortune, it continues to assert the value system and emotional code of its original story type. The codes of emotion worked out in all three stories depend, as we have said, on the resources of narrative, which allow an imagined situation to be stated as a fact ('Once upon a time . . .'), whatever the narrator says to be accepted as cause and consequence ('Maḥmūd lost a lot of money . . . Maḥmūd accepted the [Tāhirid's] money and lived happily ever after . . .'), and whatever would weaken emotional tension to be deleted (no dialogue is reported between Maḥmūd and Sakan from her agreeing to be sold until her parting outburst), while inserting whatever details add verisimilitude (the sailors' annoyance when the young man keeps fainting) or heighten romance (the Abbasid prince's chivalry in not forcing himself on the *jāriya*). The emotions themselves are ideal in their strength, durability and distinctness from the mixture of thoughts and feelings that accompany lived as against fictional emotions, and it is the artificial device of plot that combines them into a code that clarifies the values they represent and vindicates them.

Life-writing story types and thinking about emotions

This kind of life writing tells us something about how people of a certain milieu and time thought about emotion, and what emotions they believed deserved exploring, or thought could be explored through storytelling. In other words, a corpus of this sort implies a literary community (all the writers who thought “sold *jāriya*” stories worth collecting and retelling, and all the readers - less easy to identify! - who liked reading them) and documents at least the broad lines of that community’s literary sensibilities.

Because literature is so imbricated in elite social practice in our period, as is attested by concepts such as *ẓarf*, it is tempting to assume that groups who shared literary sensibilities were also social groups, emotional communities as Barbara Rosenwein expresses it,⁴⁷ who valued and responded to emotions in the same way, and perhaps even conducted their emotional lives in the light of their literary training, as al-Washshā’s *Kitāb al-Muwashshā* claims for *ẓurafā*. In other words it could seem straightforward to equate literary history and the history of emotions. But literature did not usually set out to document how people ‘did’ emotions socially. Al-Washshā’s theory of *ẓarf* has been uncritically regarded as evidence that it did, but only because today’s readers have focused on the seductive list of fashionable *realia* with which it concludes.⁴⁸ Rather than documenting emotions in the raw, literature developed *khavar* story models in order to problematise and probe emotions, and to make readers exercise their sympathies and ask where they might lead. Scholarship has not yet asked when and where such stories originated or in what forms, and their multiple functions await in-depth investigation. I suggest that the three examples in this article are propaedeutic exercises in the uses of emotion: invitations to explore an emotional situation that, at least as far as the surviving

evidence goes, is not adequately modelled elsewhere in ‘modern’ literature in relation to ‘modern’ life. (The stories about legendary Bedouin poets and lovers that were also popular in this period are all set in the past and assume a pitch and purity of emotion beyond the reach of ordinary people.)

I have reverted here to speaking of ‘literature’, because the processes through which life writing worked on its readers are those of literature, as I hope to have demonstrated. If in our period literature - life writing and poetry - clarified and organised thinking about emotion and had the ability, unique in intellectual discourse, to make people think by means of empathy, it also had a characteristic, implicit argumentativeness, which suggests how our inevitable dependence on literary history could help us construct an Arabic history of emotions. A classificatory and encyclopaedic trend established itself in the ninth and tenth centuries and continued for centuries after. Mono-themed or multithematic anthologies of *akhbār* and poetry dealt with aspects or the totality of meaningful human experience, not least emotions. There is little in their treatment of emotion that we can take as passive documentation; rather they confront us with thought experiments: “what if” things are not as we usually suppose? Our three stories are cases in point. Maḥmūd’s story’s extravagantly happy ending quarrels with the commonsense of his poetry, arguing in favour of trust against the wisdom that warns one always to prepare for the worst. The anonymous young man who is made to put *ẓarf* to the test learns that it is neither confined to an elite nor based on ideals that ‘modern’ life is fundamentally unfit to fulfil, as the bible of *ẓarf*, al-Washshā’s *Kitāb al-Muwashshā* pessimistically asserts. In contrast, the unromantic story of the *jāriya* discarded by her owner contradicts its own story type and the lazy expectation that love will bring reciprocity and fulfilment.

