

Office of Academic Diversity Research Collective Symposium

Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah: The Life and Poetry of a Medieval Damascene Scholar

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First of all, I would like to thank the Office of Academic Diversity Research Collective – and especially Cesar and Brittany – for organizing this symposium and for the opportunity to share and develop our work among a community of scholars committed to diversity. I would also like to thank Wajdi and Aseel for their Arabic recitation, which you will hear during my presentation. I understand this is a mixed crowd in terms of areas of specialization, so while I delve into the life of a pre-modern Arabic poem, I hope I am able to give enough context to make the analysis accessible and interesting for everyone.

STAKES OF THE RESEARCH

The sixteenth century scholar and writer 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah (d. 923/1517) is considered one of the most prolific women writers of the medieval period contrary to theories about the decline of Arabic literary production in medieval societies. I would like to first clarify the stakes of my research within our current sociopolitical context. By shedding light on the figure and work of al-Bā'ūniyyah, I hope to challenge a set of problematic assumptions that informs the way Muslims and the Arabic-speaking world are popularly discussed and framed including assumptions regarding the medieval period and the absence of women participating in intellectual and literary discourse; assumptions regarding a historical lack of agency and victimization of Muslim women considered inherent to societies in which Islam is ubiquitously present; and assumptions regarding

hierarchies of orality and textuality in the development of African, Asian, and other non-western cultural production.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

‘Ā’ishah al-Bā’ūniyyah was born in Damascus to a family of scholars and poets. Originally from the village of Bā’ūn located in southern Syria, her ancestors eventually moved to Damascus where the family subsequently lived for generations. Under the direction of her father, a chief judge for Mamluk Damascus, al-Bā’ūniyyah memorized the Qur’an by the age of eight and studied along with her six brothers law, poetry, and hadith. Her family belonged to the ‘Urmawī branch of the Qādiriyyah Sufī order, and al-Bā’ūniyyah married a man who studied with one of her primary teachers in Damascus and was from another prominent Damascene family known to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

After the death of her husband, al-Bā’ūniyyah moved to Cairo with her two children and along the way their caravan was ambushed by bandits who stole everything – including all of her books. Through the help of a family friend and secretary to the Mamluk sultan, they received assistance and al-Bā’ūniyyah spent the next few years in Cairo studying with local scholars and writing again. She later left Cairo for Aleppo in 1515 to meet with the Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī. Historical sources speculate because he was preparing for war against the Ottomans in the north, he invited ‘Ā’ishah for advice and because she was known to be a pious woman, he wanted her prayers. She then returned to Damascus and died soon after her return.

The translator Emil Homerin describes al-Bā’ūniyyah as composing more works in Arabic than any other woman prior to the twentieth century, however, very little is

known about her in the North American and European academy. On the other hand, the prolific and popular literary tradition of pedagogical poetry within which al-Bā'ūniyyah participates continues to live on in oral recitation.

CONTEMPORARY LIFE OF HER WORKS

In a YouTube video clip, an Iraqi shaykh identified as Walid Ibrahīm al-Dulaymī al-Fallūjī recites an ode composed by 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah on an episode of an Iraqi television show from 2014. Not only does al-Bā'ūniyyah's literary composition live on through oral recitation as evidenced in this clip during the most recent U.S. occupation of Iraq, but the person who excerpted this clip from the larger interview cites the poet herself in the YouTube video details.

Unlike other forms of medieval Arabic poetry that are known more popularly through recitation without an author attributed, her name is invoked and exists in cultural memory as a historical literary and saintly figure. This complicates understandings of high culture and textual literacy in which oral cultures – particularly where meter and rhyme encapsulated by poetic verse exists – are viewed as primitive rather than as indicative or even necessary for a texts transmission, circulation, and ultimately preservation. It also complicates understandings of the distinctions between “elite” and “popular” poetry.

HER WORKS

Al-Bā'ūniyyah composed numerous works of poetry and prose, some of which have been lost and are known through intertextual references. Some of her poetry, however, not only remain available but also are still recited as a living tradition in Iraq and Syria. Her works point to her scholarly interests in Sufi thought and practice, Arabic

rhetoric, the hadith narratives of the Prophet Muhammad, Qur'anic commentaries as well as hagiographies. Her poems *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn fī Madḥ al-Amīn* (trans. The Manifest Opening in Praise of the Trustworthy)¹ and *Fayḍ al-Faḍl wa Jam' al-Shaml* (trans. Emanations of Grace and Union) are examples of poems written as a *mu'āraḍah* – or a pastiche – in homage and response to a poetic predecessor. What this means is that she wrote the poem in the same meter and rhyme of an earlier work by a writer considered to be central to their field of study.

