Original Article

The Gender of Magic: Constructions of nonbinary gender categories in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*

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Abstract 'The Gender of Magic: constructions of nonbinary gender categories in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*' explores how fictive components of the aforementioned medieval Arabic popular epic both alter and 'unbind' the gender of its characters from binary conceptualizations. Numerous engagements with magic in *Sīrat Sayf* not only delight and entertain, but also construct gender within the narrative by disrupting characters' conformity to social roles derived from sex and gender, repositioning them within a gendered system of social relations, altering their bodies, and producing drag. Drawing upon nonbinary theorizations of gender, this piece offers an interpretation of *Sīrat Sayf* wherein a 'magical gender' is actively constructed with and against particular elements of the *sīra*'s fiction. Additionally, the work provides a model for untethering studies of gender in medieval Islamicate fiction from binary understandings of the category, and opens a new avenue for considering how fictivity constructs and affects gender more broadly.

Keywords: gender; magic; sīra sha'biyya; arabic literature; fictionality

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Introduction

'...have we really finally done away with gender binaries in our historical and analytical work? What can we make of the fact that the only categories of gender that run through so much of our gender scholarship are women and men, masculinity and femininity? How do we approach the problem of gender's historical and narrative effect for its own production as a binary?...are we not naturalizing (and by implication atemporalizing) gender, despite our best intentions?...By focusing our gender analytics on men and women, do we, as historians, not continue to naturalize manhood and womanhood and thereby underwrite heteronormativity?' (Najmabadi 2006, 12)

Sīrat Sayf bin Dhī Yazan is a late medieval Arabic *sīra sha'biyya*, a genre of oral-to-written texts often glossed as either 'romance' or 'popular epic.' The text can be summarised as the adventures of its titular King Sayf and his family amidst their war against a *Ḥabashī* (Ethiopian or Abyssinian) kingdom and the wizards controlling it.[1] However, even as the spine of the story is grounded in war, much of the *sīra* narrative is dedicated to fantastical side quests and to magical adventures born out of King Sayf's passion, stubbornness, or social bonds.[2] The uniqueness of *Sīrat Sayf* for its magical engagement has been noted on a number of occasions (Norris 1989, Jayyusi 1996, Blatherwick 2016): the world of the text is not only heavily populated with jinn, ghouls, sorcerers, and arcane devices, but these figures and devices are main characters and crucial plot points. Magical engagement in *Sīrat Sayf* not only delights and entertains, I argue, but also constructs gender within the narrative, by disrupting characters' conformity to social roles derived from sex and gender, repositioning them within a gendered system of social relations, altering their bodies, and producing drag.

A number of scholarly works on *Sīrat Sayf* have taken up the question of gender, and specifically the richness of representations of women; these works consider magic in their analyses but do not center it in their interpretation of gender (Jayyusi 1996, Kruk 2013, Hannoosh Steinberg 2018).[3] Our understandings of gender and magic in Arabic literature, and specifically the interactions of these two categories, remain undertheorised despite innovations in both queer theory emerging out of gender, sex, and sexuality studies and historical Islamicate occult studies. This essay therefore brings these conversations together to model a new engagement with these texts and themes.[4] A crucial part of this engagement includes recognising and responding to Afsaneh Najmabadi's critical question: 'By focusing our gender analytics on men and women, do we, as historians, not continue to naturalize manhood and womanhood and thereby underwrite heteronormativity?' (Najmabadi 2006, 12).

1 The term *al-Ḥabasha* refers to modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and portions of Egypt. There is a long history of connections between *al-Ḥabasha* and the Arabian Peninsula; notable here is the war of attrition in the Abyssinian plateau between Muslim and Christian governments of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries. See EI2, *Ḥabash*.

2 See Blatherwick (2016), especially pages 23–26, for a more in-depth discussion of the religio-cultural context and connotations of Sīrat Sayf's *Ḥabashī* setting, as well as the text's broader plot structure.