Throughout *khavar*-based anthologies, we are presented with narratives which are animated by arguments, but these arguments work by obvious omissions, suppressions, deletions and manipulations. We can identify arguments and confront them with what they omit, and we can compare the range of themes and values embraced by life writing and poetry with those promoted by other discourses (legal, medical, theological, philosophical). By moving recurrent *akhbār* around and placing them under different umbrellas of meaning, and juxtaposing story types and value systems that quibble with each other,⁴⁹ this body of literature offers a framework for constructing an interrogative, intellectual, if not a positive, documentary history of emotions, and for broadening our grasp of the cultural functions of emotion and the vehicles used to explore it.

Of these vehicles, the *khavar* is, together with poetry, the most universal, but remains the least questioned as a literary form and an intellectual tool. This is partly because modern scholars have taken stories for granted as a natural and universal form of human expression - rather like emotions themselves - but equally because of the ahistoricity with which emotions have been approached in Arabic scholarship, leading to the assumption that medieval storytelling can be used as a direct source for documenting lived emotions, as if emotions were a form of *realia* that texts convey unconsciously. As an eyewitness historian of his own century, Eric Hobsbawm speaks of the 'curious intertwining of social reality and art.'⁵⁰ Discovering where and how life and art intertwine is a challenging task for historians of a culture with as many artful supposed eyewitnesses as that of ninth and tenth-century Iraq.

¹ See for example R. B. Serjeant's introduction to his translation of a comic masterpiece by al-Jāḥiẓ (776-868), one of the subtlest and most challenging thinkers of his day, in which imagined excesses of miserliness and avarice embody ethical and theological conundrums expressed as shaggy dog stories and elaborate jokes. For Serjeant, 'the picture it gives of life in traditional Arab society, resembling as it does the [south Arabian city of] Tarīm [which the translator] knew almost half a century ago . . . is an introduction to how the Arab conducts himself, the proprieties, table manners etc.', al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Book of Misers: a translation of al-Bukhalā'*, Robert Bertram Serjeant (transl.), reviewed by Ezzedin Ibrahim (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1997), p.xxvi.

² On history conceived as eyewitness or as personal experience, see Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially pp.113-15 on al-Tanūkhī, the author or transmitter of the second piece discussed in this paper. For a comparatist discussion of the spectrum of veracity and verisimilitude and the epistemological problem of assigning Arabic writing to exclusive categories, see Robert Hoyland, 'History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam' in Julia Bray (ed), *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.16-46.

³ On paper and the book culture to which it gave rise, see for example Jonathan M. Bloom, 'Papermaking: The Historical Diffusion of an Ancient Technique' in Heike Jöns, Peter Meusburger and Michael Heffernan (eds), *Mobilities of Knowledge* (Cham: Springer, 2017), pp.51-66, Shawkat M. Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) and Julia Bray, 'Lists and Memory: Ibn Qutayba and Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb', in Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (eds),

Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), pp.210-31.

⁴ The bibliography on this topic can be approached through the publications cited in this article.

⁵ On new poetic genres and the malaises of modernity, see for example Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), Chapter 2, 'Ghazal and Khamrīya: The Poet as Ritual Clown', pp.31-77, Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas. A Genius of Poetry* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005) and Jean-Claude Vadet, *L'Esprit courtois en orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l'Hégire* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1968).

⁶ See Julie Scott Meisami 'ḥikma', in Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp.286-7.

⁷ The outstanding example is Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's (ca. 897-972) *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, on which see Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's Kitāb al-Aghānī* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). The 'Book of Songs' collects the stories of the men and women who wrote and performed the most popular tunes of the most popular Arabic poems to have been set to music from pre-Islamic times onward.

⁸ See Mhammed Ferid Ghazi, 'Un groupe social: "Les Raffinés" (Zurafā)', *Studia Islamica*, 11 (1959), pp. 39-71, and the partial translation by Siham Bouhlal of al-Washshā' (d.937), *Le Livre de brocart* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), on which see note 48. On love and love poetry, see for example Renate Jacobi, 'al-'Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf', in Meisami and Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, pp.2-3, Thomas Bauer, *Liebe und Liebesdichtung in der arabischen Welt des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998) and Gadi

Algazi and Rina Drory, 'L'amour à la cour des Abbassides. Un code de compétence sociale', *Annales*, 55 (2000), pp. 1255-1282.

