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Manuela Marín, Randi Deguilhem. *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arabic Sources.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2002. 289 S. Â£ 42.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-1-86064-697-3.

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Diving for Archives: <cite>Cherchez la Femme</cite>

Diving for Archives: *Cherchez la Femme*

Feminist historical research has been a key impetus in overturning assumptions about what constitutes an archive, how boundaries around "archive" are drawn and defended by discourses of power that maintain their legitimacy through controllable knowledge repertoires, and how the notion of archive as a repository of hallowed information is itself a construction to legitimize structures it may serve. I say "feminist" deliberately, as a political and politicizing label that advertises its own interest in studying the stuff of history, and that rejects the illusion of *a priori* objectivity in scholarly endeavors. Expanding the archive for our work–locating new sources and exploring them imaginatively for what they elucidate about the impact of gender on human lives, and gender's centrality to identificatory practices–remains an important task in MENA gender studies, of course, and whether or not one identifies one's praxis as "feminist."

Though the present collection is not self-labeled "feminist," and though its editors worry that to focus on gender "exclusively" "would risk setting aside the woman and her actions as constructed objects of study held apart from the mainstream of society" (p. xvii), *Writing the Feminine* takes as its brief an inquiry into primary sources for the study of women in Arab societies, and the elucidation of how sources untapped thus far might further such study. It differs from the many studies on women and gender in MENA that have drawn on primary sources in that it highlights the sources themselves as a subject of inquiry. But the overall thrust of the collection is not methodological so much as it is descriptive, and the emphasis, indeed, is on differences gender makes in categorizations of human experience: in legal works, popular attitudes, poetic and autobiographical "portraits," and other material in question.

The book is a product of seminars held in Spain and France, in 1997-98, and one of a series of volumes to appear out of a collaborative research project on "Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World." *Writing the Feminine*'s editors and contributors aspire implicitly to open up the boundaries of "archive" as a received scholarly concept, in the interest of highlighting possibly sidelined "indigenous sources which reveal the visibility, the agency and the consciousness of women's actions–and their limits–in the Islamic Mediterranean" (p. xv). They describe these sources as "Arab" rather than "Arabic" presumably to signal the inclusion of visual art (one chapter) in this wider compass, but possibly also to hint at the complex layering of human and textual sources that feed into any one "text." Thus, not only thoroughly accepted historical sources such as juridical texts, chronicles, and biographical dictionaries receive attention here, but also multi-genre *adab* works, classical poetry, popular siras, proverbs, orally transmitted legends about saints, and twentieth-century autobiography.

For me, the welcome novelty this collection offered was a focus on Muslim Spain; nearly half the volume is dedicated to cultural production of al-Andalus, from proverbs to biographical dictionaries to legal works and chronicles. Scrutinizing Ibn Hazm's application of his Zahiri principles to the issue of women's access to a public religious domain, Camilla Adang finds that his literalist reading of sources for shari'a resulted in more access and less restriction than was true of existing, applied legal thinking. Yet, as she notes, this says little about the actual impact of gendered thinking on women's and men's lives, since the Zahiri school of law was never put into practice. Mar=a Luisa =vila questions the long-dominant dictum among historians of Spain that Andalusian women were "freer" than those in the Arab Muslim east, arguing the opposite on the basis of Andalusian Arabic biographical dictionaries. Cristina de la Puente, assessing Maliki legal writing on women's capacity to act and restrictions on their legal personhood, makes a similar point in noting that Andalusian "freedoms" might have applied to some women and not to others. Amalia

Zome=o studies Andalusian watha'iq works for information on women's access to divorce once abandoned by husbands, while Mar=a Jes=s Viguera Mol=ns explores images of women in Andalusian chronicles.

What links all of the volume's essays is an emphasis on reading from primary data, on eliciting "the viewpoint of primary sources," as the editors put it (p. xvii). But is "viewpoint" not a rather tricky notion? The editors observe that this focus on "documentary sources" raises questions of methodology, not the least of which is, what is being documented? Contributors do recognize that these texts (written, oral, visual) must be "read" from within their societies, and not as flat surfaces yielding empirical data. But, while most authors have something to say about how the genres they study might shape the nature of the information therein, in all but a few essays the description of source content predominates heavily over discussion of methodological issues, and in fact authors' caveats do not prevent them from falling at times into transparent readings that do not take into account the investments of different "viewpoints" in the material these sources include.

