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INTRODUCTION

Marilyn Booth

In 1909, Demetra Vaka Brown (1877–1946), a Greek ethnic subject of the Ottoman Empire, published *Haremlik: Some Pages from the Life of Turkish Women*. Writing in English for a primarily North American audience, she drew cleverly on her insider/outside position to present the harem to readers who probably felt that they already knew what the word meant, even if they had little idea of its social realities for women of the empire or of how “the life of Turkish women” might have changed over time. Vaka Brown—who had lived, worked, and married in the United States—returned to her native Constantinople, now Istanbul, to visit Turkish Muslim friends and to sketch the interiors of their lives for the citizens of her new country. She started with the interior of, as she put it, the “Old Serai . . . dark and mysterious as the crimes committed within its walls.”¹ She could count on an audience: to use the word *harem* in a book title was to lure readers with an image often assumed by Western European or American observers to be characteristic of an entire society or a vast stretch of territory in the East.² That Vaka Brown was in some sense a “native informant”—someone who socially as well as physically crossed and blurred the
inner/outer divide that the word *harem* seemed to signal—enhanced her authority for readers, as she manipulated her representation of private spaces for public political, international, and domestic aims.

If Vaka Brown exploited the drawing power of the harem as an image of exoticism and mystery for her North American friends and readers, she also sought to complicate that image for her readers, contrasting it with the “hatred and scorn” she had heard Americans express toward Turkey, as they assured her that Turkish “women [were] miserable creatures.”3 The “harems” she visits in her book are often monogamous households; if they are polygynous, they are portrayed as harmonious communities of women, who may speak flawless French, enjoy the outdoors, have a cosmopolitan aesthetic sense, and confound the visitor with blunt, smart questions about Euro-American assumptions of what “freedom” and “ambition” involve. They offer, in other words, an image of the harem as a domestic scene that would be congenial and familiar—if quite possibly disappointing in its lack of exoticism—to upperclass female North American readers. For this audience, the harems in her book also offer a haven of hospitality and grace: unhurried meals, fine textiles, good company, pleasing gardens, and the time and sense to enjoy them. “I had lived so long in a civilized country,” mused Vaka Brown with canny irony, “that I had forgotten how much more civilized, in some respects, uncivilized Turkey is.”4 Her genteel construction of a few upperclass Turkish households was also pointedly deconstructive of Western Orientalist presuppositions about the harem—and, by extension, about what that institution was thought by Westerners to prove about Turkish society, and Muslim-majority societies in general.

Equally disorienting for an Anglophone reader might have been the comment of another traveler and writer, Zeyneb Hanoum (a pen name), after a visit to Britain’s Parliament. Addressing a friend in her 1913 book, *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions*, Zeyneb Hanoum exclaimed: “But, my dear, why have you never told me that the Ladies’ Gallery is a harem! A harem with its latticed windows! The harem of the Government! . . . How inconsistent are you English! You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection.”5 Zeyneb Hanoum and Vaka Brown were consciously writing against a persistent Western, and particularly masculine, eroticization of the harem that stood in for a sweeping judgment of the societies it was thought to order. As Reina Lewis vividly puts it: “For men, the harem woman trapped in a cruel polygamous sexual prison was a titil-
lating but pitiful emblem of the aberrant sexuality and despotic power that characterized all that was wrong with the non-Christian Orient.”6 The burden of representation that Vaka Brown and Zeyneb Hanoum were trying to shoulder, even as they exploited the commercial potential of the harem, led another Ottoman subject, who belonged to a slightly later generation and who became a prominent official in the early Turkish republic, to call for jettisoning the term entirely. Asked how English women could help Turkish women, Halide Edib Adivar (1884–1964) said: “Ask them to delete for ever that misunderstood word ‘harem,’ and speak of us in our Turkish ‘homes.’”7

These “counter-travel” books, whose authorship is sometimes in doubt, sought, sometimes ambiguously, to undo accumulations of Euro/American imagery that unambiguously placed “Eastern” women in an envisioned harem of Western making. Yet, the appeal of those imagined harems offered by Western travelers remained strong. European women traveling to Istanbul or Cairo sometimes expressed disappointment that the domestic reality they witnessed did not fulfill expectations raised by the armchair harems of Anglophone or Francophone travel literature and the visual imagery of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Orientalist art. Even today, these texts and images continue to shape popular views of the harem, particularly in societies that produced this art and literature but also, in some cases, among Middle Easterners. Scholars worldwide have been busy dissecting Orient-scapes and explicating them as politically loaded and romantically infused products of European and American minds, pens, and ambitions over time. Yet, in the West, images and attitudes that the discourses and images of Orientalism shaped continue to saturate assumptions about Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim, and Eastern women, and to underlie judgments about their societies. After all, in “Western” as well as “Eastern” societies, representations of women’s bodies and the spaces they should, might, or do inhabit have carried heavy symbolic burdens, often standing in for particular political agendas, representing perceived social problems, evoking justifications for war, or bearing the weight of “moral” campaigns. As we shall see, the imagined, represented, and experienced space of the harem—in its wide range of meanings and manifestations—has been one of these sites of symbolic representation available for various uses.

_Harem Histories_ offers a series of historically specific and wide-ranging examples of institutions and images that the term _harem_ has encompassed across geographical spaces and over centuries. Our emphasis is on the con-
cept/institution/image of the harem as shaped and represented within societies of the Middle East and North Africa, while we also attend to its representational and political uses by visitors to and observers of these societies. The genesis of this project was a conference organized by Professors Nasser Rabbat and Heghnar Watenpaugh at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in May 2004, on “The Harem in History and Imagination,” funded by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Some essays in this volume were written for that conference; more of them have been solicited since.8 How, we ask collectively, has the harem, and understandings of gendered space in the societies where the harem structured women’s and men’s lives, been represented within societies of which it was a historical part? How successfully can one even define the word harem? Moreover, how can a range of architectural scapes and literary-political discourses that have shaped the spatial practices of gender-specific segregation, but that have not always been explicitly known as “the harem,” be linked to this term that sometimes seems both ubiquitous and elusive? This collection of essays explores the harem as social institution, architectural framework, and representational figure both in Muslim-majority societies and in Euro/American imaginations. It considers the harem not as a static space but as a historically changing and geographically and socially variable concept which helps us to understand broader notions of gendered space in Muslim-majority cultures. The harem is just a starting point.

What do we—the contributors to this book—mean by harem? First and foremost, we suggest its variability, as we recognize its allusive power, not only in the West but also in societies where the term had institutional meanings and still has political purchase. In Egypt, for example, writing in 1987, the veteran feminist and journalist Amina al-Sa’id used the term as a metaphorical base line when she argued, in the popular monthly magazine al-Hilal, that in the difficult post-1967 political and economic circumstances of Egypt, women were paying the price for Egyptians’ perceived sense of failure. She titled her article: “Are Women Returning to the Age of the Harem?”9

If, for al-Sa’id, “harem” was a shorthand way to encapsulate the loss of “all that [women] have gained through the past sixty years of their struggle,”10 including public political rights as well as changes in family law and educational and work opportunities; if, for Vaka Brown, it was a space of female community constructed explicitly to counter dominant Euro/American notions of “harem” as a place of incarceration and sexual free-for-all; and
if, for writers and groups of people whom we shall meet in this book, it meant certain (but varying) patterns of social and familial arrangements and their spatial correlates, it is possible at least to note some specific circuits of meaning that the word connotes. The semantic field of the Arabic word *harīm* is hardly what one would expect against the backdrop of Hollywood films or European paintings of odalisques—or even Amina al-Sa‘îd’s political metaphor. İrvin Schick addresses some basic definitional origins in chapter 3 of this book. Nevertheless, and risking repetition, it is perhaps useful to offer some immediate linguistic pointers. The Arabic verbs *harama* and *harrama* mean “to deprive” and “to forbid,” but they are not specifically gendered; they have no a priori connotation of “depriving” or “forbidding” women space or movement. On the contrary, with the word *harem* women, children, and closely related men are placed within the space that is “forbidden.” The semantic field of these verbs’ associated nouns ranges from “that which is forbidden” or “that which is illegal” (*harām*) to a female spouse or a sacred enclave (*haram*). The mosque precinct in Mecca is “the noble Sanctuary” (*al-haram al-sharīf*), while Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities of Islam, are “the two harams.” Colloquially, *baraam ‘alayk* means “shame on you!” (literally, “it is forbidden to you”), while *hariimi*, in its contemporary and utterly secular sense, is an adjective referring to women’s items, such as women’s clothing. Harīm can refer both to an inviolable space that women and only close male relatives can enter, and to woman or wife (in the singular or plural). As an institution, the concept denotes a certain arrangement of domestic space that has been common to a wide variety of Islamicate societies across many centuries. It is not limited to any single architectural or class-defined elaboration of that concept—for example, the imperial harem which is so often gestured to in European paintings. To insist on the latter would be to retain a stereotypical and narrow idea of the harem, a notion that this book challenges.