3 As Hannoosh Steinberg and Rachel Schine (2019) both note, discussions of gender in the *siyar sha'biyya* tend to be centered upon instances in which women behave 'like' men.

4 A good model for simultaneously speaking about gender and magic is Laurie Pierce's 'Serpents and Sorcery: Humanity, Gender, and The Demonic in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.' See Pierce (2015, 362).

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While the past fifteen years have seen a flourishing of scholarly work on topics of gender, sex, and sexuality in historical Islamicate cultural production, little scholarship analysing gender in the literature and fiction produced in these contexts has seriously responded to Najmabadi's call to apply nonbinary frameworks of gender analysis in interpreting and analysing these sources.[5] This is not to deny that, in the text and the cultures in which the text was produced, gender was often correlated with sexual dimorphism in humans. however, it is worth calling attention to the *de facto* assumption of gender in our analyses as both binary and sex-correlated. In this assumption, we risk the naturalization and atemporalisation of specific notions of dichotomous gender. Furthermore, we preemptively foreclose on our capability to consider how fiction and gender can be constructed together in historical Islamicate sources.

5 The notable exception of which I know is Antrim (2020).

Fiction need not passively or inevitably 'reflect' gendered social realities. Much of the power in *Sīrat Sayf*, and especially power in matters related to sex, does exist within a binary and sex-correlated frame (i.e. men as male, women as female). However, when we read for gender without naturalising a contemporary binary system into our analysis, we can see that aspects of the text's fictivity alter gender: in particular, the use of magic by characters in *Sīrat Sayf* can be read as altering their fields of power such that they embody a nonbinary 'magical gender.' I argue, therefore, for reading magical engagement as a constitutive element of gender in *Sīrat Sayf*, and thus for reading the use of magic in the text as something that in fact enables fluid gender transitions. Theorisations from feminist history, queer studies, and trans studies structure this analysis.

I want to emphasise that I am not arguing for the presence of a magical nonbinary gender category in the historical societies which produced *Sīrat Sayf*.[6] Rather, I am arguing for particular reading practices that respond to criticism of the presentist naturalisation of binary sex and gender by defining gender in line with contemporary theorisations. I am interested in tracing how gender is constructed alongside fiction in a particular text, which does not exist outside of the society that produced it but is nonetheless a space of imaginative possibility for experiences beyond those present in society. As Judith Butler has observed (Butler 1988, 1989, 2011), the notion of stable and essentialised genders is a fabrication, a fantasy of coherence overlaid onto bodies, and this fiction is constructed simultaneously in the past by the readers-authors-performers of *Sīrat Sayf* and by scholars who interpret the work today. Gender itself can be an Islamicate fiction.

6 Magic was practiced in Muslim societies; see *EI2* '*siḥr*' as an initial foray and Saif, Leoni, Melvin-Koushki, Yahya (2020) for a recent discussion.

I begin with an introduction to *Sīrat Sayf* and the relationship of magic–and here I use the term 'magic' to refer broadly to the nexus of occult scientific practices, marvels, and otherworldly contacts present in the narrative–to its fictivity. I follow this with a discussion of the nonbinary

theorisations of gender I utilise in my reading. I then demonstrate how a 'magical gender' is actively constructed with and against particular elements of the *sīra*'s fiction, namely magical practices.

Sīrat Sayf and magical, marvelous fictivity

Despite the diachronic appreciation of popular epics, the *siyar* tradition has remained fairly niche within studies of classical Arabic literature; within studies of *siyar*, *Sīrat Sayf* itself is also rather obscure.[7] The unfamiliar reader may appreciate a brief introduction to both *Sīrat Sayf* and the *siyar* tradition together. Helen Blatherwick nicely summarises the *siyar* genre: on the whole, it '...consists of a number of narratives which cover an extensive range of subject matter and geo-cultural situations and which each have a potentially infinite number of tellings. They are popular over a wide geographic area, of oral nature (whether in oral or written form), are of considerable length, and relate the legendary history of a hero, or heroes, and the social group to which they belong' (Blatherwick 2016, 10–11). To say the *siyar* are oral in nature means that the texts display, in their construction, an interaction and coexistence between oral and written forms of the narratives (Blatherwick 2016, 20–21; Ott 2003).

