

Mystical Islamic Poetry 6: Aishah al-Ba‘ūniyya (d.1517)

For the last of our poets of the 15th century, we move away from the world of Persian poetry, and return to the heartlands of the Arab world – to Damascus and Cairo – and a poet who wrote entirely in Arabic. We also come across only the second female poet in the whole of our coverage of the mystical Islamic tradition over six series – the first being the most famous female mystic in Islam, Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d.801), who lived in the region of Basra, now in Southern Iraq, and who is often regarded as the first Sufi poet. There has actually always been quite a strong tradition of poetry written by women within the Islamic tradition, in both Arabic and Persian, and later also in Turkish and Indian languages, as modern scholarship increasingly reveals, but there have been far fewer of them than male poets, at least as far as we know, and also, prior to about the 18th century, very little of their work survived. For instance, Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukūniyya (d.1190) was a very well-known poet in her own day – the 11th/12th century – who rose to fame in Granada, in Andalusia at the court of the Almohads – she would have been a contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabī. But of all the poetry on which her reputation rested, only about 70 lines have come down to us today. Given all these factors, the lack of surviving bodies of work by Sufi women is easily explained – although after the 17th century things start to change, and there are some important later figures such as Zeb-un-Nisa (d.1702), the daughter of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, the Persian poet Bibi Hayati (early 19th century) and the Nigerian ‘song-poet’ Nana Asma’u (d.1864) who are now becoming well known.¹

A’isha al-Bā‘ūniyya is therefore a very exciting discovery. Although much of her work has been lost, at least two major *dīwāns* have survived² consisting of more than 350 poems, plus several prose works, the most famous of which, ‘Selections on the Fundamentals of the Stations and Sciences of Sufism’³ was written as a guide to the mystical path.⁴ As this indicates, A’isha was not only a poet, but also a practicing Sufi attached to the Qādīrī order, and she was widely respected in her day as a scholar and a spiritual teacher. Even so, it is only in the last 5-10 years that she has become at all well-known even within the Arab world and her two *dīwāns* were only published in Arabic in 2010 and 2012. In the west, there seems to be just one scholar, Th. Emil Homerin, whom we have met before as a translator of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s poetry, doing work on her, and his book “Emanations of Grace”, which renders a

¹ For more on some of these women, see Camille Adams Helminski *Women of Sufism*, Shambhala, Boston, 2003.

² *Dīwān Fayḍ al-faḍl wa-jam‘ al-shaml*, ed. Maḥdī As‘ad ‘Arrār (Beirut 2010), and *Futūḥ al-ḍarā‘a fī l-ṣalāt ‘alā sāhib al-shafā‘a* (Amman 2012).

³ *Al-Muntakhab fī usūl al-rutub fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf*, as yet unpublished. Homerin quotes extensively from a manuscript copy, Dar al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, microfilm 13123 of Ms 318 (Taṣawwuf Tarmūr) 1074/1663. See Th. Emil Homerin *Emanations of Grace*, Louisville, 2013, p. 17, n.18.

⁴ This has been translated into English by Th. Emil Homerin: *Principles of Sufism*, New York, 2014.

selection of verses from her *dīwān* of the same title into English, was published in 2011.⁵

Women in Islamic Poetic Tradition

I said that there was a very strong tradition of poetry by woman within Islam, but it is also true that this was traditionally restricted to certain genres. Within the pre-and early Islamic tradition, women's principal domain was the elegy, or the poem of lament for a fallen warrior, which usually opened with the motif of 'eyes shedding tears'. The other main genre was the erotic love poem, which was originally the domain of the "singing slave girls" who performed in the courts of the Umayyads and 'Abbāsids, singing and dancing – and probably doing other things – to entertain their masters. These girls, who were most likely illiterate, would often make up their own poems, and carried an enormous repertoire; according to some sources,⁶ they would have known an average of about 4,000 different songs. This represented an oral, folk tradition of poetry of great range and also great lyricism; it was out this genre that Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's poetry probably came – she having been of course a slave girl herself.

