Introduction

Historians of past times relied exclusively on written sources to know and reconstruct what happened in them. In the case of the medieval Islamic world, these sources were exclusively written by men from the intellectual and religious elites, closely linked to the dynasties for which they worked. These two circumstances – the male authorship of the texts and those authors' commitment to power – conditioned their stories, both in terms of the topics they dealt with and the biased view of different individuals and social groups that they offered. However, this is not merely a peculiarity of the Islamic world, but has been found, to a greater or lesser extent, in all sociocultural scopes until recent times.

In Arabic and Islamic historiographical discourses, the reflection of women was subordinate to the male version of events, since women were never the authors of the texts on which modern reconstructions of their social realities are based. As a matter of fact, women never did provide accounts of their lives, nor did they speak about their feelings in the first person in these texts. Equally, they did not have the opportunity to personally draw their own image of themselves, either as individual human beings or as members of a community. Their experiences, virtues, feelings, conflicts, problems, wishes or aspirations are always described or interpreted in the sources by male authors, leaving no place for the voice of women. Therefore, female motivations and ideas were filtered through male eyes which observed them from an unequal social position, while the feelings of women towards men rarely elicited response or reciprocity. Furthermore, the details of such female images transmitted by the authors were designed to increase not only the socio-religious depiction of these women within an Islamic moral context, but also the good reputation of the men who interacted with them through kinship links. Likewise, Arab writers also care about how women were represented in their texts, since historiography itself could be considered as a field of public visibility and, consequently, a record of the full display of women.

However, the female presence in medieval Arabic sources was not only conditioned by the personal vision of the authors; its perception also depended on the literary genre in which they were reflected. As each literature has its own topos, the female depictions often respond to both cultural and ideological stereotypes specific to each record, and this applies to women historiographically

described in general terms and individually. In this respect, the casuistry is infinite and, therefore, it would be presumptuous to try to offer a complete map of all the female representations to be found in pre-modern Arabic texts in these brief pages.

With this in mind, this special issue aims to paint a vivid picture of the possible male representations of women from the extensive medieval Islamic world in different historiographic genres, as well as to analyse how far the written sources conditioned both the female presence and agency in them. Throughout these pages, the emphasis will be placed on how several groups of women, either anonymous members of society or individually identified, were represented in texts belonging to very different types of literature – lexicographical, legal, historic, literary (*adab* genre), etc. As will be seen, the different Arabic written records through which these women have been studied open a wide range of textual possibilities, reflecting the relationships between men and women, but, above all, offering a wide range of possible masculine interpretations of female social reality.

The chronological and geographical framework analysed is quite broad, covering both from the fourth/tenth to the ninth/fifteenth centuries, and from al-Andalus to the Islamic East, considering that some regions of the medieval Islamic world were known for the special qualities of their women.¹ The study of these time frames and areas has led us to conclude that, despite the socio-cultural peculiarities of each place, dynasty or time, the image of women was continually subordinated to the official male discourse, regardless of time or location.

The topic analysed in this special issue is not really new but has already been tackled in other works. Therefore, both the aim and the perspective from which a group of female researchers have approached the study of women here does not raise a new question, but revolves around an existing one, providing new studies and perspectives on what we could call the “textual masculine imagery of women.” Among these works, the collective volume edited by Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem titled *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arabic Sources* (London, 2001) should be highlighted, as this dossier has followed in their footsteps. Later interesting monographs also focusing on the female presence in a specific genre are, for instance, Susan Spector’s *Women in Classical Islamic Law* (Leiden, 2010) and Remke Kruk’s *The Warrior Women of Islam* (London, 2014). These works, among many others, have gradually outlined a path in gender studies to be applied to our field of research,

1 Fatima Mernissi, *Las sultanas olvidadas: La historia silenciada de las reinas del Islam* (Barcelona: El Aleph, 1996), 107.

leading to the conclusion that women should be studied within their social, cultural, political and religious environment, which they undoubtedly shared with men.

Likewise, the importance of gender studies for the analysis of social history has been progressively recognised, considering that stories about individuals – both male and female – are essential for the reconstruction of certain social groups or entire collectives. As the American historian Joan Scott has pointed out, echoing certain reflections outlined from feminism applied to the discipline of history, “the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities.” This is what we have tried to achieve, applying scientific rigour, being aware that this methodological approach is fundamental in the scripting not only of a new history of women but also of a general new history, as Scott also states.²

With this aim, we have inaugurated this special issue by laying the foundations of the concept of woman according to medieval Arabic dictionaries. Thus, in the first article, Tsampika Paraskeva analyses pre-modern Arabic lexicographical literature in search of the meaning of the word “woman” through a rigorous study of the root *m-r-*³ and its derivatives. Through a complete semantic analysis of the main Arabic dictionaries written between the second/eighth and eighth/fourteenth centuries, the author concludes that the term *imra’a / mar’a* was semantically linked to notions such as “manliness,” “male honour,” and “masculinity.”

