

Introduction

Textual Orgies, Licit Climaxes
and Transgressions

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This volume is the result of the conference of the same name “Words of Desire: The Language of Arabic Erotica and Its Translation”, convened by Frédéric Lagrange and Claire Savina in May 2016 at the University Paris-Sorbonne and the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) in Paris. This bilingual conference, co-funded by IISMM,¹ CERMOM² and IMA, gathered over twenty scholars and writers interested in the various ways Arabic erotica is expressed and translated. The thirteen chapters that comprise the book were selected from the conference papers and peer reviewed. They are all attempts to answer what has been our obsessive question: how to translate desire?

At the first stage of the translation process, human desire translates into acts and words. Erotic literature appropriates these words and attributes them to specific actions selected from the endless range of human practices. Erotic literature also defines sexuality norms: what is lawful, legitimate, transgressive or prohibited. At times, the absence of a word reveals an unthought. Like in other erotic literatures, Arabic literature combines the words of the body and sometimes conceals them through the use of euphemisms, metaphors and metonymies. It also exposes crude words with ostentation as if they were delicacies. It finally invents others so that all these words stimulate the readers’ desire and excitement in an astonishing desire-language loop.

At the last stage of the translation process, different world cultures appropriate erotic productions from different areas and convey them in their own words and images. By doing so, they transpose and domesticate desires from distant lands to adapt them to their own imaginations. At times, they are careful to maintain an exotic strangeness and distance. Maybe because of this very distancing translated texts and re-encoded languages have the capacity to stimulate desires other than the ones imagined by the original authors – additionally, temporal and cultural distance results in reconfiguring the meaning of words and the direction of desire.

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The initial call for papers invited contributions on both medieval and contemporary literature as well as on music, dance, cinema and translation studies in order to paint the broadest possible picture of writing and translating Arabic erotica over time. We found however that contemporary research is more interested in medieval Arabic erotic texts. This bias, combined with the selection process applied to contributions, results in a volume somewhat unbalanced in terms of the time periods represented, with studies on pre-modern texts taking the lion's share. Common threads running throughout the entire volume are the issues of concepts, words, and *ethos*. The essays gathered here offer pioneering perspectives on well-known texts, open a dialogue with recent methods in translation and gender studies, or analyze more confidential, less studied materials. Some even deal with unpublished texts e.g. *Jawāmi' al-ladhdha* by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Kātib or the *Rāḥat al-arwāḥ fī al-ḥaṣhīsh wa-l-rāḥ* (15th century). They invite an exploration of the nexus between eroticism and food, eroticism and hashish, eroticism and violence, or eroticism and disgust. They also prompt a reflection on the narration, by male authors, of marriage advice passed on between women from one generation to another.

This volume also presents and explores contemporary cultural productions – literature, songs and cinema – in a perspective engaging with both cultural and gender studies as complementary to philology. We examine the relationship of Arabic speakers with obscenity, sexual categories and a fluid behavioral norm emerging from the tension between global models and claims of cultural specificity, sometimes articulated in religious terms. Authors in this volume pay special attention to language, and more specifically Arabic language(s). They interrogate the relationship individuals maintain with classical Arabic, its modern standard version, regional dialects and, ultimately, foreign languages that are all used to express – crudely, scientifically, medically, eruditely or euphemistically – desire, sex and their various categories.

Ultimately, we aim to refine our approach to the connections between notions of desire and arousal, and between eroticism and pornography within cultural productions in Arabic through time

and space. Both claim to be universal, yet it is hard to find an Arabic translation pertaining to the same episteme. Contributors attempt to measure the amount of obscenity in the expression of desire, its limits and emic definitions. They explore the legitimacy of fiction in Arabic erotica, from marriage manuals in the tradition of *‘ilm al-bāh* to the rise of imagination in pre-modern narratives. Indeed, the fictional nature of the *khavar* (informative anecdote), which is the basic narrative unit of Arabic medieval literary discourse, is paradoxically negated by its very designation as *khavar* meaning “a piece of factual information presumed to be true”. In the pre-modern and contemporary versions of these cultures, are erotica and pornography purely performative cultural products aiming to prompt, or bolster, erection? Or do they also relate to the construction of gender, primarily masculine identities – considering that this literature is composed by and for men – but perhaps also feminine and minority identities? Can women today perform a modern reading of, and appropriate, this textual, linguistic, pictorial and bodily legacy? How legitimate is it to consume such productions today and seek emancipation through them while disregarding the context in which they were written and their – often phallogocentric – original goals? In *The Proof of Honey*³ Syrian novelist Salwa Al Neimi offers precisely such an unconventional reading and takes full responsibility for the inevitability of distortions, by both Arabic speakers and Westerners, in reception and decoding.