As for more sophisticated, written poetry, we know of a few female poets who were highly regarded in their time; we have already mentioned al-Rukūniyya at the court of Granada. There was also her almost exact contemporary, Mahsati Ganjavi (d. 1159) from Ganja in Azerbaijan writing in Persian, who found fame at the court of Sultan Sanjar of the Seljuk dynasty. Generally, within the Islamic tradition until the 20th century, women were not educated to the same degree as men, and it was only within the elite classes – the scholars and the rulers – that it was common for them to be even literate, let alone educated in the literary and religious arts. Therefore, many of the famous female poets that we know of were members of the ruling elite. Those of you who have looked at Dick Davies' book on Hafez "Faces of Love" will have noted that he includes poems by Jahan Malek Khatun, a princess whose uncle, Abu Es'haq was ruler of Shiraz for a time.⁷ Similarly, the 10th century Rābi'a-i Balkhī, from, of course, Balkh in present-day Afghanistan (famously killed by her brother after writing of her love affair with a Turkish slave), was a member of the Samanid royal family, and Safwat al-Din Khatun (d. 1295) was a member of the Mongol ruling dynasty who actually became for a short time ruler of Kirmān in her own right.

Another class of women who were often educated were the wives and daughters of learned men and Sufi shaykhs, and this was the case with A'isha, who came from a very eminent and scholarly family, the Ba'ūnī, who served the Mamluk sultans in Cairo, Aleppo and Damascus over several generations. Her father, Yusuf, was the chief judge in Damascus and her uncle was a Sufi poet who wrote a famous eulogy to the prophet Muhammad. The whole family had

⁵ Th. Emil Homerin *Emanations of Grace*, Louisville, 2011.

⁶ See for example *Encyclopaedia of Medieval Islamic Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2006, pp. 865-867

⁷ See Dick Davies *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*, Penguin, NY, 2013

a strong and long-standing connection to Sufism, especially to Abū Bakr ibn Dāwūd (d.1403) a shaykh of the ‘Urmawī branch of the Qādirī order, who was buried in Damascus. A‘isha was educated by her father alongside her five brothers, and exceeded them; it is said that she had memorized the Qur’ān by the age of eight, and was already composing poetry as a little girl. She studied Qur’ān, *ḥadīth* and jurisprudence, and poetry, and as time went on, she also added study of mystical writers, in which she became a specialist. Her studies, according to Homerin, included the works of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, the founder of the Qadiriyya (d.1166), ‘Abd Allah al-Ansārī (d. 1089); al-Qushayrī (d. 1074), ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 1253), Ibn ‘Atā Allah al-Iskandarī (d. 1309), Muhiyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d.1277) and ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Jurjānī, (d.1413) who wrote an important Sufi lexicon, the *Kitāb al-Ta‘rīfāt*. There is no evidence at all of any direct influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas, which were not generally taken up at this time in the central regions of Islam, where the condemnation by Ibn Taymiyya was influential, and his grave in Damascus lay neglected and forgotten.

Whilst many women at this time were learned – there was a very strong tradition in this region of female transmitters of *ḥadīth*, for instance – it was very rare for them to compose any works of their own, but it seems that in this A’isha was quite exceptional. For instance, she did not just read the work of ‘Abd Allah al-‘Ansārī; she went on to compose a version of his popular Sufi guide, the *Manāzil al-Sā‘irīn*, in verse. Homerin claims that she was in fact the most prolific female writer in any field prior to the 20th century, although I have not yet found a complete list of all her works; they probably numbered about 12 altogether.