Persistent representations of the harem have tended to highlight particular and spectacular applications while passing over the more mundane and socially variable phenomena to which the term has been attached. In the very recent past, Euro/American dictionary definitions, or thesaurus groupings, of the word *harem*, as Judy Mabro notes, had little to do with the meanings of the Arabic term; rather, they house *harem* with *impurity* or *love-nest*—synonymous meanings only within an ahistorical lexicon of Anglophone usage.11

That the focus of Euro/American scholarship on the harem has been
on Euro/American representations of it is understandable. Pre-twentieth-century Western travel writings about the region, which helped to crystallize popular notions of the harem, are perennially popular texts for analysis by scholars and in college courses focused on cultural encounter. The visual impact of European art, known to so many of us through art history courses and museum tours, has left its mark on many an imagination. Yet, as Mohja Kahf reminds us, the harem as an almost ubiquitous element in Western representations of the Oriental Other was not part of Europe’s earliest representations of this particular Orient, but rather emerged some time after the European medieval period, and after Europeans had already become aware of, and were representing, Arab and Muslim-majority societies to themselves. And in Enlightenment Europe, the harem became a resonant image of political authoritarianism—the opposite of the reign of individual rights that Enlightenment thinkers argued ought to undergird legitimate political sovereignty. The harem took on a representational life of its own within the political debates and social tensions of Western societies in transition.

This volume includes essays that focus on European culture as a repository of harem representations. A larger number of chapters, though, tackle indigenous representations of home spaces and their significance for how men and women, girls and boys, were bodily distributed in social space, from early Islamic Mecca to early-twentieth-century Cairo. Some chapters also address the awareness of Arab and Turkish intellectuals of what observers from the West saw—or what they thought they saw, or understood—when they gazed at the walls of a house in, say, Cairo, Istanbul, or Tunis. Thus, one theme that threads through these essays is the intimate interrelatedness of “West” and “East” through encounters within and around the harem, whether in the elite sociabilities of precolonial Tunis or in historical novels published in Istanbul and Cairo from the late nineteenth century on, and popular among a rapidly broadening readership as literacy became more common. One has only to read the Arabic press of late-nineteenth-century Cairo, for instance, to find high degrees of awareness and sensitivity among the literate urban populace about how they were seen in the metropolises of Europe and North America. Arab, Turkish, and Persian writers of fiction and essays looked to the West (generalized as al-Gharb, in Arabic) for literary models and ideas about social organization, but at the same time, they criticized the filters through which their own societies were represented, and they asserted their own representational

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abilities. They also recognized how complicated and truly transcultural are human disseminations of cultural artifacts—how circuitous are the paths down which images travel. In her biography and critical study of the Egyptian poet 'Aïsha Taymur (1840–1902), the Lebanese writer Mayy Ziyada (1886–1941) noted that she had read with pleasure the serialized 1901 Arabic version of a novel allegedly written in English by a Turkish woman, Layla Hanım—whose father, Khalil Pasha Sharif, had been a minister of the Ottoman Empire. “I have absolutely no doubt,” said Ziyada of this novel, “that it describes the ‘harim’ of Istanbul in those days more truthfully than everything written by the Europeans on this subject.”

When discussing the harem, a key concept (and methodological underpinning) to consider is that of spatial thinking. Thinking about space not as passive or neutral or natural in its familiar contours, but rather as humanly formed and as a powerful shaper of human identities and understandings, has led scholars to consider how people in groups organize themselves physically and formatively around gender. The formulations of Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Soja, and others have emphasized the relationships between humans’ constructed spaces and lived experiences, along with the significance of intimate embodiments—how people have lived and used their bodies—and the way we think about and construct the spaces in which we live and move. The pioneering work of Shirley Ardener, Dolores Hayden, and Doreen Massey energized feminist scholars to consider not only how built environments have corresponded to existing social assumptions about certain spaces as specific to females or males and the genders’ appropriate roles, but also how architecture itself fixes and sustains these understandings and practices over time—in other words, how the construction of spaces helps to form gender identities. Daphne Spain, for example, suggests that segregated spaces in the home, in educational institutions, and throughout work sites—as well as the geographical distancing of “female” from “male” space—have been significant as they have distanced women from valued nodes of knowledge that underwrite social hierarchies.

These scholars’ work also makes it clear that segregated gendered spaces have not been the exclusive property of Muslim-majority societies—a point that Leila Ahmed drives home in her memoir of growing up in Egypt and moving to England for her university education. Newly ensconced at the University of Cambridge, she wondered whether all-female Girton College was not “the harem perfected,” with the positive associations of camaraderie.
in a female community that the term carried for her. Ahmed’s metaphorlic use of “harem” echoes that of some European women, travelers following in the energetic footsteps of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), who traveled to Istanbul and wrote about it for audiences back in England in her celebrated and posthumously published *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763). Elite women such as Montagu and other travelers lived at the beginning of the transition to an industrialist capitalist economy that separated home from workplace and loudly proclaimed the home as the proper space for women. If some European male commentators thought that their female compatriots ought to be thankful that they did not live within the physical constraints of elite Muslim homes (as these male travelers represented them), some of their female peers (Montagu, for instance, and later Vaka Brown) saw aspects to value in the female-run spaces of domestic life in the Arab or Turkish city. Montagu felt that veiled and supposedly secluded Turkish women had more freedom—in the anonymity she saw as guaranteed by the “portable harems” of their all-enveloping street clothes—than did most European women of her day. These traveling and writing women may also have realized that referencing the harem could silence criticism of ways by which European or American women were spatially (and otherwise) constrained.

Today, issues of space and the body remain central, even critical, across Muslim-majority societies and Muslim communities, and one can trace these issues historically back to the concept and practice of the harem in its many, many variations. Likewise, spatial and bodily imagery remain central to the politics of East-West encounter. Among Muslims, some contemporary interpretations of how Islam should be lived emphasize the need to reestablish gender-defined spatial boundaries, whether by encouraging women to stay home or by asserting the importance of covering and hiding the female body. (This is not to deny that women have many reasons to wear the *hijab*, and that in most Muslim communities they have choices about whether to do so. Nor is it to deny that issues of domesticity and dress are also important elsewhere and in other faith communities—for example, among some communities in the United States.) Today’s republication of medieval treatises and *fatwas* (juridical opinions on issues of daily life) in glossy yet highly affordable editions sold on the street throughout the Arab world focus noticeably on women’s comportment and their spatial disposition, as do contemporary biographies of famous women that explicitly position women in the home as earlier biographies did not.
roccan scholar and activist Fatima Mernissi sees this phenomenon as a response to a collective identity crisis: “Muslims in search of identity put the accent on the confinement of women as a solution for a pressing crisis. Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West.”

Ironically, among Western non-Muslims, this “accent” risks resurrecting the old stereotype of Muslim women as synonymous with the harem—even if the dominant Western stereotype of the harem produces images of “undress” more than it does that of the covered body, as Joan DelPlato shows in her chapter.

English-language writings on the harem have tended to fall into three categories. First are memoiristic evocations, personal meditations, and travelogues. These include recent republications of earlier works such as those of Vaka Brown, Zeyneb Hanoum, and others, which gave readers and travelers an allegedly indigenous view of harem culture, although some authorship has been challenged. Second are discussions of the harem as a trope in European and American cultures, as represented in these societies’ visual arts and literature (including travelogues), often as part of a larger study of aspects of Orientalism (in the sense of collective representations developed in the West of North African and Asian populations as essentially different and inferior, as outlined particularly by Edward Said and further developed by many other scholars). The third group consists of historical treatments of the harem as a set of institutions in particular historical contexts or theorizations of the harem within institutional and discursive parameters defined by Islam and Muslim-majority societies, which focus on the languages, archives, and specific histories of the Middle East (while also sometimes considering, as do works in the first group, the fantasies that the harem has evoked in Orientalist discourses).

This volume builds on the insights and archival work of these and other scholarly publications. But we hope to undo, or at least to question, what appears to be a division of representational labor that has marked most literature on the harem. Studies focused on Islamicate societies (the third group above) have understandably tended to focus on the harem as a historically documentable institution. Those focused on artistic and literary representations—the harem as image—have generally emphasized Orientalist texts (including visual arts and film) that “look in on” the region. This volume, however, emphasizes representations of gendered space and the harem (and gendered space as the harem) produced in and by the societies.
of which they are a part—while questioning exactly what in and by might mean, in times and places already constituted by perpetual cultural motion. The temporal and geographical focus of the essays includes the early Arab Islamic heartland, the medieval Islamic Empire, the middle and late Ottoman Empire, and modern Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia—as well as nineteenth-century Europe.

Thus, this volume focuses also on the harem as metaphor—and often as a hovering, implicit institution that signified women’s relations to domestic and public space even when the harem itself as an identifiable part of a household with identifiable inhabitants was not, not yet, or no longer operative (as in Amina al-Sa’id’s use of the term in the late twentieth century). Moving from representations of the earliest Islamic society to discourses about early-twentieth-century Egyptian urban space and to late Ottoman photography, the scholars here explore aspects of interrelations between built environments, bodies, and social organization and process.