In the next article, Cristina de la Puente studies an Andalusian legal text from the fourth/tenth century belonging to the genre of notarial manuals. The main peculiarity of this document lies in the fact that its legal argument takes into consideration the affective and emotional relationship between men and women, as well as the slave involved in this particular legal case. The principal figure in the text is a woman, a slave who believed that she would be manumitted, although she was not finally emancipated. She did not even know that a notarial minute was written up for her case, and was also unaware that the document alluded to her bad character based on the masculine perception of her owner. She may not have realised that her master’s feelings towards her were what compelled him to take legal action. In this case, the woman was a passive object of the legal act, therefore, we will never know what she really felt or thought in relation to this matter, since it is the man who observed her, expressed his opinions and emotions, and acted in accordance with the rights that Islamic jurisprudence gave him. The value that a source awards to

² Ibid.

a woman's character has been analysed in this case, as well as how her behaviour became a model to be transferred from one notarial form to another and applied to similar future cases in which women were involved.

The article by Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo takes us from al-Andalus to the Maghrib, adopting a completely different social perspective – the study of the textual representation of a group of women from the elite (the Merinid dynasty of Fez, seventh/thirteenth-ninth/fifteenth centuries), according to different accounts extracted from the chronicles generated in the political scope of this lineage. Based on these texts, the author reconstructs the vision that the chronicles offer of this female group, through a rigorous analysis of the anecdotes recorded in these sources. All these accounts are extremely useful for reconstructing a global vision of the religious virtues that the chroniclers – all men – attribute to these royal women, creating a female ideal characterised by deeply religious and pious qualities, outlined in the image and likeness of “the Mothers of the Muslim believers.” The female moral values are directly projected by the historians onto the Merinid sovereigns who were related to these women during their lives, aiming to justify their moral rectitude through their example.

Antonella Ghersetti's article represents a journey to the East, specifically to the social reality of the Mamlūk kingdom of Egypt (seventh/thirteenth-tenth/sixteenth centuries), focusing her analysis on the image of its women. She chooses a very concrete topic within the countless possibilities of female representation offered in Arabic texts – the intelligence of women, according to a literary source of the sixth/twelfth century, Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 597/1200) *adab* work titled *Akhhbār al-adhkiyā'* (“Stories of smart persons”). This book includes a collection of stories about smart people, dedicating a specific chapter to the accounts related to female intelligence. These are not wise women like those recorded in some biographical dictionaries, nor are they pious or virtuous; rather, they are women endowed with practical intelligence, which Ibn al-Jawzī relates to astuteness and the ability to speculate. As in the previous cases, he offers his masculine vision of both these feminine qualities and the social and domestic fields in which they were developed. As in previous articles, the question remains implicit as to whether these textual accounts define the existence of a properly feminine intelligence or whether they correspond to a specific way for women to express their intelligence. However, doubt remains as to what these females would have said about this and other questions, how they perceived both male virtues and defects, or what they would have written if they had had the chance to do so.

Finally, Desirée López-Bernal's article also deals with the image of women in the Mamlūk kingdom, as reflected in two later *adab* works, al-Nuwayrī's

(d. 733/1333) *Nihāyat al-Arab* (“The ultimate ambition, on the arts of erudition”) and al-Ibshīhī’s (d. 850/1446) *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kullī fann al-mustazraf* (“A quest for attainment in each fine art”). Both sources also include chapters dedicated to women as a general group and to specific female figures, depicting their moral and intellectual profiles in the way in which men usually make women visible in works of this literary genre through their interaction with men.

With these five essays – most of them being the result of the Research Project of Excellence “La mujer nazarí y meriní en las sociedades Islámicas del Mediterráneo medieval (siglos XIII–XV): Poder, identidad y dinámicas sociales” (HAR2017-88117-P), NAZAMER,³ funded by both the Spanish Ministry for Economy and Competitiveness, and the Spanish State Research Agency – we have tried to contribute to the demystification of the image that masculine medieval Arabic texts offered of women, deconstructing the visions that they drew according to the historiographical strategies of each literary genre. In other words, we have aimed to build more accurate and objective female images by divesting them of their subordination to the male perspective. Even so, and despite the collective effort to assess the different cases analysed in the following pages, we will always wonder what women would have written or said about themselves.

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³ <http://nazamer.ugr.es/en/>.