She was a practicing member of the Qādirī order, taking two masters, Jamāl al-dīn Ismā‘il al-Ḥawwārī (d. 1495) and his successor Muhiy al-dīn Yaḥya al-‘Urmawī (d. 15th-16th c). She was also married, her husband Aḥmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Naqīb al-Ashrāf being a member of another respected Damascene family, a descendant of the prophet, and a fellow devotee of al-Ḥawwārī, and she had at least two children, a son, ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and a daughter, Baraka. They lived in the city of her birth, Damascus, but Homerin gives very little information about the kind of life she led. But we do know that in 1503 her husband died, and there seems to have been financial problems, for in 1513, A‘ishah left the city to travel to Cairo with her son, with the aim of finding him employment. We don’t know the date of her birth, but Homerin reckons it to be about 1457, so she would have been about 56 at the time. *En route*, they were attacked by bandits who stole everything, including all of A‘isha’s written works, so they arrived in Cairo destitute. Fortunately, they were rescued by a family friend, Maḥmūd Ibn Ajā (d. 1519) who was the confidential secretary and foreign minister of the Mamluk sultan, al-Ghawrī (d. 1516). He gave her son a job, and settled A’ishah in an apartment in his house.

A’ishah stayed in Cairo for three years, and they seem to have been very fruitful in terms of work; she communicated with several leading scholars, rewrote some of her lost works and

composed some of the poems for which she is now most famous. Then in 1516 her son was given a new post in Aleppo and she went with him. Here a notable incident occurred. The Sultan was also in Aleppo at the same time, gathering an army for his final battle against the Ottomans. He was preparing his troops, ordering prayers to be said day and night for their success. He was in a state of intense anxiety and virtually reclusive, rarely appearing in public save for urgent military matters. Yet he took time to arrange a meeting with A'isha. No-one recorded what happened at this encounter, but it is widely speculated that he was seeking her spiritual blessing, as a respected scholar and Sufi master, for the forthcoming battle. After it, she returned to Damascus where she died a few months later, and he went into the fateful battle at Marj Darbiq which marked his own death, the end of nearly 300 years of Mameluk rule in Syria, and the beginning of Ottoman domination in the Hijaz and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This is a nice little vignette of this devout and humble old woman appearing on the scene at what was one of the great turning points in Islamic history.

A'isha's Poetry

A'isha wrote entirely in Arabic, and was a master of all the various forms of Arabic poetry of her day, being highly skilled in the technicalities of writing. There was no equivalent to the *mathanawī* form in Arabic verse, so there were no epic poems as we have seen in the Persian tradition of Nizami, Rūmī and Jāmī. The main verse forms were the *qasīda* (mostly used for panygeric poetry) and the *ghazal* (the love poem) which was usually composed in monorhyme, and the *dhu bayt* (or quatrain) which had its own distinct rhyme structure. There were also forms of popular verse using strophic forms – i.e. with choruses – such as the *muwashshahāh*, of which, we saw in the last series, Sushtarī was a master, and a form called the *takhmis* in which the poet takes a line from a previous poet and extends it to five lines. Thus in Arabic, as in Persian poetry as we saw last week, by this stage there was much conscious reference back to the poets of the past: A'isha for instance wrote a long, 250-line *Ta'iyya* or poem on the monorhyme *ta* in homage of Ibn al-Fārid's very famous *Poem of the Way*.

A'isha wrote in all the traditional forms, and she also experimented with new structures and rhythms. But she is most famous within the Arab world for a form of poetry which we have not yet looked at in these series, i.e. the poem in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (*al-madīh al-nabawī*). This was a distinct genre of mystical poetry going back to the earliest days of Islam, which was so important that Anne Marie Schimmel devotes a whole chapter to it in her seminal survey of mystical poetry *As Through a Veil*.⁸ Perhaps the most famous exemplar of the genre, entitled the *Burda*, was written by al-Būṣīrī (d. 1295) in the 13th century. Love and devotion to Muhammad is a very central feature of the religious life of all Muslims, and there are many popular poems and songs referring to Muhammad as *habībī* (my beloved) or *ḥabīb*

⁸ Anne Marie Schimmel *A Through A Veil*, One World, Oxford, 1982, 2001.

Allah (the beloved of God) which are sung especially on the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, the *mawlad*. But within the Sufi tradition it took on a specific meaning as Muḥammad came to be regarded as the exemplar of the *insān al-kāmil*, the perfected or realized human being, who is in the state of union with God and is the place of manifestation of the most complete knowledge. Praise of him is therefore seen as praise of own potential perfection, and is considered to bring great blessing upon the reciter. There is a well-known *ḥadīth*: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you".