As for *Sīrat Sayf*, the text form we see today emerged out of a narrative tradition and likely became recognisable sometime between the late fourteenth and sixteenth centuries(Norris 1989, 129; Blatherwick 2016, 18). A number of its key geographical and historical references indicate an Egyptian provenance; however, legends and stories about the titular King Sayf are believed to stem from the historical existence of a Yemeni Ḥimyarite ruler by the same name in the sixth century CE. Stories surrounding King Sayf have long histories extending through North, East, and West Africa (Blatherwick 2016, 18; Crudu 2014). Taking the adventures of the titular King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan as its focus, set in a mythic or legendary time before the advent of Islam, *Sīrat Sayf* '...tells the story of how Sayf leads his people into Egypt, diverts the Nile to its current course, and then goes on to conquer the worlds of men and jinn in the name of Islam' (Blatherwick 2016, 1). My own work with *Sīrat Sayf* focuses primarily on the portions of the narrative where Sayf undertakes a number of ever-deepening and twisting quests in order to facilitate his first marriage, working closely with his jinn milk-sister, ʿĀqiṣa, and other strange, valuable, and often downright magical allies.[8]

Indeed, *Sīrat Sayf* is a text suffused with depictions of magic, magically charged events, and magical technology. Harry T. Norris goes so far as to write:

7 See Blatherwick (2016, 3) for a full discussion of why this has been the case.

8 For more on the plot, dating, structure, and development of *Sīrat Sayf*, see Lyons (1995) and Norris (1996) in addition to Blatherwick (2016).

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> Sayf, however, is enclosed within the parameters of a quite different world...Much of it seems to be unconnected with everyday life, and the lines separating the world of magicians and jinn from that of humankind are all but nonexistent. Symbolism has precedence over realism. Gory battles give way to magical spells and marvelous machinery. (Norris 2016, xiv)

The degree to which the presence of magic in *Sīrat Sayf* is enmeshed with its fictionality merits deeper consideration, particularly given the recent methodological turn and new epistemological considerations brought forth in the study of Islamicate occult sciences and magic. Work in the past decade especially has demonstrated the pervasiveness of occult scientific worldviews and practices in medieval Islamicate societies; our intellectual and scientific histories are incomplete when medieval Islamic occult sciences are marginalised from them as a means of sanitising Islamic history of 'irrationality' or 'falsehood' in response to Orientalist critiques of backwardness or decline.[9] 'Magical spells' and 'marvellous machinery,' as Norris says, are not part of a separate world, but very much a part of the medieval Islamicate landscape. With this, the magic present in *Sīrat Sayf* comes into view not necessarily as a fantasy element of the story, as an indicator of its falseness, but as a legitimately possible, if not quotidian, aspect of *Sīrat Sayf*'s readers' and listeners' worldviews.

This is not to say that listeners or readers of *Sīrat Sayf* necessarily believed (or partook in) all of the magic espoused by *Sīrat Sayf*. Magic can be recognised as having an indeterminate status, holding the possibilities of both social 'fact' and literary 'fiction.' The readers of *Sīrat Sayf* deserve more credit than is traditionally granted for the sophistication of their reading practices and theorisations of fictivity. I argue this in a similar vein as Michelle Karnes or Matthew Keegan (Keegan 2017, especially Chapter 3; Karnes 2020). Previous scholarship on fiction and fictivity in the medieval Islamicate world, especially in non-elite or popular forms, tends to highlight lies, falsehood, and entertainment as defining elements and interpretations. This is certainly the case for *siyar*: Thomas Herzog posits that composers of the *siyar shaʿbiyya* attempted to avoid the customary criticism of learned scholars that viewed imaginative story-telling, especially that which engaged historical figures and events, as a dangerous falsehood borne by misdirected authorial attribution (Herzog 2012, 31). However, while writing about al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt Abī Zayd al-Sarūjī* and *adab*—though different in genre than the *siyar shaʿbiyya*—Keegan nonetheless demonstrates that medieval authors from the Abbasid era forward had more complex and, frankly, more interesting techniques of assessing fictivity.[10] Just as the perceived prohibition against fiction in Islamicate cultures '...tells us much more about the persistence of late