The book is divided into thematic sections that are also more or less chronological. The first section, “Normative Images and Shifting Spaces,” considers gendered space in Islamic contexts through the lenses of normative representations and their shifts through time. In chapter 1, “Early Women Exemplars and the Construction of Gendered Space,” we begin with the examination of how notions of women’s relations to domestic and public space changed over discrete historical moments, as Asma Afsaruddin examines the representation of the lives of women of the Prophet Muhammad’s time who were his associates and became models for women’s interactions with and in diverse social spaces. She compares biographical treatments of their lives in different periods for what these life-story constructions “tell us about changing conceptions of women’s moral excellence and their public roles in Muslim societies through the late medieval period,” reading them in conjunction with conduct manuals of the same eras that spelled out normative behavior for women. Her tracings of these women’s portrayals show not only the contingency and historical variation entailed in women’s access to public space but also remind us that early Muslim women were community leaders and warriors—an image far from that of the female secluded in the harem, but also one that was muted in later biographical dictionaries concurrent with conduct manuals that emphasized the merit of staying home. (As noted earlier, some of these very same conduct books have been republished in the present and are sold at newsstands to women and men in Cairo and elsewhere in the Arab-speaking world.)
Yet, as Yaseen Noorani reminds us in chapter 2, “Normative Notions of Public and Private in Early Islamic Culture,” “public” and “private” are themselves categories that one must subject to historically rigorous scrutiny, thinking through the issue of how people divide up their social lives, and what sorts of value they give to these divisions, and furthermore how concepts of the self govern the relationships of bodies to space. Noorani draws upon Jurgen Habermas’s explication of the emergence of the public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe from concepts of the family as the space of “psychological interiority” par excellence, contrasting these understandings of public and private with a very different notion of personhood and household and social space evident in early Islamic literary texts. With their shifting deployments of the Arabic word *harīm* (harem), and the absence of fixed sites specific to discrete social realms and normative statuses, these texts offer a very different model of sociospatial organization than that organized around a public/private distinction. And Noorani reminds us, importantly, that the harim has not been uniformly coterminous with “women’s realm” in Arab-Muslim histories or in the literary imaginaries that have subtended them. As we focus on the relations of gendered subjecthood to home spaces that our other contributors map out, Noorani’s work obliges us to work against the residue of assumptions about the harem that we may yet bring to our reading.

Ending this section, Irvin Schick’s chapter, “The Harem as Gendered Space and the Spatial Reproduction of Gender,” moves away from historical settings to set out some crucial concepts that resonate through Afsaruddin’s and Noorani’s work as well as through later chapters. Getting us to think about the origins of the term *harem*, as I briefly described them here, Schick conceptualizes the harem as a set of sites crucial to gender construction. Citing a wide range of theorists, and drawing particularly on the work of geographers and others who study the social construction of space, he asks us to scrutinize all of the chapters in this volume for the political implications of a spatial-social practice that separates bodies according to gender, age, and kin relationships, where that separation both illustrates and enables differential social and economic power.

The second cluster of chapters, “Rooms and Thresholds: Harems as Spaces, Socialities, and Law,” takes up the analysis of historical spaces and legal discourses. These chapters also incorporate issues of representation and normativity; however, the book’s divisions are to some extent artificial, as all chapters range across methodologies, source material, and focuses. It
is impossible to study the “lived harem” without attending to the ways it has been represented, whether in Orientalist painting, European travelers’ memoirs, Arabic novels, or juridical texts, just as it is crucial to be historically specific. Nadia Maria El Cheikh reiterates this in chapter 4, on lived spaces in Abbasid Baghdad, where she discusses both the harem of Caliph al-Muqtadir (908–932) and the dwellings of urban families, using images culled from chronicles and belletristic collections. In both cases, the multiplicity of spaces recognizable as the harem requires us to take women’s exercise of power into account and to see that seclusion was often partial, multivalent, or interrupted. Moreover, the caliphal harem was an enormously complex, polygynous institution, but the urban elite home was not. There, monogamy was more often the norm. The harem emerges not as monolithic but rather as a range of spaces that are anything but impermeable, fixed, or indistinguishable one from the other.

In chapter 5, “Domesticating Sexuality: Harem Culture in Ottoman Imperial Law,” Leslie Peirce considers shifts in Ottoman culture during the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth, investigating what they say about changing notions of social space and the disposition of gendered bodies. Peirce examines the Kanunname-i Osmanî—the imperial Ottoman book of laws—that successive sultans shaped, as a central codification of normative practice. She asks what edicts about sexual disorder meant for the organization of the household, and how the laws changed over time. Her subtle analysis, which builds on her earlier work on the Ottoman royal harem, scrutinizes criminal statutes and laws about illicit sexual acts for what they tell us about the changing normative status of domestic space as inhabited by a range of ages, statuses, and genders—what she calls “a reading of domestic life from the ground up as viewed from the top down.”

Also imagining domestic space as envisioned from the imperial center, in chapter 6 Jateen Lad takes us into the social space of the Ottoman royal household, in an essay and photographs that focus on the eunuch as a liminal figure, a threshold marker whose ability to traverse the spaces of the harem actually highlights the boundaries that divide those spaces from one another. Lad emphasizes that the imperial Ottoman harem was not a space but rather a complex sequence of spaces, whereby spatial arrangements themselves might have a disciplinary effect upon the inhabitants. The eunuchs, powerful and revered, were “crucial mediators” and “formidable barriers,” and their own situation was simultaneously powerful and abject.

With Julia Clancy-Smith’s mid-nineteenth-century Tunisian panorama
(chapter 7), we turn away from Istanbul’s projection of enclosure and imperial power and toward the creole intersections of North Africa before the time of the European colonies. In “Where Elites Meet: Harem Visits, Sea Bathing, and Sociabilities in Precolonial Tunisia,” Clancy-Smith argues that Europeans who resided in and around Tunis partook of the spatial articulations of the ruling system in seeking to implant themselves residentially near the summer palace of the bey, inserting their own social circles into the social life of the local elite, including gendered sociability around sea bathing. Women, both European and Tunisian, were critical to diplomacy as they became part of each other’s social worlds. Familiar North African practices that combined socializing and hygienic concerns—and the gendering of space—met the new European interest in traveling for health-related tourism, notably the restorative effects of hot springs. Thus, concerning nineteenth-century Tunis, to see the harem as a space separated off from public life, or as emblematic of an us-them divide, is to not see it at all.

In chapter 8, Heghnar Watenpaugh, scrutinizing the urban space of nineteenth-century Syria as reconstructed by Aleppines in the late twentieth century, finds a nostalgic production of spaces through a focus on the old courtyard house, not only as the scene of contemporary restaurants and the inspiration for the interior arrangement of residential apartments, but as pervading the contemporary rewriting of earlier lives. In particular, she analyzes recent biographies of the writer and salon founder Mariyana Mar-rash (1848–1919), finding a spatial correlate to those biographies that seems to substitute the home and the duties of hostess for the body, mind, and intellectual productions of this Arab female intellectual. As a nineteenth-century Arab female author becomes the focus for the production of a certain kind of gendered nostalgic discourse that centers on the woman/home equation, the woman herself is occluded. Watenpaugh offers us an instance of how this figure of woman in domestic space can serve political agendas, broadly defined, in the present.

The final group of essays, “Harems Envisioned,” analyzes the harem as a set of literary and artistic representations. In chapter 9, “Harem/House/Set,” Nancy Micklewright walks us through a series of photographs of Ottoman interiors that both continue and question the conventions of European Orientalist painting. Photographers supplied their European tourist customers in Istanbul with studio versions of the imagined harem as constructed in European art and travel literature, set pieces that allowed
them to momentarily enter the harem, albeit a harem that existed mostly in the European imagination. Meanwhile, as Ottoman subjects sought photographic representation of their homes and lives, the results offered cosmopolitan interiors that belied the consistent material markers of the imagined European harem, corresponding more to Demetra Vaka Brown’s interested portrayals of elite Ottoman households as blurring East-West boundaries (however artificial those boundaries already were). In chapter 10, “Dress and Undress,” Joan DelPlato turns our attention from the sets to the clothed and nude bodies in European paintings of the harem, linking these images to the imperial politics and trade flows that bound western Europe to the Ottoman Empire, as well as showing how images of the harem reverberated against domestic issues of gendered space and gender politics. The erotics of the represented female harem inhabitant, in artworks by Ingres, Maurin, Lewis, and Lane—which DelPlato analyzes against the art-critical commentary and popular travel writing of each artist’s milieu—are put into play by the images’ suggestive maneuvers with clothing, whether worn or discarded. The details of each representation persuade the viewer to accept the claim that these European gazes into the harem are authentic.