One of A'isha's surviving *diwāns* consists entirely of six long praise poems; her most famous is entitled *Faṭḥ al-Mubīn fī Mahd al-Amīn* (The Clear Inspiration in Praise of the Trusted Prophet) which consists of 130 lines in the style of *badī'iyya* – a difficult form in which each line contains a rhetorical device together with a praise-worthy attribute of the prophet. This is too long for us to look at today, but Rahim is going to read another one at the end of this session.

A'isha's deep feelings of love for the prophet stemmed from early experience that she had during her childhood, when she was taken on pilgrimage to Mecca by her father. Whilst in the holy precinct, she had a vision of the Prophet and found herself in his presence. This awakened a life-long devotion to him. In general, as you will see, her poetry is more directly devotional than other poets that we have studied, and in this she is in some ways a very direct successor to Rābi'a. They are also much more overtly linked to Sufi practice; some of the strophic poems were quite clearly intended to be read or, more probably, sung, at Sufi gatherings – and I have included one with a chorus line which is actually a type of *dhikr* in the selection I have given you.

Emanations of Grace

Today we are going to concentrate on poems from her other *dīwān*, *Fayḍ al-Faḍl wa Jam' al-Shaml* (The Emanations of Grace and the Gathering of Union). This is a kind of spiritual autobiography, recording moments of intimacy and insight as they occurred throughout her life; they are what are called *munājāt*, or intimate exchanges with God, and they all begin with some form of explanation: *from His inspiration when rapture was intense; from His inspiration of her, when patience was gone and loving desire increased*, etc. It is from this *dīwān* that Homerin has made his selection, and I have chosen poems which also appear in an article he wrote entitled "*Recalling You, My Lord*": *A'ishah al-Bā'ūniyah on Dhikr*"⁹ because there he includes Arabic versions of the texts which we have not been able to find elsewhere. This is a very good article which is on open access, so I have given you the reference and will put it up on the web-site, and highly recommend it as supplementary reading.

⁹ Th. Emil Homerin "Recalling You, My Lord": A'ishah al-Bā'ūniyah on Dhikr" in *Mamluk Studies Review*, Vol. 17, 2013, pp. 130-154. http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_XVII_2013_Homerin_pp130-154.pdf

Homerin has identified the theme of *dhikr*, meaning remembrance of God, as a particularly important theme in A'isha's work. In fact, in her own delineation of the mystical path in her prose work, "Selections on the Fundamentals of the Stations and Sciences of Sufism", she identifies it as one of the main four stages or aspects of spiritual practice, which are: *tawba* or repentance: *ikhlas* (sincerity or faithfulness); *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *mahabba* (love). Homerin points out that many of her poems can be read as descriptions of progression through these stages, moving from a state of absence to a state of union, in the tradition of what Louis Martz has dubbed 'meditative poetry'. In this, in what he rather nicely calls 'an act of interior dramatization';

"The speaker accuses himself; he talks to God within the self; he approaches the love of God through memory, understanding, and will; he sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches by the imagination... Essentially, the meditative action consists of an interior drama, in which [the person] projects a self upon an inner stage, and there comes to know that self in the light of the divine presence."¹⁰

To show you what he means, I thought that we would begin by reading one of A'isha's poems together: (refer to Poem 1 on the sheet). We don't normally do this, but I myself did not really begin to 'see' these poems until I read Homerin's article. I thought they were sweet but did not really understand their depth. Now that I have, I am completely in love with them, so I thought that it might also be helpful to you to have this view on them from the very beginning.

From His inspiration upon her after His blessings had wafted in.

- 1) When a breeze of acceptance wafts in,
a deep love reminds me of union's covenant,
- 2) And when a flash of inspiration appears from my Lord,
my eyes cloud up and pour.
- 3) When the leader calls out His name
as the caravan departs, desire wants my heart to stay,
- 4) And when passion's fire is kindled in my ribs,
then, my friend, I take a drink from recollection's cups.

¹⁰ Louis Martez, "Meditative Action and Metaphysick Style" in his *The Poem of the Mind*, New York, 1966, p. 33, quoted in Th. Emil Homerin "Recalling You, My Lord...", p. 136.