⁹ A. F. L. Beeston (transl. and ed), *The Epistle on Singing-Girls by Jāḥiẓ* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Limited, 1980), pp.30-3.

¹⁰ Beeston (transl.), *Singing-Girls*, p.35. Four thousand is a symbolic figure which the slave handlers comically multiply by the length of the poems, arriving at 'ten thousand verses, in which there is not one mention of God (except by inadvertence).'

¹¹ On this tale type, see Julia Bray, 'Isnāds and Models of Heroes: Abū Zubayd al-Ṭā'ī, Tanūkhī's Sundered Lovers and Abū 'l-'Anbas al-Ṣaymarī', *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, 1 (1998), pp.7-30 (12-15, 29) and Geert Jan van Gelder, 'Slave-Girl Lost and Regained: Transformations of a Story', *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 18 (2004), pp.201-17.

¹² Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḍathin*, 'Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (ed) (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, [1968]), pp.594-6.

¹³ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, pp.587-9.

¹⁴ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, p.585.

¹⁵ After Hārūn al-Rashīd (d.809), all Abbasids took slaves as consorts. On Qabīḥa, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), pp.189-191. On Ibn al-Mu'tazz, see 'Ibn al-Mu'tazz' (W. Heinrichs) in Michael Cooperson and Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *Arabic literary culture, 500-925* (Detroit: Layman, Brucoli & Clark, 2005), pp.164-171 and Julia Bray, 'Ibn al-Mu'tazz and Politics: The Question of the *Fuṣūl Qiṣār*', *Oriens* 38 (2010), pp.107-143 (111-15).

¹⁶ Teresa Garulo, 'Humor y Excentricidad en *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḍathin* de Ibn al-Mu'tazz', *al-Qanṭara*, 30 (2009), pp.427-45 (433).

¹⁷ Heinrichs, 'Ibn al-Mu'tazz', p.167. Albert Arazi argues that the wording of the preface has been recast but its sense retained, 'Poétique et politique dans *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt* d'Ibn al-Mu'tazz', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 30 (2005), pp.264-292.

¹⁸ See Clifford Edmund Bosworth, 'The Tahirids and Arabic Culture', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 14 (1969), pp.45-79.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, pp.366-7. A version of this translation appears as Appendix I of Julia Bray, 'Ya'qūb b. al-Rabī' Read by al-Mutanabbī and al-Mubarrad: A Contribution to an Abbasid History of Emotions', *Journal of Abbasid Studies*, 4 (2017), pp.1-34 (22-3).

²⁰ In proper scholarly fashion, Ibn al-Mu'tazz names his sources, neither of whom can now be identified.

²¹ Maḥmūd the Book-Seller or Stationer-Copyist, one of the many bookmen trading in Baghdad after the introduction of paper. In some accounts, he also dealt in slaves. He died in the first half of the 9th century. See Tilman Seidensticker, 'al-Warrāq', in Meisami and Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, p.805.

²² A stock poetic image.

²³ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, p.455.

²⁴ This passage is slightly garbled.

²⁵ In theory, a free man could not marry a slave. By freeing Sakan, Maḥmūd is declaring his suit.

²⁶ Two poets who set the benchmark for aphoristic verse. They died in around 783 and 718 respectively.

²⁷ A famous example is a three-line poem rhyming in *-anī* (metre: *kāmil*) attributed to the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d.809), Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wa l-umam*,

Muḥammad and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (eds) (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1995), vol. 8, pp.326-7.

²⁸ Al-Jāḥiẓ again: ‘For the most part singing-girls are insincere, and given to employing deceit and treachery in squeezing out the property of the deluded victim and then abandoning him,’ Beeston (transl.), *Singing-Girls*, p.34.

²⁹ See Claude Cahen and Louis Gardet, ‘*Kasb*’, in P. Bearman et al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition (originally Leiden: Brill, 1960-2005), online: https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/kasb-COM_0457?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=kasb consulted 24/09/2018.

³⁰ See Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³¹ The symbolic roles of money in medieval Arabic writing have been surprisingly little explored.

³² The *Fuṣūl Qiṣār*, see Bray, ‘Ibn al-Mu‘tazz and Politics’.

³³ Bray, ‘Ya‘qūb’, p.20.