The following three chapters concern fictional representations of the harem as a site that engaged the contemporary political worlds of writers and readers. With Orit Bashkin’s analysis of nineteenth-century Arabic historical novels in chapter 11, we turn (again) to indigenous representations of domestic space. Yet here we find a parallel to the case of Ottoman photography: when Concubine J asserts her agency in a historical novel by the prolific Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), a Syrian writer and journalist in Egypt, the border between indigenous and outsider is not fixed but rather becomes increasingly ambiguous. Zaydan draws on and yet simultaneously seems to critically mimic Orientalist notions of the harem and “Oriental despotism” in order to intervene in the debates of his era concerning gender rights and the shifting alignments of gender and lived space in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Bashkin argues that whether Zaydan is taking the stuff of his fictions from medieval Baghdad or contemporary Istanbul, his representations of women in or of the harem (from the sultan’s mother to the racialized portrayals of slaves, from Concubine J to her friend, the modern, book-toting Shirin) allegorize political tyranny through the constraints of the gender-segregated household and family structure. It’s interesting that Zaydan is
writing at precisely the time, the 1890s, when (according to Reina Lewis) Anglophone “harem literature” is at its peak. If this audience was not Zaydan’s primary concern, it is likely that a cosmopolitan intellectual of his sort, who drew much of the material for his Arabic journal al-Hilal (the crescent) from European sources, was aware of the transnational—but not consistent—symbolic resonance of the harem. (And how fitting it is, then, that it was in this very magazine, nearly a hundred years later, that Amina al-Sa’id used her metaphoric harem as a critical counterpoint to what she saw as gained but threatened by women’s rights.)

It may be that it was only in a period when the seclusion of women was beginning to fade—or at least to seem likely to fade in the near future—that writers such as Zaydan (and there were others) could consciously use the harem as a pivotal, questioned space in a changing social landscape. Considering the contemporaneous novels of the Turkish intellectual Ahmet Midhat Efendi, in chapter 12, A. Holly Shissler finds the spaces of domestic life, and the harem as a principle of social organization (as Shissler puts it, “the removal of women from the world and their placement under male protection”) to be a central and positive value in these fictions, an institution that “protect[s] the deepest structure of the family from market forces.” The middle-class harem—a space very different from that of, say, the imperial palace—is a place where private virtue is learned and practiced, and where morality inheres in individual choices and complementary gendered roles, all to the benefit (the novels argue) of the larger society.

These male reformers, earnestly supporting certain kinds of choices and new types of education for young women—and young men—do not offer the kinds of transgressive thinking about harem spaces that we can find in certain Anglophone memoirs and other texts by women writing around the beginning of the twentieth century—unusual texts that bespeak a bold imaginary yet a lonely path beyond, more than within, the writer’s own society, and that (as noted) construct a readership that is not necessarily indigenous. Consider the shape-shifting Melek Hanım (aka Marie de Jean, 1814–73), whose 1872 Thirty Years in the Harem, published in the United States, actually features travel across vast swathes of land more than it does home spaces. The author shows Ottoman women gazing out their latticed windows at men, a prelude to direct communication; girls and women wandering around outside on Ramadan nights; and Ottoman princesses donning European clothes and slipping out of the palace, showing that they were able to use the harem visits of European women to their own ends.
by masquerading as those women. And Melek Hanım’s strongest representation of seclusion comes when she is sent to her mother-in-law’s home in Rome. Meanwhile, she shows how gender hierarchies are modulated by other hierarchies: the commoner husbands of Ottoman princesses are little more than prisoners of their wives, and the Ottoman sultan is confined to his palace and denied access to politically important information. The text challenges the whole idea of what some Western scholars have labeled homogeneously as Muslim spaces—as do Zaydan’s novels, though in a very different way. Or, moving from Ottoman Turkey to India under British rule, consider the feminine utopian fantasy of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, written in English rather than in the Bengali of her controversial essays “The Secluded Ones.” In Sultana’s Dream, men are locked into the harem, and a fine satire on nationalist rhetoric has the queen asking the men to enter the zenana (harem) “for the sake of honor and liberty.” The men are shown as disciplined into confinement: the power of custom obviates the need for policed boundaries. This is a discipline that Fatima Mernissi, born in 1936, will emphasize, nearly a century later, as she speaks in her memoiristic novel Dreams of Trespass of the socialization of girls into learning “invisible” boundaries: childhood is a series of boundaries, but boundaries also create frontiers. In both texts, women’s communities are sustaining, the harem offers refuge to women dealing with conflict in their lives, and the intimate rooms above the grand salon inhabited by men offer spaces for creativity. Aunt Habiba’s storytelling voice “opens up magic glass doors, leading to moonlit meadows”—even if the motif of dreaming suggests limitations on action. And in the homes that the young girl inhabits, the social organization of the patrilineal and patriarchal extended family is institutionalized architecturally. Yet the younger generation of men has inherited the principles that Ahmet Midhat Efendi (and his Arab counterparts of the late nineteenth century) propagated in their fiction and other polemics: for Mernissi’s father and uncle, monogamy and a preference for nuclear family space are central to a nationalist outlook.

My chapter, like Shissler’s, investigates fictional representations of prostitution, moving into the early twentieth century and south to Cairo. In the city after the First World War, as represented in the texts I analyze, “houses” (brothels), the moral opposite of the harem, actually afford young women more protection than do the cloistered spaces of home. Echoing Melek Hanım, for these young women, traversing open space is a way to save oneself. For these characters, dreams become nightmares. In “Between
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Harem and Houseboat,” I consider prostitution as a textual unveiling of what has gone wrong with the process of becoming modern, in the view of those elites who were producing (and reading) early Ottoman and Arabic fiction. What I call ventriloquized memoirs — where the female and/or subaltern narrator is presented as a memoirist and yet textual clues suggest that this narrator is not the author/authority producing the text — are linked, I argue, to a broadening cultural scene in 1920s Egypt, as more voices joined in a reformist and nationalist discursive ferment. Historicizing these texts against a campaign to end legalized prostitution, I see them as exposing the fiction of protection as represented by the paternal home’s secluded and supposedly feminine space, to suggest the failure of the state and of nationalist reformist activism to provide a feasible space and future for young, educated middle-class and elite girls.

In public discourse today, at least in North America, efforts to educate citizens about the histories, multiplicities, and expressive arts of Muslim-majority societies seem constantly undermined by prejudiced, prepackaged, narrow notions of what Islam is. These bundled sets of images, sound bites, and words — jihad, Mecca, harem — have been reshaped into narrower and nonreligious meanings as they have joined the Anglophone lexicon through time, and they often find the starkest and most shorthand representations in gendered images. If the harem no longer saturates public discourse in the West as it once did, its imagined walls hover behind other symbols that carry similar valence for Western audiences. Where once the harem stood in for “Oriental despotism” and Muslim or “Eastern” women’s alleged powerlessness, now the veil has become a sign of abjection and silence: as Asma Afsaruddin has put it, “female coveredness has often impressionistically served as a barometer for gauging female subjection”; and yet many women have adopted the veil partly because it allows them to respectably assert a stronger public presence, whether in the workforce or through political action. The veil — in its myriad forms, a variety not always recognized in North American discourse — comes to stand for an opacity of understanding that precludes communications between those of different cultural origins, just as it (and the harem) stood for mystery and inaccessibility in the accounts of nineteenth-century travel writers. From Lord Cromer to President George W. Bush, Western male leaders have used “saving the (other) women” as gestures — perhaps sincerely meant — that are also justifications buttressing political and military encroachments across boundaries. And both veil and harem contain within their symbolic
reach the notions of “stripping off” and “penetrating”: envisioned acts that encompass connotations of sexual mastery, violent transgression, and colonial triumph, in the face of long-standing stereotypical notions that veil and harem evoke, of passivity, silence, incarceration, and sensuality. If these are symbols that obscure the varieties of lived experience, we need also to consider them as aspects of experience, but ones that did not work in ways that observers and commentators expected or even “saw.”

Thus, if the harem is popularly understood in Europe and North America as a thing of the past, old representations of it, with accumulations of newer and equally gendered images, continue to shadow how the region as a whole is imagined. To take on the ideologically fraught and symbolically loaded word harem is to consider the ways in which this institution, with its dynamic histories and myriad manifestations across a range of societies, is fixed in popular imaginations, as well as to confront how understandings of sexual and gender identities shape and represent whole culture areas to each other. The harem as concept and institution reminds us that these representations, within and across cultural areas, are always located in social space and historical time. Taken together, the essays in this volume suggest that the harem is not—in any way, shape, or form—a static concept or an immediately recognizable, repeatable space. It is a varying institutional practice that has shaped the lives of many, and it remains a productive locus for thinking about how gender matters in the ways that human beings make, use, and represent the spaces in which we live out our lives—and think about the lives and spaces of others.