In the case of *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn fī Madḥ al-Amīn*, she pays homage to Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī's fourteenth century foundational poem on Arabic rhetoric, in which he opens with the following verse:

If you arrive in Sal', inquire about the loved one
And convey greetings to the people of Dhū Salam²

In ji'ta sal'an fa-sal'an jīrati l-'alami
Wa-qri al-salāma 'alā 'urbin bi dhī salami

While pointing to his scholarship musically, 'Ā'ishah incorporates her distinct style through her writing and says:

The moons of Dhū Salam are harbingers of a felicitous opening
Among the party of ardent lovers, I have become the flag bearer.³

Fī ḥusni maṭla'ī aqmārin bidhī salami
Aṣḥabtu fī zamrati al-'ushshāqi ka al-'alami

¹ The translation is mine.

² The translation is mine.

³ The translation is mine. See 'Ā'ishah Al-Bā'ūnīyah, *Sharḥ Al-Badī'īyyah Al-Musammāh bi al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn fī Madḥ al-Amīn*, ed. Riḍā Rajab (Dimashq: Rand lil-Tibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2010), 33

It is difficult to make an argument for reading her profession of love for the Prophet as gendered or particularly feminine; rather, she exhibits a style that is clear, direct, pithy, and expressive. She directly identifies the trope she will exemplify within her verse, and she articulates a more intimate and ecstatic reference to the Prophet as the moon instead of the neighbors of Dhū Salam or simply the location Dhū Salam.

In the case of *Fayḍ al-Faḍl wa Jam‘ al-Shaml*, which is also known as her *Ode in T* or the *Tā‘iyyah*, al-Bā‘ūniyyah modeled her poem after the thirteenth-century *Ode in T* also known as *Nazm al-Sulūk* or *The Poem of the Sufi Way* by Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Referred to as *Sulṭān al-‘Āshiqīn* or the Sultan of Lovers, Ibn al-Fāriḍ is one of the most famous Sufi poets of Arabic literature.

In her scholarly as well as later Sufi poetry al-Bā‘ūniyyah assumes the role of a master. She clearly demonstrates her knowledge of not only poetic convention but the corpus of literature related to the discipline from which she writes. For the remainder of this talk, I will focus on the verses of her *Ode in T* and its engagement with and idiosyncratic departures from Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s poetry. English translations as well as the Arabic transliteration are included for each verse.

In the opening line of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s *Ode in T*, he composes the following verse:

The palm of my eye handed me
Love’s heady wine to drink,
And my glass was a face
Of one revealing loveliness

Saqatnī ḥumayya l-ḥubbi rāhata muqlatī
Wa ka’sī muḥayya man `ani l-ḥusni jallati

Almost three centuries later, ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā‘ūniyyah writes,

He quenched me with love’s heady wine
Before my birth,

And I delighted in my drink
Prior to my being

*Saqānī ḥumayya l-ḥubbi min qabli nash'atī
Wa min qabli wijdānī ṭaribtu bi nashwatī*

Without ever mentioning her predecessor, al-Bā'ūniyyah immediately invokes him on three levels. The first is primarily by way of the musicality of the poem. Like Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, the poem ends with a rhyme in the letter "Tā" vowelised with a *kasrah*. The poet is composing for an audience that would take pleasure in her invocation – that is, an audience familiar with the genre of Wine Odes composed by Sufi poets.

Secondly, al-Bā'ūniyyah invokes Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Tā'iyyah* by way of her language and imagery. The poems begin with the same verb – *sa-qa-ya* – to quench. The actor performing the act of quenching the lover is the cupbearer. A trope of wine poetry, the figure signals the beginning of the ode and in the case of both opening verses, the cupbearers are offering the lover the wine of love to drink.

Thirdly, the temporal reality of the lover at the beginning of al-Bā'ūniyyah's *Tā'iyyah* does something interesting. It does not invoke the *Tā'iyyah* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, but rather another work in which Ibn al-Fāriḍ does this in another Wine Ode in which he says,

In memory of the beloved,
We drank a wine
We were drunk with it
Before the creation of the vine

*Sharibnā `alā dhikri l-ḥabibi mudāmatan
Sakirnā bihā min qabli an yukhlaqa l-karmu*

Similarly, al-Bā'ūniyyah plays with the conceit of remembering pre-existence or pre-eternity. The practice of remembrance, as discussed within Sufi circles, is designated

as remembrance because of the concept of the first covenant in which all souls testified to the existence of their creator prior to their bodily existence. Al-Bā'ūniyyah demonstrates not only her knowledge and mastery of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's famous *Tā'iyyah* – but of the corpus of Sufi poetry and thought.