9 On this point, see Matthew Melvin-Koushki (2017), and Liana Saif and Francesca Leoni (2020).

10 *Maqāmāt* are stories; *adab*, though difficult to define precisely, is the term generally used to refer to belles-lettres or *paideia*.

Victorian notions of literature and morality than they do about the texts at hand,' (Keegan 2017, 239), so too does relegating the role of magic in *Sīrat Sayf* to a marker of its falseness say more about modern attitudes than medieval readership.

If the presence of magic no longer immediately exiles a work to the realm of falsehood, or if magic in the medieval Islamicate world does not constitute fantasy, then we can ask what magic might 'do' in the narrative world of *Sīrat Sayf*. Much like the descriptions of marvels found in travel literature—a comparison that I find salient because of the fact that much of *Sīrat Sayf* finds the characters voyaging to wondrous, far-off, and/or magical realms, such as the City of Women or Mount Qāf—*Sīrat Sayf* presents, through magic, narrations of things and places which are marvelously *possible* without being necessarily *real*.[11] Magic opens a window of imaginative possibility, and it does so through quotidian and recognisable methods (narrative and occult-scientific practice). This can (and, I argue, should) apply to gender as much as anything else: we can read the use of magic in the text as something that shifts characters into more capacious and fluid gender categories than were societally normative during the text's production.

11 See Prior (2009) on Mount Qāf, often cited as a major locus of magic and marvels in medieval Islamicate literature. See Karnes (2020) or Zadeh (2010) for more examples of medieval aesthetic choices in deprivileging the opposition of truth and fact and the cultivation of astonishment in the *ʿajā'ib* genre.

Gender as a field of power

Reading magic in *Sīrat Sayf* in this vein follows from the view that gender is something shaped and constructed as part of the *sīra*'s narrative world. Just as magic can no longer be read as an inauthentic or even unreal component of historical Muslim worldviews in light of recent work, so too do recent queer and poststructuralist approaches to gender show that gender is not something inherently subsisting within texts. This does not mean that *Sīrat Sayf* is devoid of influence or unresponsive to a cultural backdrop made up of general perceptions, stereotypes, laws, and taboos regarding what gender was, nor does it preclude the *sīra* from engaging and playing with tropes about gender. It is important to ask how and where gender was being theorised in the *sīra*'s own times: where was the fiction of gender being articulated, what was being said about it, and what sources are we able to access in the present that partake in the theorisation of gender in the long durée of *Sīrat Sayf*'s composition? Unfortunately, thorough answers to these questions are outside the scope of this article. This is because, as Marion Katz neatly explains in 'Textual Study of Gender,' gender was not a monolithic category even within time- and place-specific Islamic normative discourses (defined here as works authored by urban, educated, male elites, such as government records, histories, biographical dictionaries, jurisprudence, *adab*, etc); gender is

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perpetually intersected with other factors (economic status, ethnicity and race, marital status, freedom or unfreedom, residential lifestyles, etc); and gender as it was experienced in real time and life is not necessarily what is represented in these sources (Katz, 2016).