We find similar concerns in the relatively recent disciplinary field of *porn studies*, though they essentially pertain to images, whether still or animated. As François-Ronan Dubois puts it, “[literary studies] are mainly dedicated to historical objects, e.g. erotic libertine literature, and hardly ever intervene in contemporary discussions.”⁴ Yet, Zoltan Szombathy’s recent monograph *Mujūn. Libertinism in Medieval Muslim*

3 Salwā al-Na‘īmī, *Burhān al-‘asal*, Bayrūt, Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 2007 (Salwa Al Neimi, *The Proof of the Honey*, translated by C. Perkins, New York, Europa Editions, 2009).

4 Dubois François-Ronan, *Introduction aux Porn Studies*, Bruxelles, Les Impressions nouvelles, 2014.

*Society and Literature*⁵ and Sinan Antoon's work on *sukhf*⁶ contradict the alleged lack of interest literary studies have for the limits and conditions deemed necessary to socially and culturally legitimize the use of obscenity and pornography in pre-modern Islamicate cultures.

We have chosen to organize the thirteen selected contributions into three sections that structure the volume: "Words of Pleasure and Textual Orgies", "Licit Climaxes, Advices and Remedies" and "Glorified Transgressions, Taboos and Stigmatizations". The deliberate choice of a methodological rather than chronological arrangement stems from our intent to reflect broadly and comparatively upon the expression of eroticism. Starting from the standpoint of Arabic studies, we aim to go beyond cultural specificity and suggest original perspectives on global porn studies and research on erotica.

In the first part of the volume, "Words of Pleasure and Textual Orgies", authors engage with explicitly erotic productions in a philological perspective, whether they treat *logos* in the traditional sense or in cinematographic language, or propose a reflection on genres (drawing on philology, poetics as well as gender studies) to distinguish the tools used to create a "textual orgy".

The volume opens with Brigitte Foulon's study of eroticism in the works of Andalusī poet Ibn Khafāja (11-12th century) in which, adopting the approach of comparative poetics, she refers to the author's (in)famous Abbasid predecessor Abū Nuwās (8-9th century). The chapter, based on the study of two homoerotic *ghazal*-s, defines both the specificities, and limits of the Andalusī erotic poem as a genre. It interrogates the relationship between the content of the poems and the lived reality of their authors, and thus discusses the notion of "discursive fiction" in the poems.

Christian Junge, in "Exposing the Eroticism of Words. How Shidyāq Turned a Lexicon into Literature", offers his reading of one of the most

5 Szombathy Zoltan, *Mujūn. Libertinism in Medieval Muslim Society and Literature*, Oxford, Gib Memorial Trust, 2013.

6 Antoon Sinan, *The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

important productions of the *Nahḍa*, the racy *al-Sāq ‘alā al-Sāq* (1855), as an eroticized summary of the *Qāmūs* – a 15th-century dictionary by the lexicographer Fīrūzābādī. The text, according to Junge’s reading, transforms an arid collection of erudite words into literature; following the pattern of *jam’* in traditional treatises of *‘ilm al-bāh* it combines enumeration, narrative and reflection in order to generate an erotic language that exhibits words, women and the body. By presenting *al-Sāq* as an exhibition, Junge’s contribution constitutes a significant building block for a post-Eurocentric philology, also known as world philology, in the making.

Dwight Reynolds’s chapter, “Music as Desire: Erotic Dimensions of Musical Imagery in the *Muwashshaḥ*”, echoes the previous contributions by offering a reflection on affects and eroticism in Andalusī *muwashshaḥ*-s. The author strives to demonstrate how these are conveyed, if not created, by the musical imagery in which texts are immersed, in a reading where music becomes the very erotic drug of the poem.

“The Kiss in Egyptian Film Language of the 1940s”, by Marlé Hammond, proposes another philological study of erotica by looking at how the representation of the kiss evolved in Egyptian cinema of the 1940s. In the universe that Hammond explores, the language is talking movies and the kiss is not merely a symbol but becomes one of the structuring elements in a “grammar of desire” for the Egyptian middle class and, by extension, a model for Arabic modernity.

Monica Balda-Tillier analyzes desire, both ridiculed and sublimed, based on a comparative philological study between two 14th century texts from the same geographical area: *A Manual for Martyrs of Love*, by the Egyptian Mughultāy, a ‘udhrite-style treatise that exalts ethereal love attributed to this mythical tribe’s customs according to which men died when their love was chaste; and the roguish shadow theatre play *al-Mutayyam wa-l-ḍā’i al-yutayyim* by Ibn Dāniyāl which explores desire on the transgressive mode of *mujūn* (referring to textual and behavioral immodesty and deliberate provocation). Like Christian Junge’s work on *al-Sāq ‘alā al-Sāq*, the chapter contributes, via a methodic philological analysis, to a universal definition of desire(s) beyond love as imagined in the Egyptian literature from the 14th century.