³⁴ Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj ba‘d al-shidda*, ‘Abbūd al-Shālījī (ed) (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978), vol.4, pp.316-27, no.469. See Bray, ‘*Isnāds*’, pp. 13-14 for a slightly inaccurate earlier summary. On al-Tanūkhī’s life, times and *Faraj*, see now Julia Bray, ‘Introduction’, in al-Muḥassin ibn ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī, *Stories of Piety and Prayer: Deliverance Follows Adversity*, Julia Bray (ed. and transl.) (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

³⁵ If this story type has a real-life model, it is Ya‘qūb ibn al-Rabī‘, the early ninth-century poet and member of a scribal dynasty who for seven years spent his fortune pursuing a *jāriya*, Mulk. His story differs, however, in that Mulk died only six months after he succeeded in

buying her. Most of Ya'qūb's poems were said to commemorate his love and grief. See Bray, 'Ya'qūb', pp.5-9, 15-17, 27-8.

³⁶ Al-Jāhīz again: 'An accomplished singing-girl . . . continues to study her profession assiduously,' and is particularly apt to fall in love with a man who 'can compose and quote poetry or warble a tune,' Beeston (transl.), *Singing-Girls*, pp.35, 33.

³⁷ Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣḫānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, (Cairo: Būlāq, 1285 [1868]), vol.15, p.136. This is a retranslation of an item discussed in Julia Bray, 'Verbs and Voices', in Robert G. Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (eds), *Islamic Reflections Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Alan Jones* ([n. p.]: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), pp.170-85 (175-6).

³⁸ 'I' = Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣḫānī.

³⁹ Probably al-Ḥusayn ibn Yaḥyā al-Mirdāsī, a Baghdadi man of letters.

⁴⁰ Ḥammād ibn Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, whose grandfather Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (742-804) was one of the greatest Abbasid composers. This *khavar* is included in the 'Book of Songs' because of the song it quotes.

⁴¹ Literally: 'I did not want my *ahl* [family or household, often a circumlocution for wife] to see her.' Was the *jāriya* the narrator's concubine, or was he, like the Abbasid prince of our second story, simply a music-lover who bought her as an artist? Like many Arabic emotion words, the verb *kariha*, used by both the owner and the slave, can be weak or strong according to context. It seems evident that the slave uses it strongly, since the narrative links it to her lack of choice. It is less evident that the owner/husband uses it weakly. He may have been free to choose between his slave and his wife, but there is some literary evidence that the marriage contract of a well-connected wife could require her husband to be monogamous.

⁴² This suggests that the narrator did not put her up for sale in public. The X in question is feminine.

⁴³ The poem is by al-Ḥārith ibn Khālid al-Makhzūmī (d. ca. 700), an aristocratic love poet of the courtly Hijazi school whose verse was often set to music. This anecdote is one of a sequence illustrating settings of it by a contemporary of his and by Abbasid composers, including Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī. The poem is quoted in full just before this anecdote, with its two concluding lines:

Rejoicing in your love, and wishing none to be friend or companion except you;

You are all my desire, dearest on earth of all to me: so should I be to you!

⁴⁴ See Bray, 'Verbs and Voices', p.173.

⁴⁵ Julia Bray, 'Toward an Abbasid History of Emotions: The Case of Slavery', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49 (2017), pp.143-7 (144).

⁴⁶ The nearest approach is Bruce Fudge, 'Al-Tanūkhī on the Recovery of Health and Wealth', in Regina F. Bendix and Dorothy Noyes (eds), *Terra Ridens - Terra Narrans. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Ulrich Marzolph* (Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2018), pp.90-106.

⁴⁷ For the term, which has now been adopted as common currency, see, for example, Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Al-Washshā' claims that love, inconceivable in its true essentials by any but a refined elite, is impossible to realise in 'modern' conditions, its objects, *jawārī* and nowadays even respectable women, being incapable of love. Nonetheless, to love a woman, with the emotional discipline and refinement, *ẓarf*, that it entails, is essential to a man's ethical self-realisation. Material and social *ẓarf* has a set of rules of dress, personal adornment and so

on for men and women of which al-Washshā' gives a uniquely full and detailed list. This part of the book is better known than al-Washshā''s love theory.

⁴⁹ I borrow the concept of 'quibbling' from the title of Jeannie Miller's forthcoming study of al-Jāhiz.

⁵⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured times. Culture and society in the twentieth century* (London: Abacus, 2013), p.ix.