I would point the reader seeking to better understand gender in Mamluk society broadly towards Yossef Rapaport's 'Women and Gender in Mamluk Society: An Overview.' Rapaport shows how early Mamluk society was highly gendered, '...with both men and women contributing to economic and political life, but doing so in largely separate spheres of activity' (Rapaport 2007, 47) and how later Mamluk society witnessed a shift in the relationship between the public and private, the state and households, leading to shifting (often blurring) landscapes of gender relations. For the theorist of gender, these assertions suggest that, first, early Mamluk gender relations map onto sexual dimorphism, and second, that looking to qualitative accounts of masculinity and femininity will give us more information about the normative ideas with which *Sīrat Sayf* is engaged. Yet each of these suggestions has been complicated and challenged, as well. Indira Falk Gesink, Ahmed Ragab, and Zayde Antrim have all demonstrated the flexibility, complexity, and spectrum-like quality of sex designations across medieval Muslim sources, leading to Antrim's powerful assertion of '...the inadequacy of a binary construction of sex for understanding the way bodies were perceived and positioned in premodern legal and medical discourses' (Antrim 2020, 4).[12] Second, as Everett Rowson, Nadia El-Cheikh, and others have shown, assertions about gender and sexuality tend to tell us more about who is doing the describing than about the societies they claim to describe: gender is harnessed and implicated in identity construction and the maintenance of its borders.[13]

Instead of focusing on gender in society, I want to quickly attend to tropes surrounding gender in the *sīra* (by no means an exhaustive account). Hannoosh-Steinberg notes two that recur broadly: that of female sexual desire as stronger than male sexual desire (and its necessary control and satisfaction through marriage), and that of *kayd al-nisā'*, or the wiles of women, the ability and tendency of women to utilise their exclusive and private access to their husbands to manipulate political power. Kruk reads the treatment of female characters as indicative of ideas about *fitna* (social chaos): female characters are able to behave as the male characters do (especially in the martial realm) so long as their institutional power and their sexuality–a threat to social order–remains appropriately constrained (Kruk 1998). Blatherwick develops this idea further in her reading of *Sīrat Sayf*, noting that, following marriage, '...these women lose their "male" attributes and settle down to the life of a stay-at-home wife and mother' (Blatherwick 2019, 5–6).

12 For example, see Gesink (2018) or Ragab (2015). Additionally, Antrim (2020) has excellent bibliographic notes on this topic.

13 For example, see Rowson (1991) or El-Cheikh (2015).

Focusing on representations of anger, Blatherwick finds that, while both male and female characters model anger at injustice in *Sīrat Sayf*, the injustice to which female characters react takes place more domestically and is routinely linked with jealousy and even social insecurity, in opposition to more public and honor-based scenarios to which male characters respond. Furthermore, when motivations for a character's anger are incongruous with the gendered representation of said anger, a great social threat is signaled. In the emotional landscape of the text, 'the male, patriarchal forces of order are in tension with the female forces of chaos in an unstable and perpetually shifting balance that must be kept in equilibrium…this attitude towards women reflects the underlying concern of Sīrat Sayf with the reconciliation of male and female forces and their readoption of their appropriate places in the world order' (Blatherwick 2019, 5–6). This resonates with the assertions of Lena Jayyusi in the introduction to her translation of *Sīrat Sayf*, who writes:

> One of the most striking features of the gender landscape delineated here is the absence of the hard dividing line between 'woman' as private, emotional, and reactive, if not passive, and 'man' as a public, rational, and active agent that one finds in western notions of the culture of the Arabic world...Rather, the gender identities of both male and female are melded of the same combinations. (Jayussi 1996, xxii)

These scholars together posit that, in *Sīrat Sayf*, gender is organised in binary categories situated on an axis, even if that axis is not the one contemporary readers may have presupposed.

What if we began our interpretation with a different definition of gender, untethered from the essential, inherent, or ontological? In so doing, we can read gender as composed of and altered by elements of a text's fictivity. Magic changes the capabilities and the options characters have in *Sīrat Sayf's* fictive world; characters using magic do things differently and do different things than their counterparts who do not use magic. As such, when reading the text, I shape my inquiries around gender not by tracing men and women or differences between them, but by asking how aspects of the text's world, like magic, shape characters' fields of power and the performances of gender they undertake.