NOTES

Throughout this volume, we transliterate Ottoman Turkish terms according to contemporary Turkish norms. For Arabic, we use the simplest possible system, marking only ‘ayn and internal hamza, except in the case of harīm and occasionally other words for clarity. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
1 Vaka Brown, Haremlik, 2.
2 On the marketing potential of the word harem in English-language publications of this period, see Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism, chap. 1.
3 Vaka Brown, Haremlik, 13.
4 Ibid., 15.
5 Zeyneb Hanoum, A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions, 194.
6 Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism, 13.
7 Quoted in ibid., 45.
I am grateful to the organizers for their enthusiastic help as I assumed responsibility for this project, and I am also indebted to Nasser Rabbat for some felicitous turns of phrase in this introduction, inspired by his introduction at the conference.

Al-Sa'id, "Hal tā'udu al-mar'a ila 'asr al-harim?"

Ibid., 30.

Mabro, Veiled Half-Truths, 7.

Kahf, Western Representations of the Muslim Woman.

Ziyada, A'isha al-Taymur, 98.

Bachelard, The Poetics of Space; Lefebvre, The Production of Space; Tuan, Space and Place; Soja, Postmodern Geographies and Thirdspace.

Ardener, Women and Space; Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution and Redesigning the American Dream; Massey, Spatial Divisions of Labor, Space, Place, and Gender, and For Space; Spain, Gendered Spaces.

Ahmed, A Border Passage, 181.

See Booth, May Her Likes Be Multiplied, chap. 8; Booth, "John Stuart Mill . . . Islamist?"; Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite.

Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite, 99.

See, for example, Shaarawi, Harem Years; Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass.

See also a collection of excerpts from these sources: Lewis and Micklewright, Gender, Modernity and Liberty. For a review of this series, see Booth, "Armchair Harems."

Malek Alloula’s early and influential work remains important and has been joined by many more-recent studies. See Alloula, The Colonial Harem; DelPlato, Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures; Graham-Brown, Images of Women; Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism; Melman, Women’s Orient; Yeazell, Harems of the Mind.

See Lal, Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World; Peirce, The Imperial Harem and Morality Tales.

See Göle, The Forbidden Modern; Schick, The Erotic Margin; Yeğenoğlu, Colonial Fantasies.

Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism, 14.

Melek Hanım, Thirty Years in the Harem, 12–13, 25, 28–29, 20–21, 182, 41.

See for example Spain, Gendered Spaces, chap. 2. Spain’s move from specific anthropological examples and geographical sites to general commentary on “Islamic purdah” is very problematic, especially with her use of the “timeless” present tense and her tendency to slip among categories such as Muslim, Arab, and Indian, while failing to define what she means by “Islamic nations” (51).

Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass, chap. 1.

Ibid., 19.

Ibid., 35.

The harem cannot be understood apart from its historical specificity. Although Western observers have decontextualized and fetishized the harem, using misconceptions of it for their own ends, it is not only the Orientalist tradition that is guilty in this connection. Arab critics have also argued that the Arab cultural heritage has been projected as something absolutely exemplary, timeless, and outside history. Abdallah Laroui has pointed to the exaggerated medievalization obtained through quasi-magical identification with the zenith of classical Arabian culture. According to him, the true alienation is this loss of self in the absolutes of language, culture, and the saga of the past, the absolute truths of the medieval world: as he describes it, the language of al-Jahiz, the scholasticism of al-Ash’ari, the mysticism of al-Ghazali. Mohammed Arkoun similarly asserts that “all of the contemporary discourse emerging in Islamic contexts inevitably refers to the emerging period of Islam, and the ‘Golden Age’ of its civilization used as mythological references to reactivate ‘values’—ethical and legal paradigms.” Such identification produces what becomes received knowledge. In this
context, Arkoun has consequently argued that Arab scholars have the responsibility to “create methodological and epistemological options in order to conquer new territory not only to explore new fields of meaning, but primarily, to initiate new levels of understanding of many inherited issues that remain unexamined.” In this chapter, I examine such an “inherited” issue by exploring Abbasid harems in Baghdad during the fourth/tenth century using a variety of well-known historical and literary texts. Surveying sources for relevant references to harems, I set these up in opposition to the atemporal fantasy, promoted by both Arab “Medievalism” and Western Orientalism, which continues to obscure our historical understanding.

This chapter thus challenges both the static, timeless nature of prevailing images of the harem and the tendency in Orientalist literature to refer to “harem” in the singular—as if there were simply one type of harem. I contend instead that there were a variety of living arrangements for women in Islamic households in the Abbasid period. To steer away from conventions and clichés, I undertake a more detailed investigation of harems at a particular historical moment. I discuss the harem of Caliph al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32), analyzing its structure as well as the social, economic, and political power that a number of harem women were able to exercise. The narratives pertaining to the caliph’s reign are particularly useful for such an investigation since the power struggle among the various factions at the court allowed the caliph’s mother, along with a number of harem women, to wield political power and influence.

While the model of the complex, polygamous harem complete with multiple wives, concubines, and eunuchs applies to the caliphal harem, it was far removed from most people’s lived experiences. Thus, the second part of this chapter discusses household harems. The two adab anthologies of al-Tanukhi (940–94), Kitab al-Faraj ba’da al-shidda and Nishwar al-muhadara wa akhbar al-mudhakara, are particularly valuable as they contain material pertaining to the social history of this period. Although distinct in intention and content, both belong to a literary genre within adab that was quite popular in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries—namely, compilations of edifying and entertaining anecdotes. Adab has been defined as including the best of what had been said in the form of verse, prose, aphorism, and anecdotes on every conceivable subject which an educated man, an adib, is supposed to know. Adab also purports to deal with a wide range of problems in language, literature, and ethical and practical behavior. Such books of anecdotal narratives convey not only historical information but also social values and the art of social conduct.
THE HAREMS: SOME DEFINITIONS

Critics of Orientalism see the harem as a fictional notion, and they point to the inability to establish any kind of truth about “reality” in the harem. One such critic makes the distinction between “real” harems and the harem of European literature, which “is nothing but fantasm, a purely fictional construction onto which Europe’s own sexual repressions, erotic fantasies and desire of domination were projected.” Fatima Mernissi has similarly differentiated between the historical reality of “her” harem—the one in which she grew up—and the Western harem, which gets its vitality from images created by Western paintings, operas, and ballets, all of which depict the harem as a sexual paradise populated by naked, vulnerable creatures, perfectly happy in their captivity.

The Encyclopedia of Islam defines *harīm* as a “term applied to those parts of the household to which access is forbidden, and hence more particularly the women’s quarters.” Nikki Keddie distinguishes between polygamous elite households with slaves and servants and non-elite households that were most probably monogamous and had no slaves or concubines. In the former, activities of the harem were more complex, but it was not “the den of idleness and voluptuousness depicted from their imaginations by Western painters.” Leila Ahmed has defined the harem both as “a system that permits males sexual access to more than one female” and as “a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, and daughters—share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community.” In her introduction to the memoirs of Huda Sha’rawi, a leading Egyptian feminist of the early twentieth century, Margot Badran states that the harem was the part of the house where women and children conducted their daily lives. Upper- and middle-class women lived within the private enclosures of their domestic quarters and veiled their faces when they went out, taking their seclusion with them. Such definitions suggest variety across social space and time, but also a shared core of meaning.

The separation of domestic space into the public quarters and the private family space of the harem does not have an overtly sexual connotation. Recent research on domestic space in Muslim community contexts has generally challenged the notion of rigidly demarcated territories, showing that the private and public spheres shared many points of contact in varying historical circumstances. According to Leslie Peirce, while the institution of the harem derived from notions of sexual propriety, “sexuality was
not the dominant ordering principle within the household.”14 Reina Lewis has characterized “the segregated domains of Ottoman women as spaces of political agency and cultural production.”15 In her study on the Safavid period, Kathryn Babayan has similarly concluded that the harem enjoyed different layers of meaning within contexts that provided functions and channels for women to exercise political, religious, and social roles.16 Rather than excluding women from the outside world, the harem created a central role for them in the dissemination of information.17 Emily Apter has defined the harem as a place where women gather and speak to each other. She has highlighted the ambivalence of harems as spaces that can protect and nurture women as well as imprison them.18

Hugh Kennedy has pointed out that the term harīm is seldom used in Abbasid sources. The texts refer to the caliph’s huram—his women and others under his control. (Huram comes from the same root as harīm.) Thus, the reference is to a group of people rather than to a physical location such as a particular building.19 Al-Maṣʿudi (d. 345/956), for instance, talks about dar al-huram and does not use the term harīm to refer spatially to the women’s quarters.20 Al-Tanukhi’s Nishwar al-Muhadara mentions the women’s quarters in an anecdote involving Ibn al-Jassass. He had been imprisoned in the caliphal palace. A eunuch accompanied him through various areas of the palace, guiding him to the caliph’s mother’s quarters (dar al-Sayyida), so that she could be the one to release him, as she was the one who interceded on his behalf.21 Moreover, when al-Muqtadir decided to have the vizier Ibn al-Furat imprisoned, the vizier’s palace was pillaged. The sources refer to the private areas of Ibn al-Furat’s palace by using the term dur (plural of dar): Al-Saʿīdī (d. 448/1056) talks about the dwellings of his children and wives (dur awladihi wa ahlihi); Arib (d. ca. 370/980) also refers to the dur; and Miskawayh states that his huram were disgraced and his dwellings (durahu) pillaged.22 Other references which occur in Nishwar similarly refer to the women’s quarters as dur al-huram.23 Thus, in contemporary and near-contemporary sources, the term harīm generally does not seem to have been used to specifically express women’s spatial location within a house, but rather to refer to a specific group of people.