- 5) If critics belittle my claims to love,
 well, ancient is my tale of love for Him,
- 6) And when others slander me because of Him,
 my every limb opposes them with passion.
- 7) If all the world abandons me, recollection of him
 remains my heart's close companion and friend.
- 8) When the One I love is pleased, He guides me
 to the path of righteousness, the straight path,
- 9) And He brings me to the pastures of acceptance
 and gives me a taste of inspiration's fruitful knowledge.
- 10) He gives me a drink from the spring of love,
 and I attain what I seek and desire,
- 11) And He leads me to smell a scent on the breeze of nearness,
 reviving me, though the hot winds blow.
- 12) He tears away the veils of pride and heedlessness
 that cloud the skies of the heart,
- 13) So I behold the truth of Truth in every atom,
 and leave aside what passes and does not last.
- 14) O, Lord, confirm my view of You, for You are, indeed,
 all-knowing of needs, most generous with grace!

The first thing note here is that we are immediately in the world of Arabic poetry here i.e. in the desert, where news of the beloved is carried on the winds, and we have a little array of motifs that we would equally find in Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Ibn 'Arabī; the caravan departing, the fire of passion between the ribs, even an "eyes shedding tears" in line 2, which, as I have mentioned, was a strong feature of traditional Arabic women's poetry, and an allusion to the wine song in line 4. Then, as we proceed through the poem from line 9 onwards, we get a host of oasis images; **the pastures** of acceptance, **the spring** of love, **the breeze** of nearness, etc.

The second thing to note is the progression of the poem. In the first four lines, we have the initial calling back to God – some intimation in the heart which reminds it of its reality and

begins the process of recollection. This would be equivalent, I think you can say, to the stage of *tawba*, being called away from the world to God.

Then in lines 5-7, there is a period of difficulty, when the people and things of the world give the seeker a hard time and test their resolve. This is the stage of *ikhlās*, which Homerin translates as ‘sincerity’ but it also has connotations of loyalty and purity, being faithful and perhaps, as we saw with Jāmī last week, being pure or single in one’s focus, or we might say, in one’s remembrance (*dhikr*).

Then, from line 8, there is the state of being brought into union – what Homerin calls ‘a new life in love’, meaning in the Divine Love (*maḥabba*) – and we should note here that all the actions mentioned are done by the Beloved; there is at this stage nothing attributed to the poet. One of the very nice things about A’isha’s poetry is how much she emphasizes this final state – in some poems, the first three stages are dealt with in a few lines and the whole poem is devoted to this stage where the seeker rests in the comfort and security of the Divine Love, and the happiness and joy this brings.

And finally, just to point to lines 13 & 14; line 13 is almost an exact quote from Qur‘ān 55:26–27: “All things on earth are passing away (*fānin*), while the majestic and beneficent countenance of your Lord abides (*yabqá*)”, so making it absolutely clear who the Beloved is, as does the final prayer in line 14. This is a strong feature of all of A’isha’s poems which is possibly related to her particular vulnerability as a female poet. We have already mentioned that the very first poetry of the Sufi tradition, by Rābi‘a al-Adawiyya, came out of the singing slave girl tradition, but with the object of love transmuted from an earthly beloved to a heavenly one. This, as we have seen over our studies, became one of the fundamental features of Sufi love poetry as it developed. Many of the male poets that we have studied have played with this transition and retained a certain ambiguity about the object of devotion, so that it has been left hanging as to whether the beloved is physical or spiritual, or whether it is both at once. But love poetry was dangerous ground for Muslim women, and of the famous female poets that we know of, an astonishingly high proportion of them ended up being executed or imprisoned by their families for expressing erotic sentiments publicly. Therefore, when we consider A’isha’s poetry, it is very likely that this definite identification of the Divine Beloved springs from a sense of precaution. But of course we cannot say whether this was don’t was a common feature of women’s mystical poetry, because we don’t have many other examples to compare it with; so further research needed.

Jane Clark, 18/11/2014.