I make use of two different definitions of gender for this reading. The first is Joan Scott's, who wrote 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' with the aim of defining gender as an analytic category, therefore enabling rich inquiry into 'how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced, deployed, and changed' (Scott 1986, 1423) in the study of history and historical sources. Theorisations of gender generally adopted by historians tend to reinscribe a fixed opposition of masculine and

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feminine that works to universalise particular and contextual understandings of those terms.[14] Scott therefore argues for a working definition of gender that refuses a fixed gender binary and that enables a genuine historicisation of the terms of sexual difference. She defines gender first as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived difference between sexes, and second as a primary way of signifying relationships to power. The first portion of the definition speaks to the construction of gender relations; the second theorises gender itself. Scott specifies that gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Gender, as an established set of references, structures the perception and organisation of social life, and these references establish distributions of power, thereby deeply implicating gender itself in the construction of power. Scott's definition works well in conversation with Najmabadi's critique of how gender and sex are studied in historical, non-Western sources and the tendency of contemporary scholars to reproduce our own historical binarisation of gender within our sources, thus limiting the voices of historical actors and our subsequent understanding of them. Reflecting on her previous work, Scott notes: '...what "Gender" (the article) actually does is posit "women" and "men" as conceptual categories. It refuses the idea that those two words transparently describe enduring objects (or bodies) and instead asks how those bodies are thought' (Scott 1986, 1426).

14 The exception is that legal-historical studies of Islam have long considered the presence and existence of eunuchs, intersex persons, and practices such as cross-dressing.

Second, I utilise Judith Butler's oeuvre on gender, sex, and sexuality, which provides insights into *Sīrat Sayf* that are both tandem to and unique from what emerges out of Scott's interpretive metric. For Butler, there is nothing fundamentally possessed by an individual that indicates or expresses an innate gender. Gender is, instead, 'an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*...produced through the stylisation of the body performative' (Butler 1989, 193). The 'reality' of gender is its social performance. Butler writes,

> Gender is not…determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler 1988, 531)

In contradistinction to Scott, Butler therefore challenges the notion of sex as a stable and essential biological category (distinguished from gender as a historical category). They note, 'Indeed, if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is

codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender' (ibid, 524). Sex, they argue, is not a singular condition of the body, but the retroactive construction and installation of a fiction or fantasy by regulatory norms which materialise 'sex' through their forced reiteration (Butler 2011, 2–10). Thus Butler exhorts us to not reify sexual difference, for, resonating with Najmabadi's warning, that reification '...unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality' (Butler 1988, 530).

I structure my interpretations of gender within *Sīrat Sayf* around these definitions at different points, depending on what the text itself emphasises, opting to remain fluid in my own fundamental theorisations of the category. Importantly, even as Scott and Butler differ, both definitions of gender work against what, in the context of contemporary field of archaeology, Ghisleni, Jordan, and Fioccoprile have termed the 'binary binds': 'the interpretation of sex and gender…has long been contained by the social polarity of "man" and "woman" as well as the confinement of sex in biology and gender in culture' (Ghisleni et al 2016, 766). These binds '…lay claim to a particular configuration of sex, the body, gender, and their interrelationships, containing how we understand the constitution of social subjects as well as how we confront multiplicity and ambiguity' (Ghisleni et al 2016, 767). Ghisleni, Jordan, and Fioccoprile also note that '…we can "de-contain" our categories and practices from the exclusionary assumptions that "bind" inquiry toward recognising only certain kinds of persons, ways of being different, or processes of knowledge production' (Ghisleni et al 2016, 767). To practice this de-containment myself, I borrow some perspective from Stryker, Currah, and Moore, scholars of trans studies who conceptualise genders not '...as classes or categories that by definition contain only one kind of thing (which raises unavoidable questions about the masked rules and normativities that constitute qualifications for categorical membership)' but instead as '...potentially porous and permeable spatial territories (arguably numbering more than two), each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference' (Stryker et al 2008, 12).