**THE HAREM OF AL-MUQTADIR**

The death of the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafi in 295/908 led to a crisis, since he had made no provisions for the succession. Jaʿfar [al-Muqtadir], the thirteen-year-old brother of al-Muktafi, was proclaimed caliph despite ob-
jections raised on account of his age. His caliphate, a period of unstable government, started out with the appointment of a sort of regency council composed of Shaghab, his mother; Gharib, his maternal uncle; Mu‘nis, the treasurer; General Mu‘nis al-Muzaffar, leader of the Baghdad troops; Safi, the chief eunuch; and Sawsan, the chamberlain. This situation allowed members of the administration, servants in the palace, viziers, and women in the caliphal harem to negotiate the realities of political power among themselves. Although al-Muqtadir’s caliphate differed from some others in having this regency council and thus may have allowed a greater degree of negotiation than was the case in other caliphal households, the composition of his household was probably similar to those of other caliphs.

In the early fourth/tenth century, the dar al-khilafa, or caliph’s residence, was a large complex made up of a number of palaces. The configuration of these palaces as well as their internal organization remains unknown. Not only is the archaeological information insufficient, but so is the textual information, according to the noted art historian Oleg Grabar, for “nowhere do we read a description that can be translated into architectural forms.”

We do know that the dar al-khilafa functioned simultaneously as a stage set for the representation of caliphal power, as the administrative center of a vast empire, and as a residence for the caliphal family. Prominent women had their own apartments within this complex, and it is probably at this time that a separate women’s quarter within the palace first emerged. The Abbasid harem of the early fourth/tenth century included family members and the administrative, or service, hierarchy. The former included the caliph’s mother, wives, concubines, and children, and his unmarried, widowed, or divorced sisters and aunts. The administrative hierarchy included the high-ranking administrative officers of the harem: eunuchs; stewardesses, whose role is discussed below; female servants, who performed the housekeeping tasks of the harem; and female slaves. Notes Hilal al-Sabi’: “It is generally believed that in the days of al-Muqtadir bi-llah . . . the residence contained 11,000 eunuchs [khadim] — 7,000 blacks and 4,000 white Slavs . . . 4,000 free and slave girls and thousands of chamber servants.”

The caliphal harem consisted of diverse communities of varying ages that interacted with each other in different ways and at different levels. The harem space was the site of a web of female relationships, structured by its own internal hierarchies. Of course, the caliphal harem of the fourth/tenth century was polygamous. The caliph had not only the four legal wives but also a multiplicity of concubines who populated the caliphal harem. Once a concubine had borne a child, she became an umm al-walad and
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enjoyed a legally and socially enhanced position. The hope of attaining the status of queen mother—as happened to al-Muqtadir’s mother—must have been entertained by every concubine taken into the harem. A Byzantine by birth, Umm al-Muqtadir, then called Na‘im, had been bought by the caliph al-Mu‘tadid (r. 279/892–289/902). In 282/895, Na‘im gave birth to a son, Ja‘far. At that point, the caliph changed her name to Shaghab. Her producing a son was felt to be troublesome (shaghab) for the other wives of the caliph—hence her name. As an umm al-walad, she was freed on al-Mu‘tadid’s death, becoming the most influential person at the court. Operating within the harem, Shaghab and her retinue were not able to cross the threshold that separated the private from the public sphere. But this restriction had little impact for, in reality, major politics was conducted from the private rooms of the caliphal palace.

Access to the caliph’s mother was particularly important during the reign of al-Muqtadir. She figures prominently in the annals of this period through her political interference, her financial contributions to the government, and her wide-ranging philanthropic activities. The sources highlight the closeness between the caliph and his mother, stating that the caliph used to spend a lot of time at his mother’s quarters in the harem.

One source states that upon hearing of his new appointment as vizier, al-Khasibi “wished that he had not taken charge of the vizierate,” realizing that being a secretary (katib) for Umm al-Muqtadir was better for him than being the caliph’s vizier. Al-Khasibi’s appointment as vizier was related to his closeness to Umm al-Muqtadir. It was she who, together with her sister Khatif, suggested that he be appointed vizier in 313/925. Previously, he had been the katib of the stewardess Thumal. Thus, his political career owed a great deal to harem women.

Umm al-Muqtadir played an important part in the power struggle within and between factions at the court. On various occasions, she reassessed the political situation for her son. One such incident happened in 311/923, when the vizier, Ibn al-Furat, hoping to arrest the chief chamberlain, Nasr, nearly won al-Muqtadir’s acquiescence—but for the intervention of Umm al-Muqtadir. She not only saved Nasr but also, more importantly, redressed the balance of power among the caliph’s courtiers. Umm al-Muqtadir reminded her son that Ibn al-Furat had already removed General Mu‘nis from his entourage. His current wish to ruin Nasr, she told her son, was “in order to get you under his power.” She then asked him: “On whom, I should like to know, will you call for aid if he means mischief and
plots your dethronement?" Umm al-Muqtadidir successfully convinced the caliph that Nasr’s contribution to his security was more important than his money, which the caliph would confiscate from Nasr upon his arrest. Nasr’s connections with Umm al-Muqtadidir were crucial for his survival.

In addition to providing sound political advice to her son, she supported the reign through her financial contributions and her philanthropic activities. When the Carmathians threatened Baghdad in 927 CE, Umm al-Muqtadidir gave half a million dinars of her own money to the public treasury to be spent on the troops. Her act was momentous for, in the words of the vizier ‘Ali b. ‘Isa, "since the demise of the Blessed Prophet, no more serious disaster has befallen the Muslims than this." Umm al-Muqtadidir’s generosity also focused on pilgrims. Ibn al-Jawzi states: “Shaghab is said to have devoted one million dinars each year from her private estates to the pilgrimage. She was devoted to the pilgrims’ welfare, sending water tanks and doctors and ordering that the reservoirs be fixed.” Umm al-Muqtadidir’s economic power was based on her agricultural estates, which she had received as land grants. Her very wealth became a source of power, and this in turn allowed her to foster a series of subordinate patronage networks. She had her own retinue of secretaries and other officials.

Very few references are made to the harem section of the palatial complex in the literary sources. A rare description of the harem of al-Muqtadidir is contained in Kitab al-Faraj ba’da al-shidda. A young cloth merchant, wishing to marry a harem stewardess (qahramana) of the caliph’s mother, was sneaked into the palace for an interview with Umm al-Muqtadidir. The merchant concealed himself inside a box among other boxes, in which the qahramana pretended to be bringing clothes and other effects to Umm al-Muqtadidir. The merchant concealed himself inside a box among other boxes, in which the qahramana pretended to be bringing clothes and other effects to Umm al-Muqtadidir. The qahramana had to pass through groups of eunuchs guarding the doors of various apartments in the harem; they all demanded to inspect the boxes. She yelled at some and cajoled others until she reached the chief eunuch, who insisted on inspecting the content of the boxes. Once again, her cunning saved her, and she managed to pass through. The young merchant managed to meet Umm al-Muqtadidir the following day.

This report contains information about the harem section of the palace, the hallways and gateways, and the meticulous security measures, all the responsibility of the eunuch guardians. Eunuchs were at the heart of the harem, monitoring access and partaking in all the informal politics that took place in it. Accepted as a functionally legitimate group, this distinctive gender group flourished in spite of the fact that Islamic law prohibited...
the making of eunuchs within the lands of Islam. Caring for the women and guarding them required large numbers of slaves and eunuchs. Eunuchs played an important role as servants and guardians within the caliph’s women’s quarters.

However, the previous anecdote is particularly significant in that it accentuates the length in both spatial and temporal terms that was required to move within and between various parts of the palace complex. The distance that had to be traversed to reach the harem has important implications for movement between the harem and the public areas of the palace. Distances had the potential to affect frequency of communication and could constitute a limiting factor for quick access to the caliph and those close to him. Equally important, this description reveals a multilayered veiled space—using Apter’s term—where barriers to access are concentrically enumerated, constituting an exploration of the “spatial sensation of claustration.” Nevertheless, the anecdote is primarily focused on the very transgression of the barriers.