The second part of this work, “Licit Climaxes, Advices and Remedies”, gathers studies of advisory texts that define, teach, frame, or prescribe licit desire and erotic satisfaction. The idea is to illustrate how the rationalized and controlled search for pleasure falls in line with premodern Islamic ethics, as well as to question the modern reception of those texts that are the product of a different episteme.

Claire Savina, in “From Interpreting a *‘ilm al-bāh* Treatise to Realizing Barthe’s ‘Pornogram’: Translation as Ravishing Rapture”, engages literally with “Arabic erotica and its translations”. She questions both the text’s erotic agency and the translation’s alleged incapacity to induce pleasure. She offers a critical study of the French and English editions of the *Perfumed Garden* by Nafzāwī (15th century), one of the most quoted works of medieval Arabic erotica. On the basis of this case study, she engages with contemporary translation studies to explore the notions of treason and transgression, and deploys the concepts of “*in-traduction*” (un-translation) and “*transgénérisme*” (trans-genrism) in order to offer a possible answer to the question: “Can eroticism be translated?”

For her part, Shireen Hamza focuses on aphrodisiacs that she sees as a common element in 10th century Arabic medical texts. She chooses to explore “Sex in the Kitchen” and presents an ambitious and effective comparison between Ibn al-Jazzār’s erudite work, a cookbook by Ibn al-Sayyār al-Warrāq, and an erotic treatise by Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. Building on the specific case of aphrodisiacs, she demonstrates how memorization became, in the 10th century, an integral part of the understanding of bodies and foods.

Pernilla Myrne’s chapter focuses on the literary character of the elderly woman as eroticism expert and advisor. By looking at erotic anecdotes about Bunyāndukht and the mythical Ḥubbā from Medina in medieval treatises of *‘ilm al-bāh* and works of *adab* the author sheds new light on expressions of women’s desire. She also suggests that, contrary to common belief, some of those texts might have been written for a female, as well as male, audience.

Rima Sleiman’s chapter is the only one in this volume analyzing a contemporary work of Arabic literature: *Imra’at al-qārūra* (1990) by the

Iraqi novelist Selim Matar. From her personal experience reading the novel as a teenager, Sleiman questions the different roles embodied by Hājar's character as a literary synthesis of all women.

The last series of essays, under the heading “Glorified Transgressions, Taboos and Stigmatization”, engages with the transgressive dimension found in texts, or other cultural productions, related to desire. The *mujūn* is a mode of premodern writing in which the author asserts his indecency either, in verse, with the intoxicated panache of a criminal or, in prose, by exposing examples of transgressions and pretending to condemn them virtuously whilst actually provoking the reader's physical or intellectual climax. This section furthermore explores modern avatars of the medieval *mājin* (profligate or debauchee) and shows how modern Arabic language, whether standard or colloquial, confronts globalized categories of homosexual desires.

Previous research has dealt extensively with the combined intoxication of wine and epebes in medieval Arabic poetry. Danilo Marino's contribution, for its part, offers an original study of the link between homoeroticism and hashish – read as the “pederasty-hashish duo” – in Mamluk-era literature. The chapter begins with tales from the *Arabian Nights* and legal texts, then introduces the *Rāha* by al-Badrī, a collection of texts in prose and verse dealing with hashish and wine. Marino selects transgressive anecdotes, and examines them side-by-side with medical discourse suggesting that cannabis inhibits virility. He then compares them with legal sources in which hashish's liceity is ambiguous at best, and with literature inspired by the popular belief that “hashish magnifies excitation and sexual experience”. His piece offers a rich panorama of various representations of the hashish-homoeroticism duo.

Frédéric Lagrange looks at a modern *mujūn*, whose specificity lies in it being disseminated by audio-visual media and faced with the role the modern State intends to play as regulator of public modesty. He compares erotic or saucy lyrics sung in early 20th-century Egypt with lewd songs interpreted (or whispered) by female performers in present-day video clips designed to arouse viewers. He questions a lasting conception of pleasure as mainly masculinist and phallogocentric.

The last two chapters are philological studies of Arabic words referring to homosexuality, and thus complement and answer each other. In the first one, titled “From Words of Desire to Words of Hatred”, Mariem Guellouz identifies homophobic insults as the only resource in use in Tunisian colloquial Arabic to name homosexuality. The last essay, by Gabriel Semerene, examines how terminology has evolved in LGBTQ activist discourse in Lebanon and Palestine and has come to constitute what the author terms a form of “linguistic activism”. Both contributions conclude this book with a reminder of the relationship between language and power, as well as of the stigmatizing or empowering potential of words. They clearly demonstrate that the scope of this volume, through the themes it explores, goes far beyond philological or aesthetic speculation.