While *Sīrat Sayf* certainly presents a normative binary system for its characters, magic serves as a queering force that denaturalises 'men' and 'women' as categories of gender in the text and disturbs the static stability of 'male' and 'female' as well. Whether through inherent magical power or through the use of magical technology, a character practicing magic shifts their gender by changing key referents within their field of power, and subsequently the field itself, or by changing their bodily performances.

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Characters using magic in *Sīrat Sayf* are 'in transition'; their bodies reorient themselves within, across, and between time and (gendered) space (Stryker et al 2008, 13). They move not only horizontally between naturalised ideas of 'men' and 'women' but also, as these authors say, according to different spatio-temporal metaphors (Stryker et al 2008, 13). Engagements and entanglements with magic and occult sciences unbind the characters from their seemingly binary genders and sexed bodies, differing in their socialisation and power from characters who do not engage magic and whose gender and sex remain binary and correlated (male-men, female-women). This is not the same as saying, for example, that women who use magic take up the power or socialisation of men, or vice-versa. These characters do not become either men or 'empowered women,' but instead differently powerful, magical beings. Thus, through a relationship with particular aspects of the *sīra*'s fiction, namely occult and magical practices, characters become gendered differently from men and women who do not engage these practices.

Magical gendering

When gender is rigorously interpreted as a relationship to power or as a performance of bodily acts, we are able to consider what aspects of a text's fictivity alter and construct that power, those acts, that body. The use of magic in *Sīrat Sayf* disrupts conformity to social roles and positionality within systems derived from sex and gender, alters bodies, and produces drag. Thus I argue that we can read magic as a constitutive component of gender. Furthermore, when men and women use magic in *Sīrat Sayf*'s narrative, we can read the corresponding shift in power, socialisation, and performance as the transition to a nonbinary, magical gender for that character.

Here, I briefly model an analysis based on this reading practice. I draw on stories of the sorcerer, ʿĀqila; the jinn, ʿĀqiṣa; the ghoul, Ghaylūna; and the princess Munyat al-Nufūs. The interaction between each character's gender and use of magic will benefit from more detailed explorations in the future; here I simply hope to sketch how magic use shifts one's field of power and therefore can be read as structuring a nonbinary gender.

Non-conformity to social roles

Magic alters gender by unbinding characters from aspects of social roles typically defined and negotiated alongside sex and gender. Most notably, engagement with magic enables characters to acquire wealth, status, and independence without reliance on sexual or familial politics. This is not the case for characters who do not use magic, thus we see magic changing a referent (sexual/familial politics) within a field of power (gender) and enabling greater fluidity.

The sorcerer ʿĀqila, commander of King Qamrūn's court sorcerers and eventually Sayf's in-law, provides a clear example. ʿĀqila is notable both in the independence she models and the dependence she cultivates. Both King Qamrūn and Sayf are dependent upon ʿĀqila: she is a powerful geomancer, potent in combat and deeply saturated in secret, arcane knowledge. The text reads,

> ʿĀqila commanded them all [the sorcerers] because King Qamrūn did not depend on anyone except her and did not do anything except with her counsel, for she was the most knowledgeable and knowing in her station in the kingdom of the west and in the cities and districts that surrounded it and commanded all of the sorcerers living in it. (all translations mine, *Sīrat Fāris al-Yaman al-Malik Sayf ibn Dhī* Yazan 1970, 1:75)

Indeed, the major arc of ʿĀqila and King Sayf's first encounter is driven by ʿĀqila's manipulation of the geomantic practices of her underling sorcerers to aid King Sayf in breaching the city of Qaymar. When Sayf asks to reward ʿĀqila for this aid, ʿĀqila generously declines, commenting on what the power acquired through knowledge of and engagement with magic provides instead:

> Oh son, you wish to reward me, but nothing is far from me. If I desired money, then I would have it, and if I desired dominion of a land, I could attain all of what I wish by my crafts. If I wanted servants, then I have bands of jinn most obedient to me from afar. (1:84)