DEPARTURES

Thus, this is also where she departs from her predecessor. Unlike Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Tā'iyyah*, al-Bā'ūniyyah's conceptualization of intimacy with the divine is marked both by immediacy as well as in the materialized spaces of sacred ritual rather than through the intermediary of the tavern. In the first verse of her poem, the verb to quench or *saqaya* is conjugated in the third-person masculine in which the subject-actor doing the act of quenching is God. Whereas in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, the lover is gendered masculine and the beloved is gendered feminine, al-Bā'ūniyyah inverts the gender of the lover and the beloved. Moreover, al-Bā'ūniyyah's lover is directly quenched with the wine of love by the divine. She both establishes intimacy in that there is not intermediary, but she also calls to attention distinction between the lover-subject and the beloved-object of love rather than enfolds them into one.

Al-Bā'ūniyyah also introduces a different space as the gathering place of lovers that expresses a departure from the wine poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Al-Bā'ūniyyah invokes the public sanctuary – the *jāmi'* – as the space of lovers rather than the privacy of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's urban tavern in which the lover hides. He writes,

So in the tavern of my drunkenness was the time of my thanks to brave young
men,
For despite my infamy, I completely hid my love with them.

Fa fī hāni sakri, hāna shukrī li fatiyyatin
Bihi tamma li katm al-hawā ma`a shuhratī

In contrast, al-Bā‘ūniyyah illustrates a performance of love and devotion in the public sphere that is an accessible social act and without remorse. She writes,

In the mosque of love and passion, he made me call to prayer
Impassioned lovers, the worthy ones of love.⁴

Wa ṣayyarani fī jāmi’i al-hubbi wa al-hawā
Uḥay`ilu li al-`ushshāqi ahli al-mahabbati

Gendered as feminine, the poet-lover boldly emerges as a public rather than private voice and figure. Like in the first instance in which the beloved gives the wine of love to drink, the beloved enables the lover to take on the role of the *mu’adhdhin*, the one who calls to prayer – the most recognizable public voice of the Muslim community within a city or village and usually a male figure. The choice of the *jāmi’* – instead of the Sufi *zāwiyah* – is significant. Although both are spaces of worship, the former signifies power and centrality in the public sphere; it is the central mosque in which the largest Friday congregational prayers would also be held, and the *jāmi’* also functioned as a space of public scholarship in which the female lover in the poem is not only constructed as a participant but a central actor envisioned within a community of lovers instead of the hidden male homosocial space of the tavern. Unlike the “brave young men” who help to hide Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s lover, al-Bā‘ūniyyah’s poetry is decidedly public facing. Ultimately, the lover al-Bā‘ūniyyah constructs in her poetry is a social vehicle of public teaching and learning which she envisions as an act of devotion as well as critical engagement. In response to her critics, she writes,

⁴ Translation Th. Emil Homerin. See ‘Ā’ishah Al-Bā‘ūniyyah, *Emanations of Grace: Mystical Poems by ‘Ā’ishah Al-Bā‘ūniyyah (d. 923/1517)*, trans. Th. Emil Homerin (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 97.

They ask, “Who do you love?”
I reply, “What is love?”
“So many secrets!” they reply
Yet my words are telling.

Yaqūlūn, “Man tahwā?”
Aqūlu, “Wa ma l-hawā?”
Yaqūlūn, “Kam katman!”
Wa tanṭiqu `ibratī.

Here, this medieval Damascene poet and intellectual establishes for her audience that, as a lover, she is a formidable master of the spiritual path. Not only is she engaged in public service of the beloved rather than privately crushed under the weight of ecstasy, she is discerning of her critics and unapologetic in responding to their misunderstanding. And throughout her poem, the poet-lover expressly remains gendered as a woman.

The figure and works of a 16th century Damascene Muslim women should raise questions regarding the conditions that enable and facilitate prolific literary production and intellectual pursuit by women in different contexts and periods. Although the centuries between the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century has been theorized by orientalist and modern litterateurs as a period of literary decline until the European colonial encounter revived Arabic creativity, they are the centuries of the rise and flourishing of Sufi orders and the development of new genres of poetry and prose. Aishah Al-Bā‘ūniyyah’s own literary production and intellectual networks demonstrate that the Age of Decadence thesis is patently false. Finally, during a time when histories are irreparably being destroyed in Syria and other parts of the Arab and Muslim world, highlighting an Arabic love poem by a medieval Muslim woman is a small contribution to resisting the erasure and vilification of a people from whom we have so much to learn.

This talk was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation with audio and visual materials.