For example, to argue that popular attitudes, or concerns among the populace at large, can be read in proverbs, *adab* works, or epics risks effacing the voice and choices of compilers or transcribers. What kinds of narrative layering can we excavate? Who is speaking? And with what selectivity? What differences might social statuses of author/compiler/narrator make? And then, how is one to weigh genre conventions against social factors? And, for scholars in gender studies, it raises (yet again!) the question of how to evaluate gender of authorship: most of these sources, when authored by known individuals, are by men, yet clearly women's voices are part of the multilayered story.

As familiar–and tough–as these issues are, it seems important in a collection such as this not only to raise them but also to grapple with them. When texts emerge in an oral culture and then are recorded in writing later, can we situate them historically at all, in terms of popular attitudes they may convey? That epic poetry was performed in coffee houses, observes Remke Kruk, makes it likely that male attitudes toward polygyny–"sometimes considerably more sensitive than one might be inclined to expect" (p. 5)–can be elicited from these texts. This is a fascinating point, and introducing audience as one possible "viewpoint" is welcome. But which male attitudes, and when? Describing the proverbs on women included in two Andalusian Arabic compendia from the century, Nadia Lachiri argues their usefulness to social history, even as she notes that dictionaries of proverbs present them in dehistoricized terms, and that many have fallen out of use, although we do not know when. Where does this leave social historians? If meaning is constructed through and by historical context, by situated understandings of situated people, then how do we "get to" that meaning?

Acknowledging that relationships between representation, rhetoric, and lived lives are not straightforward, the collection offers some on-the-mark observations and strategies that stay in my mind. For example, Kruk, scrutinizing epic poetry as romance fiction, makes an intriguing and logical link between form and subject when she suggests that perhaps polygyny was a useful feature of epic, if the genre was required to focus on a single hero's exploits and to be lengthy: polygyny at least respectably allows the hero more than one romantic entanglement at a time! Studying women's and men's oral stories about Lalla 'Awish, Mari=tte van Beek finds a way out of seeming contradictions in the told life of this Marrakech holy woman by looking for meaning in symbolic, mystical dimensions of her story, while also noting that awliya' fortunate enough to appear in written hagiographies are often not those remembered by believers now.

Several authors, such as Maribel Fierro on "Women as Prophets in Islam," warn that seeming indicators of women's high status cannot be taken necessarily as such, but are due to the rather different concerns of these authors, in this case "a preoccupation about the integrity of prophecy" (p. 193). Yet, in general I hoped for more in the way of discussion about constraints and conventions of various genres and/or contexts, discussion that would offer methodological guidance to readers with less expertise in these sources. Nadia Maria El Sheikh's presentation of al-Tanukhi's *adab* compilation, which gives us a lively selection of translated excerpts, describes and promises attention to the genre's rhetorical contours. But as I read her assessment of the work's gender politics, I wanted her thoughts on how one is to maneuver between "a literary system that governed these anecdotes" and "multiple glimpses of women's social and psychological reality" (p. 132). Susanne Enderwitz's essay on Palestinian autobiographies does offer a sophisticated discussion of this genre, its strengths and limitations from a historian's perspective. Even so, her ensuing content analysis seems to assume a smooth documentary and historiographic function for these texts. If the nation is paramount in these "individual" autobiographies which emphasize the collective, as Enderwitz persuasively and eloquently argues, then how does this shape individual portraits within, which Enderwitz re-

counts, and what does it mean for our "historiographical" reception of them? This material-rich collection raises many such thought-provoking questions, and gives readers much to think about on the tricky relationship between "sources" and "data." All of these contributors exhibit deep knowledge of the sources themselves, and passion for the material.

If only the women whose lives these scholars want fervently to unearth could know of all this attention! And if only they could tell us how loudly their voices sound through the deep sediments of others' narrative structures!

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