CHAPTER 3

Youthful Pleasures and Repentance

If God had not mentioned the people of Lot in the Koran, I would never have thought that anyone would act thus.¹

AL-WALĪD IBN ‘ABD AL-MALIK

1 Pre-Islamic Pleasures

The first part of the chapter’s title comes from the pre-Islamic poet ‘Alqama, surnamed al-fāḥl (stallion, great), who says:

Oh, what a wonderful thing youthful pleasures are in living with riches given to a spendthrift, liberal young man!²

Affluence is necessary to enjoy youthful pleasures (ladhdhāt al-shabāb), whose privileged source for Arab men is women. ‘Alqama develops this theme in the amatory prelude (nasīb) to his bā‘yya (poem rhyming in the letter b). The key to women’s hearts is, unsurprisingly, what he has already postulated, youth and wealth:

You ask me about women? I’m a specialist, an expert, knowing women’s ailments all!
When a man’s hair turns gray, or when his wealth is scarce, he has no share of tenderness from them.
What women want is wealth, wherever they know it is; to them the bloom of youth is wonderful.³

In the first line ‘Alqama declares himself an authority on women to make his voice heard on the subject. In fact, his voice has never stopped being heard to this day; it is timeless. In the second line he warns his fellowmen of women’s pet aversion: hoary and poor men. One may think there is no need for the third line, but obviously ‘Alqama does not think so. In it he complements his diagnosis of women’s ills by affirming what makes women tick: youth and riches. These three lines are melodious and catchy in form and content. They sound more modern than Jāhilī (pre-Islamic) in that they contain no single difficult or strange word. Unlike ‘Abbāsid poetry, they are unadorned with rhetorical devices. Admirable poetry can do without such adornments. No wonder that these lines “have almost become proverbial,”4 and ‘Alqama has become identified with them. ‘Alqama’s portrayal of women took on a currency far beyond his age. Reflecting a patriarchal attitude, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (reigned 65–86/685–705) praised them, along with verses echoing them by Ayman b. Khuraym (d. ca. 700), as a true description of women.5 This is also the view of the poet-thinker Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058).6 Feminists would discern in them, however, the binary opposition male/female, reflecting a female-unfriendly attitude in a patriarchal society. It would not be an arduous task for them to show that ‘Alqama’s diagnosis would apply to the opposite sex, as well. It is said that ‘Alqama copied the following verse of Imru’ al-Qays:

I know that they [women] do not love him whose wealth is scarce, or him, crooked <with old age>, on whose head they see grey hair.7

The two poets knew each other and had a literary contest, but as to who copied whom, it remains open to debate. If ‘Alqama did, his improvement over Imru’ al-Qays can hardly be questioned. In three verses similar to ‘Alqama’s, al-Akhṭal (d. ca. 92/710) partly repeats the same view, blaming women for mocking hoary men but leaving out their desire for riches.8

Another poet, the young Ṭarafa, states his philosophy of life in terms of pleasure. Three things make all the difference between life and death: “a good swig

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4 Nicholson, A Literary History of the Arabs, p. 125