

Domestic Violence in Medieval Disability Narratives

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By placing bodies at the center of historical inquiry, medievalists have transformed assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, and disability in the Islamicate past. Power dynamics not only shaped perceptions of individual bodies, but also the material conditions of quotidian existence. Disability and impairment, in particular, intersect with violence in fascinating ways across a range of classical Arabic sources, including miniature paintings, literary narratives, religio-legal material, medical literature, and archeological data.¹ Most of these intersections occur in war narratives, as in the tale of the warrior who lost his leg in battle, then cauterized the wound in a cauldron of hot oil.² However, my essay argues that these disability and medical narratives illuminate a poorly understood aspect of private life: severe domestic violence, a subject treated largely as an abstraction by legal theorists.³ Assessing the effects of violence on bodies can help historicize disability from a unique perspective, enriching our understanding of domesticity and gender relations in medieval Islamicate societies.

Embedded in a range of disability and medical narratives are episodes of domestic violence between spouses, between cowives, between parents and children, and directed against enslaved members of a household. When that violence does not result in serious injury, it may be presented as an unremarkable occurrence, with no moralistic or legalistic overtones. One reads casual mentions of spousal abuse in personal letters, literary prose, and poetry from medieval Cairo. A Jewish woman's extended family wrote a letter, in which they accused her husband of beating her every Friday.⁴ In a story from *1,001 Nights*, "when the husband heard the account [of his wife's infidelity], he felt very angry, went to his wife, and gave her a sound beating."⁵ In a poem from Mamluk Cairo, an infuriated wife spans her husband's buttocks because he failed to provide for the household.⁶ Violence often lingers in the background of domestic scenes. Fatalities from interpersonal violence may surface in some chronicles and were presumably litigated in court records that have largely not been recovered, but the physically transformative and debilitating effects of violence must be teased out from other types of sources.

One of the most important sources for medieval disability history is Jahiz's (d. 869) *Book of the Leprous, the Lame, the Cross-Eyed, and the Blind*, a compilation of historical and literary anecdotes about disabled human and nonhuman animals. This collection features anecdotes highlighting the intersections of disability and violence. Many are war narratives about debilitating injuries sustained in combat, but others deal with domestic episodes. In the following anecdote a warrior jealously attacks his female slave.

Among the hemiplegics is Shajara b. Salim al-Jadali. He set off for battle one day, when he saw his slave woman who outfitted him with weapons, conveying honor on him. He asked her afterwards: "Have you looked at other men?" she said, "By God, I have only looked at you, for fear of what you

would do to me.” He reached for a peg and drove it into her eye until it was lodged in the wall. She died, and Shajara became a hemiplegic.⁷

After murdering a member of his own household, Shajara was cosmically rewarded with semiparalysis. In this portrait disability is the divinely ordained punishment for extraordinary violence. There would likely have been no legal consequences to killing one’s own slave. Other stories may contain what are but tacit expressions of domestic violence. The 11th-century Cordoban physician al-Zahrawi (Latin: Abulcasis) recounted his treatment of an injured slave woman.

My own experience was this: a slave-girl seized a knife and buried it in her throat and cut part of her trachea, and I was called to attend her. I found her bellowing like a sacrifice that has had its throat cut. So I laid the wound bare and found that only a little haemorrhage had come from it. I assured myself that neither an artery nor the jugular vein had been cut, but air passed out through the wound. So I hurriedly sutured the wound and treated it until it healed. No harm was done the slave-girl except for a hoarseness in the voice which was not extreme, and after some days she was restored to the best of health.⁸

Zahrawi presents this ghastly scene of a traumatized and temporarily impaired woman as a clinical case study. The social context is erased. The woman certainly may have self-harmed, as Zahrawi claims, but given the prevalence of abuse against enslaved people, one cannot discount the possibility that she was, in fact, attacked, but concealed this fact from the physician. We are only beginning to explore methods of suicide in the Islamic Middle Ages, so we do not know how likely it would have been for a woman to have attempted suicide by slitting her own throat or for slaves to have died by their own hand. Franz Rosenthal only found a single report of a man who had severed his own jugular vein, but he also noted that the frequency of suicide reporting was culturally and historically contingent.⁹ Even without clear data about suicide methods, patterns of abuse and injury may be discernible through concentrated data-mining of medical and disability-related anecdotes.

Returning to Jahiz’s work, one finds a harrowing account of a dispute between jealous cowives.

Among those [who are called “pock-marked” (*abrash*) but do not have leprosy (*baras*)] are Umm Qays ibn Tha’labah, the woman with pock-marked skin [*al-barshā*’], and Qays’s sister, who was named al-Jadhma’ [the amputee]. Some people have claimed that she was leprous [*barsā*’], but they have not brought forth evidence of such.

Suhaym ibn Hafis [d. 805–6] mentioned that al-Jadhma’ was the cowife of the pock-marked woman, and that the former threw live coals at the latter, marking her skin with the fire.¹⁰

The term *judhm* signifies either mutilation or a form of leprosy, and the ambiguity of the nickname al-Jadhma’ is purportedly resolved in a centuries-later elaboration of this story. The Cordoban author Ibn Hazm (d. 1068) continues the story of the attack. In his telling the scarred cowife retaliated by striking al-Jadhma’ and cutting off her hand, which is how she had become known as the amputee.¹¹ Stories of jealous harem women circulated about elite households, such as those of sultans or of the Prophet Muhammad, but insights into the internal dynamics of commoner households is much rarer. If domestic violence occurred privately but was publicly acknowledged, as these

stories seem to suggest, historians of disabilities have a real opportunity to identify in their sources patterns of abuse and injury, to historicize social reactions to this form of violence, and to integrate disability history into broader studies of gender relations and public health.

NOTES

¹For an overview of primary sources, see Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1–21.

²Jahiz, *al-Bursan wa-l-'Urjan wa-l-'Umyan wa-l-Hulan*, ed. Muhammad Mursi al-Khawli (Cairo: Dar al-i'tisam li-l-Tab' wa-l-Nashr, 1972), 238–39.

³Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Exegetical Violence: *Nushūz* in Qur'anic Gender Ideology," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 49–73.

⁴Eve Krakowski, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Female Adolescence, Jewish Law, and Ordinary Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 288.

⁵Robert Irwin, ed., *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 371.

⁶Ibn Daniyal, *al-Mukhtar min Shi'r Ibn Daniyal*, ed. Muhammad Nayif Dulaymi (Mosul: n.p., 1979), 237–40.

⁷Jahiz, *al-Bursan*, 279.

⁸Zahrawi, *al-Maqalah fi al-'Amal bi-l-Yad*, XXX, *bāb* 2, *faṣl* 3; M. S. Spink and G. L. Lewis, eds. and trans., *Albucasis, On Surgery and Instruments* (London: Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1973), 338–39, quoted in Emilie Savage-Smith, "The Practice of Surgery in Islamic Lands: Myth and Reality," *Social History of Medicine* 13 (2000): 311.

⁹Franz Rosenthal, "On Suicide in Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946): 251–59.

¹⁰Jahiz, *al-Bursan*, 76–77.

¹¹Ibn Hazm, *Jamharat Ansab al-'Arab*, ed. 'Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1999), 314.