religious leaders who studied for a while in the Middle East and made the
pilgrimage to Makkah.

Islamic Modern Religious Courts illustrates the complicated role of gender
issues in this landscape of competing forces: The qadi chastises a woman who
demands a divorce because her husband wants to marry his mistress as a
second wife (p. 150). The qadi’s goal is to keep the family together because
both he and the husband fear that the wife will not be taken care of and that
the children will suffer in the long run. The desire of the government here is
to preserve the family for the sake of economic prosperity. No serious
objection is raised against the husband on account of his committing adultery
(zinā); on the other hand, the wife is required to give her consent to her
husband to have the second spouse as well. The woman is trapped between
three competing powers: the indigenous Malay culture where husbands easily
leave home and settle with a mistress in another town; the Islamic law that
does not allow her to demand a divorce; and the qadi who applies the law in
combination with the government policy that discourages divorce.

Peletz has managed to provide the reader with great insights in what
exactly is meant by grand-scale projects such as “Asian values”, “Islamization”,
and “Modernization”. He pays attention to the complex layers of political
conditions, personal predicaments and the forces in society that all compound
the question what exactly it means to be a Muslim in modern Malaysia where
“society, state, and family are more important than the individual” (p. 245).
The wife whose husband had a mistress told the court she wanted “justice”
(p. 149). She could have referred to the spirit of the Islamic Law with that
remark. Yet, as Peletz’s book shows, the justice she will find depends on
whose agenda needs to be satisfied first.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder

M. Marin and R. Deguilhem, eds., *Writing the Feminine: Women in
xxvi+278. Hardcover. Price $65.00.

The thirteen essays in this new collection have two goals: to represent women
of the Arab-Islamic region as social actors in their own right and to identify
the value of disparate genres of Arabic letters to the writing of “gendered”
The editors of *Writing the Feminine*, Manuela Marin and Randi Deguilhem, frame the first of these goals as follows: “to question the already shaken myth of the passive Arab Muslim woman who is subjected, without recourse, to the dual tyranny and misogyny of both her male relatives and her religion” (p. xv). To their credit, the editors stress the need to situate women’s lives against a social backdrop; socio-economic origins, legal standing and religious identity must be given their due. The essays thus join a sizable body of published work on Arab-Islamic gender and society produced over recent decades.

The second goal, historiographical in nature, distinguishes the volume from other collections. Ten of the essays concern the “medieval” or pre-modern period, a welcome emphasis since much of the best work on gender and Islam concerns the late Ottoman and modern periods. In addition, roughly seven of the thirteen essays concern western regions of the Islamic world (Morocco and al-Andalus); of the fifteen scholars involved in the project, eight, it appears, are from Spain or work in Spanish institutions. The great strength of the book lies in the examination of a variety of sources, “from popular [works] such as pre-Islamic and Islamic epics and modern-day proverbs to medieval normative Islamic legal sources from al-Andalus to autobiographies from present-day Palestine as well as paintings from [the] contemporary [Arab world]” (p. xv).

The essays are to be read, therefore, with two questions in mind: how well does each of the genres used by the contributors serve the task at hand and how well does each contributor “interrogate” the texts in question? The following comments treat certain essays in greater detail than others.

The volume is divided into four parts. The four essays in Part One deal with poetry, proverbs and autobiographies. Remke Kruk examines the occurrence and treatment of polygamy in major works of Arabic popular epic, the *Sirat Hamza al-Bahlawan* in particular. The topic is significant, as an aspect of Islamic society from its origins to the present day, and as a preoccupation of Western analysis of Islamic law and society (where it can take on rather distorted form). Kruk, who, like most of the contributors, is careful with her evidence, argues that although the *sira* literature is highly stereotypical, it can be used to discern “something about the predilections and preoccupations of the audience/ readership” (p. 5) that traditionally consumed such material, usually in coffeehouses and other public spaces. Things become a bit fuzzy as Kruk seems mainly concerned, in fact, with the views of the poet narrators who used the texts to convey their own views on women and marriage, often with greater nuance and sensitivity than one might expect.
Teresa Garulo’s contribution deals as well with the representation of women in literary texts, in this case, classical Arabic poetry. Like Kruk, Garulo seeks to identify prevalent social views in otherwise highly stylised texts. A dense writing style makes her essay hard to follow. It appears that the representation of women in the classical poems evolved in direct relation with changing patterns of Arab-Islamic society brought on by urbanisation in the early ‘Abbasid period. Garulo also highlights the significant part played throughout the poems by the “concept of women as the fragile repositories of family honour” (p. 34). Less clear is the extent to which the poetic representation of free women can be distinguished from that of slaves who, as Garulo rightly points out, become so prevalent in Arabic sources by the turn of the third/ninth century and, it seems fair to assume, the actual public sphere. Nadia Lachiri, in her brief but helpful contribution on popular proverbs (amthāl), provides further evidence on the appearance of slave women in Andalusian society.