Eunuchs acted as messengers because they could enter any gendered space forbidden to other men. Indeed, the eunuch servants were permitted to move freely in all parts of the caliphal complex. Their duties embraced the whole compound, for they served as intermediaries between their master and his wives, concubines, and female relatives. Their connections to women in the harem gave eunuchs opportunities to influence men in high positions. An episode concerning the black eunuch Muflih shows that this intimate access gave eunuchs considerable influence. Following his dismissal as vizier, Hamid, trying to have an audience with the caliph, came in 311/923 to the palace and met with Nasr, the chief chamberlain. But Nasr’s need to rely on Muflih was inescapable, as Muflih was “the official who demanded admission to al-Muqtadir when the latter was in his private apartments.” As the chief eunuch, Muflih controlled access to the caliph when the latter was in the harem. Because Nasr could not enter the harem, he had to call on Muflih. It was the latter’s status as eunuch—in other words, his liminal gender ascription as an unsexed man—which gave Muflih precious access. The power of the eunuchs stemmed directly from this one factor: they had spatial access to the caliph in his private quarters, the harem, when no other men did.

Perhaps the only category of harem women whose members did not have to abide by the spatial restrictions was the harem stewardess, the qahramana, who performed a number of executive and managerial func-
tions in order to ensure the smooth running of the household. Everyone in the immense household had to be fed and clothed, and their other daily needs had to be provided for. In order to fulfill these duties, qahramanas had the unique privilege (for women) of going in and out of the palace: the other harem women, even the concubines, were not allowed to leave the palace. The qahramanas’ mobility gave them numerous opportunities to exercise influence. One qahramana, Umm Musa, became the center of a major patronage network. There was, thus, a sequence of subsidiary courts that could act as rival focuses of politics and patronage. Female members of the household not only advanced themselves but promoted others as well—or kept them back.

Proximity to the caliph and his mother was one sure way of building a power base at court. And as everything going to the caliph had to pass through the filter of his entourage before it could reach him, the qahramanas were able to forge alliances with powerful and influential people through their intercessions with the caliph and his mother. Umm Musa acted as the principal intermediary between the caliph’s mother and the caliph, as well as among other officials of the court. We read that during the caliphate of al-Muqtadir, “various knaves managed to write letters and convey them through Umm Musa to al-Muqtadir requesting posts and promising money.”36 The influence of the qahramanas was manifested in their role in successful plots against viziers and other high officials. Attempting to bring about the dismissal of Ibn al-Furat in 298–99/911–12, Muhammad b. Khaqan asked Umm Musa to relay a message to the caliph and his mother that implicated Ibn al-Furat in an Alid conspiracy against the caliph. They immediately imprisoned Ibn al-Furat, confiscated his wealth, and appointed Muhammad b. Khaqan as vizier.37

The activities of Zaydan, another qahramana, serve as an example of the qahramanas’ political role. High-ranking prisoners of state were committed to Zaydan’s custody for mild incarceration in the caliphal complex. Her role as jailer allowed Zaydan to come into contact with influential persons, individuals who had temporarily fallen out of favor but who had the potential to rise to power and influence once again. Her exclusive access to these important personalities, and her ability to act as a mediator between her prisoners and the caliph, provided her with important leverage and allowed her to develop a web of influence built on past favors.38

Palace politics—or perhaps more accurately, harem politics—required the formation of temporary alliances within court and harem circles in order
to obtain certain advantages such as money, power, and appointments to high office. In addition to the examples above, we read that Nasr, as chief chamberlain, sought an alliance with Thumal, a qahramana, in order to create new connections inside the harem.\textsuperscript{39}

The power, influence, and access to wealth of the harem’s women and eunuchs are confirmed in a letter that General Mu’nis addressed to the caliph. Mu’nis stated that the army was complaining bitterly about the money and land given to the eunuchs and women of the court, and about their participation in the administration. He demanded that certain eunuchs and women be dismissed and removed from the palace, and their possessions seized.\textsuperscript{40} In his reply to Mu’nis, al-Muqtadir came to the defense of the eunuchs and women:

> Now what our friends propose in the matter of the eunuchs and women, whom they would cast out of the Palace and remove far away . . . so that they should be precluded and deprived of their fortunes and kept at a distance from them until they deliver up the money and the estates which are in their hands, and restore them to their rightful owners—that is a proposal, which, if they properly considered and examined it, they would know to be an unjust proposal, and one whose iniquity is obvious to me. Still, so anxious am I to agree with them . . . that I am giving orders for the seizure of some of their fiefs, for the abolition of their privileges . . . and for the removal from the palace of all whom it is permissible to expel while those who remain shall not be permitted to interfere with my administration or counsels.\textsuperscript{41}

The answer acknowledges the powerful women and eunuchs as fief holders and points to the privileges they have. Explicit reference is made to their interference in the administration. The caliph promised to curb their political influence, but only in order to appease Mu’nis. Thus, the harem was clearly demarcated, yet its boundaries were permeable. Women’s confinement in the harem did not mean that their power was curtailed.

**HOUSEHOLD HAREMS**

The large caliphal harem, with many women and eunuchs, was very different from most people’s households. Outside the court, strict seclusion of women was practiced only by a small proportion of well-to-do urban families in which women did not play an active economic role. Moreover,
polygamy was an expensive urban practice that was mainly the preserve of the elite. We get glimpses of household harems in al-Tanukhi’s *Nishwar al-mubadara wa akhbar al-mudhakara* and *Kitab al-Faraj ba’da al-shidda*. In both works, al-Tanukhi presents anecdotes rich in detail on various aspects of Abbasid society, including women’s lives, and he vividly illustrates many practices and attitudes. A large number of anecdotes in both the *Nishwar* and *al-Faraj* include stories of a familiar literary type, which uses factual details for purposes of verisimilitude. Julia Bray points out that while some of the stories draw on fact, they are also part of a rags-to-riches romance.42

The anecdotes’ framing follows the formal pattern of historical reports. In his introduction to the *Nishwar*, al-Tanukhi lists the sources from which his information is derived, suggesting that these reports present a rich variety of examples of social behavior pertaining to Iraqi Muslim life and society in his time. *Al-Faraj* is a more difficult compilation to use, including anecdotes of various epochs centered around the theme of relief after adversity. What is particularly important about this compilation is that the information included does not concentrate on actions but rather on situations, which explains its attention to detail. Francesco Gabrieli stresses the important historical value of literary compilations such as *al-Faraj*, which constitutes a mine for the reconstitution of, among other subjects, private and economic life, institutions, and costume.43

This brief introduction to the anthologies of al-Tanukhi is warranted because of the problematic and hence rare usage of such compilations by historians. Although the anthologies do not conform to the common definition of what constitutes history, Dominique Sourdel made use of al-Tanukhi’s works in writing his history of the Abbasid vizierate, stating that if one is to consult adab works, “the most significant mine of historical anecdotes is found in the works of al-Tanukhi.” Sourdel pointed out that the accounts in the *Nishwar*, based on contemporary reports, have the value of authentic testimony, and that even if one does not accept these anecdotes literally, it is not difficult to extricate their historical significance.45 Despite its repetitiveness, its transmission of universal values, and its idealistic character, adab readjusts and actualizes its images and metaphors, recording the modifications and changes in society, its mentalities, and its sensibilities. As Jean Claude Vadet puts it, adab forms around itself the unanimity of the *corps social*.46 Adab is representative inasmuch as it would never include material that did not conform to the world values of the compiler and his audience. One scholar has also remarked that it is difficult to see why one
would suppose that certain themes in belles-lettres “were simply literary exercises which reveal nothing about the mental and emotional world” of the poets, narrators, and their audiences. It is not necessary to take the following anecdotal references in any strict historical sense. The particular incident may or may not have happened. The weight should be rather on the setting and gender roles, and the expectations represented therein as apparently unremarkable social practice.

One anecdote in *al-Faraj* includes a description of an elite harem. It involves Abu Ja’far, who had been a secretary of the caliph’s cousin and later became minister under the Turkish commander Bajkam (a military commander under caliph al-Radi, who reigned 934–940 CE). Abu Ja’far, hiding from Bajkam, disguised himself in women’s clothes and, with a number of elderly women, went to the dar of Khatif, an aunt of al-Muqtadid. He entered the vestibule between the door and the actual dwelling and had one of the elderly women talk with the eunuch in charge. Khatif appeared in the vestibule, dismissed the eunuch, discovered her guest’s identity, and then led the party through rooms, vestibules, and subterranean vaults until they reached a secret room at the end of a set of stairs.

While this elite household seems to replicate on a much smaller scale the spatial division of the elaborate caliphal harem, al-Tanukhi’s anthologies also provide information about more modest households. In another anecdote, a man mentions his marriage to a woman he loved. They lived happily for a long time: “Then it went with us the way it goes with many couples. She got angry at me and closed the door to her room, forbidding me to enter it. She told me that I should divorce her. I tried to conciliate her, to no avail. I asked her female relatives to mediate on my behalf, but it did not work.” The husband, overtaken by grief and distress, camped at the woman’s door, weeping and crying, until she was finally appeased. The man’s behavior makes the presence of other wives highly unlikely, and co-wives or even concubines are completely absent from this description. The only other females mentioned in the anecdote are the wife’s female relatives.

Al-Tanukhi presents other household scenes. Before he became vizier, Ibn al-Furat once knocked at someone’s door. The head of the household, a tailor, invited him in. The text goes on to mention something that has practically nothing to do with the substance of the encounter between the two men: the host “gave the guest’s clothes to his wife [zawjatuhu] to wash while he conversed with him.” This story refers to a single wife, not to one
of the host’s wives or one of his concubines. Later on, in the same anecdote, the tailor visited Ibn al-Furat, now vizier. He reminded him of his visit, and Ibn al-Furat inquired about “him, his wife [in the singular], and his children.”50 There are other such anecdotes that concern men of relatively modest means who seem to have only one wife.51 It is impossible to conclude with any confidence, from these limited references, whether the protagonists were engaged in monogamous or polygamous marriages. However, it is necessary to look into all kinds of evidence in order to discern the frequency of polygamous marriages, and we should consider the possibility that monogamous serial marriages were common.

Both the Nishwar and al-Faraj provide, moreover, evidence contradicting the image of harems as impenetrable and inaccessible spaces. We are told of a young man, Bishr b. ‘Abdallah, who fell in love with a woman who was jealously guarded by her husband. To allow her to spend a night with Bishr, he got a male friend to masquerade as the woman by putting on her clothes when she had left her house and returning there in her stead.52

Another transgression of the harem boundaries involves daughters of important notables in Baghdad who were caught committing immoral acts. Al-Tanukhi mentions police reports, “each one relating the day’s events. All the reports mentioned raids undertaken against women who were found fornicating. They were the daughters of viziers, military commanders, and notables who had died or who had lost their positions.”53

The Nishwar also discusses the daughter of Ibn Abi ‘Awf, a wealthy and very influential man: “It was mentioned that the news spread in Baghdad that Ibn Abi ‘Awf entered his home to find his daughter with a man who is not her mahram,” that is, the man was not within a degree of consanguinity precluding marriage.54 These passages inform us of raids undertaken by the police and of free women of a certain standing engaging in activities defined by their society as immoral. What connection do these stories about fornication bear to reality? Do they indicate that debauchery among upper-class women was commonplace or usual? In particular, what do these anecdotes tell us about women’s seclusion in their harems? We cannot fully answer these questions, but these anecdotes do suggest that the walls of upper-class harems were not impenetrable. Moreover, the anecdotes illustrate a certain moral freedom among the upper classes that legal and religious texts do not intimate, and that contradict standard notions about what harems are.

Normative texts and literary texts say much about what was expected of women and men. If adab texts do not give us information about how men

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and women actually behaved, they do give us insights into how people might have behaved and what social constraints they might have faced. While the reality is difficult to capture, works such as al-Tanukhi’s compilations can give us the social context in which the textual edifice was constructed. These writings reflect long-standing official discourses which allow us to better understand the cultural construct of expectations for both men and women in adab during the Abbasid period.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined Abbasid harems in Baghdad during the fourth/tenth century, using a variety of well-known historical and literary texts. The aim was to survey the sources for relevant references to harems, in order to set them up in opposition to the atemporal fantasy that continues to dilute our understanding. The references to al-Muqtadir’s harem do not present the idle Orientalist harem but rather a harem which is first and foremost a political arena, in which highly positioned women, as well as leading eunuchs, participated in major caliphal politics. This is clearly not the male-dominated harem of the traditional narrative. Such a vision is also at odds with the Western fixation on the harem as a brothel-like sexual prison. Moreover, the information supports the assertion that the lines among family, community, and the public sphere of politics and power were blurred in premodern societies. Although women did not hold actual political positions, they were well placed to influence public affairs, even if inconspicuously. Operating within the harem, Umm al-Muqtadir and her qahramanas were able at times to cross the threshold that separated the private from the public sphere. The restrictions that existed did not keep women from conducting politics in the women’s quarters of the caliphal complex.

Evidence from the reign of al-Muqtadir, moreover, subverts the private-public binary structure that undergirds popular perceptions of the harem. As Peirce has made clear, to map onto the harem a European notion of public and private is to ignore the fact that within the spatial relations of seclusion, it was proximity to the interior of the caliphal household that led to power and status. Ruby Lal has also pointed to the “imbrication of the Mughal domestic world in the everyday life of courts and kings or, equally, the imbrication of courts and kings in the everyday life of the domestic world.” In line with these conclusions, the harem of al-Muqtadir puts into question the nature of political power and the location of political ac-
tivity. The textual evidence invalidates the stereotype of passive, indolent harem women, and draws a picture of women actively involved in court politics and exercising a high degree of influence. The image of the harem as a place of sequestration collapses in light of the various anecdotes and historical information offered here. The walls of the harems were porous, allowing contact with the exterior via the qahramanas and eunuchs. Moreover, the historical and semihistorical anecdotes are populated with characters who succeed in transgressing the boundaries of the caliphal harem and elite households.

The anecdotes in al-Tanukhi’s anthologies, moreover, do not uphold the myth of the ubiquitous polygamous harem. This should propel us to expand our inquiry into marriage patterns in Abbasid societies. While the caliphal harem was polygamous and contained numerous concubines, references to more modest households imply monogamy. It also appears that women of certain classes were able to transgress some of the seemingly strict rules and limitations. The difference among classes in the definition of what was both proper and moral behavior for a woman calls for increasing subtlety in analyzing the role of harems in structuring the class and gender configurations of given Muslim societies. It is important to get detailed information about free women of various classes, and about slave girls. Such knowledge is vital to appreciate the various spatial positions assigned to them at various historical moments, and the multiplicity of social and moral possibilities available to diverse categories of women. Only with that information can we bridge the discrepancy between theoretical and real restrictions on women and provide a better understanding of Abbasid “harems.”

NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter appeared as “Revisiting the Abbasid Harems,” Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies 1, no. 3 (fall 2005): 1–19. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
1 DelPlato, Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures, preface.
2 Laroui, The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual, 156–58.
3 Arkoun, The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought, 10.
4 Ibid., 15.
5 Bonebakker has stated that the current definitions of adab are “too broad to provide a workable analytic framework,” suggesting a more restricted definition to be used instead (“Adab and the Concept of Belles-Lettres,” 5).
6 Leder and Kilpatrick, “Classical Arabic Prose Literature.” See, for further discussion, El Cheikh, “Women’s History.”

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8 Mernissi, Le harem et l’occident, 18–21.
12 Badran, Introduction, 7. Al-Sayyid-Marsot has pointed out in “The Revolutionary Gentlewoman in Egypt” that authors tend to describe harem life in terms of extremes: as a lascivious place or as a place of idleness.
13 Afsaruddin, “Introduction.”
14 Peirce, The Imperial Harem, 5.
15 Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism, 4.
16 Babayan, “The ‘Aqā’id al-nisā’.”
17 Lewis, Gendering Orientalism, 154.
18 Apter, “Female Trouble in the Colonial Harem.”
19 H. Kennedy, The Court of the Caliphs, 160. See also Schick’s chapter in this volume.
24 Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art, 158.
25 H. Kennedy, The Court of the Caliphs, 164.
26 Al-Sabî, Rusum dar al-klilafa, 8.
27 A concubine who bore her master a child achieved the status of umm al-walad (mother of the child) and could no longer be sold, pawned, or given away. Most jurists agreed that the umm al-walad automatically became free on her master’s death.
28 ‘Arib, Silat tarikh al-Tābari, 128.
29 Miskawayh, Tajarih al-umam, 1:117; see also al-Sabî, Kitab tubfat al-umara’ fi tarikh al-wuzara’, 47.
30 Miskawayh, Tajarih al-umam, 1:180.
33 See De la Puente, “Sin linaje, sin alcurnia, sin hogar.”
34 Apter, “Female Trouble in the Colonial Harem.” It is interesting to note that Orientalist stereotypes dramatized the harem’s inaccessibility. There is no ease of movement in the heart of the harem, but rather a boxing in of courtyards and rooms, each almost hermetically closed. See Grosrichard, The Sultan’s Court, 126. On the scrupulous concerns about separation and partitioning in the architecture of the Ottoman harem, see Lad’s chapter in this volume.
35 Miskawayh, Tajarih al-umam, 1:87; and The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate, 1:96.
36 Miskawayh, Tajarih al-umam, 1:27.
38 See for instance, ibid., 91.
39 Al-Suli, *Ma lam yunshar min awraq al-Suli*, 149.
42 Bray, “A Caliph and His Public Relations.”
43 Gabrieli, “Il valore letterario e storico del farag ba’da s-sidda di Tanühi.”
44 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 113.
49 Ibid., 4:426.
51 Ibid., 7:237. See Schick’s chapter in this volume, where he states that the data on common people in Ottoman Istanbul do not support the view that most men were polygamous.
53 Ibid., 4:5–6.
57 Lal, “Historicizing the Harem,” 603.
Dates of publication are given for the Christian era, the Islamic era, or both, depending on the information available.


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Where “Hanım” or a variant appears as an honorific, it follows the indexed name: for example, Layla Hanım, Zeyneb Hanoum.

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