The essays contained in Part Two rely on legal texts. Carefully argued, Camilla Adang’s contribution treats the views of Ibn Ḥazm on the presence of women in the public religious arena (i.e. mosques and funerals). Countering the view that Ibn Ḥazm was, in some sense, “anti-woman”, Adang suggests that had his Zāhiri views gained acceptance (which, of course, they did not in predominantly Mālikī Spain), women might have enjoyed a greater degree of visibility. Slave women again make an appearance; Ibn Ḥazm, for reasons that remain unclear, adopted rather egalitarian views, treating free and unfree women in roughly similar terms.

Christina de la Puente examines early Mālikī texts as they relate to the question of women’s “capacity to act” (an Islamic legalism according to which all persons are assigned the ability to act but in degrees, with free adult men enjoying the fullest capacity). The essay is ambitious: de la Puente herself points out that the attempt to derive social history from juridical texts runs into the problem — one among several — of assigning time and place to the cases cited therein. She also points out that such texts, which are, after all, urban products, may tell us little about the lives of rural women. Her argument that elite women were the least likely to have access to the public sphere overlaps nicely with the arguments advanced by Adang in the preceding essay. One hopes that de la Puente will produce an expanded version of her study. Amalia Zomeno’s essay, third in this set, relies on what appears to be an invaluable body of evidence: the surviving collections of contract documents drawn up by notaries in medieval Córdoba and Toledo. At issue is the ability of abandoned women to effect divorce, both in theoretical and practical terms.
The essays in Part Three seek to elicit women’s history from anthologies, chronicles and biographical dictionaries (chiefly medieval Andalusian works such as Ibn al-Abbār’s Takmilā). The essay by Nadia El-Cheikh relies on al-Tanūkhī. Her argument is that works of adab can be mined for evidence on gender relations and social patterns. El-Cheikh is very successful in selecting from the Nishwār al-Muhādara and al-Faraj ba’d al-Shidda relevant and often compelling anecdotal material. The question is whether such anecdotes count as evidence for patterns that occur outside the texts. For example, El-Cheikh correctly identifies the presence and costs of female slaves (concubines, singers and so on) as a source of ninth and tenth century Iraqi anxiety. But citing, as she does, al-Jāḥiz’s well-known essay on the qiyān, the indication is that one is much better served by reading al-Tanūkhī in conjunction with other kinds of sources.

The remaining two essays in this section are less satisfying. Maria Avila surveys the occurrence of women in a series of Andalusian biographical dictionaries. Seeking only “to give a composite view of the role of the Andalusi woman” (p. 159, n. 1), Avila concludes that the roles accorded to women were “completely different” (than those of men) and were essentially domestic in nature; neither point seems new. Her closing thought is more useful: when women participated in the transmission of knowledge — using “tuition” throughout in the sense of “instruction”, she cites eleven cases — they normally failed to act as “links” in chains of transmission since they attracted so few students. The final essay, by Maria Molins, also relies on an overly ambitious survey of a particular genre, in this case, chronicles of largely Andalusian and North African origin.

Two of the remaining four essays in the collection treat women as religious figures. Maribel Fierro discusses the debate in Andalusian tafsīr works concerning the prophecy (nubwā) of women; the essay, focused and clearly argued, is one of the strongest of the collection. Mariette van Beck’s essay, on modern legends surrounding Lalla ‘Awish, a woman saint in Marrakech, is largely devoted to positing a new approach to the study of popular figures (male and female) of this kind. The two remaining essays — those by Susanne Enderwitz on women in modern Palestinian autobiographies and Silvia Naef on women in modern Arab art (as both subjects and painters) — complete the collection.

Matthew S. Gordon

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