The dependency ʿĀqila imposes upon others, her access to wealth and status, and her manipulative means–all of which alter ʿĀqila's broader field of power–are uniquely the result of the character's geomantic practice. ʿĀqila's ability to change her and others' material conditions, her access to imperial persons, and her leadership role are based on her use of magic, and are therefore unrelated to production of sexual desire, nor are they bounded or mitigated by normative marital, sexual, or familial relations. This sits strongly in contradistinction to wealthy or high-ranking women of the *sīra* who are not suffused with magic. There are women in *Sīrat Sayf* whose fortunes provide them with entire islands of

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entertainment and isolation and more (Munyat al-Nufūs) or whose proximity to imperial powers enable their widespread influence (Qamariyya, Nāhid). However, these women are wives, daughters, and future-wives; their power is always contingent upon and bound up in sexual and familial politics.

An anecdote about ʿĀqila demonstrates how magic has provided her independence from these forces, and thus shifted her gender:

> In another of her years, a man learned in sorcery, sharp and jealous, was enamored of her, and his name was Tabḥūn the Learned. But in science, he was wicked and domineering and diligent in divination and sorcerous practices and after she [ʿĀqila] became a bedfellow to him, he wanted her to disclose to him what of the tablets whose contents were under her hand. She said to him, 'these are secrets which one, neither slaves nor free people, does not disclose.' He attacked her in speech and the matter concluded with an altercation, and after that came fighting. Indeed, ʿĀqila the Learned was stronger than him in the sciences of divination, but she believed him to be mighty and not defeatable, and she feared that he would slay her. So she made up a poisoned lance and took him unawares so that she overpowered him and stabbed him with that lance in the eye, killing him. And he had been commanding 180 wizards, so they came to ʿĀqila the Learned and waged war upon her. She overcame them and made them obey her and they became under her hand. She also had 180 wizards, so those under her control became 360 wizards and all were under her command. (1:75)

While ʿĀqila is quite old at the time of her meeting King Sayf, the text does not present ʿĀqila as someone who is fundamentally incapable of involvement in sexual politics; this is to say, that the text gives us a story about her youth and sexuality implies that her being old and presently unavailable sexually is not the exclusive shaper of her social field. Rather, because of her magic, ʿĀqila is able to navigate her personal and political entanglements unbound, in accordance with her desires, despite her involvement. As the direct result of magical prowess, ʿĀqila enters into a distinct field of power that shifts her gender.

Ghaylūna the ghoul inhabits a similar field of power as ʿĀqila. Born by the combination of wizard semen, wolf semen, and smoke in a woman's uterus, she is a ghoul, but a ghoul who can become human again through a betrayal of her alterity, aligned with the will of God and the aid of King Sayf.[15] Ghaylūna is unbound from normative structures of imperial relations and commanding of expertise (both linguistic and in leadership):

15 A *ghūl* is an ancient Arabian shapeshifting desert creature that leads travelers astray and devours them. While often taken to be female, there is debate around the exact gendered taxonomy of the *ghūl* and other similar or related creatures. See EI^2 '*ghūl*'.

> …The ghoul laughed and, speaking to him in eloquent Arabic, said, 'Come down, King Sayf, and do not fear the ghouls. I am the biggest of them and I will protect you from them because I am their leader… The tree does not protect you, for if had I wanted to eat you, I could have commanded the ghouls to strike you with stones until you perished and fell to them, and they too would have eaten you, for they would not care if you were a king among kings or poor tramp.' (1:206)

The power conveyed through Ghaylūna's magical ghoul nature overrides traditional imperial protections and flattens class distinctions. It also largely removes her from sexual and familial politics: no marriage, consort, or children. Her position of power is related to her wizard father, who was her teacher in the arcane arts; however, he is dead. Rather like ʿĀqila, Ghaylūna flourishes independently and maintains her power through her magical skill set–such as capturing and commanding a magic rooster who fights hostile ghouls–and her secret knowledge of a spell, which will destroy all the other ghouls of the valley.

In this, Ghaylūna operates outside of normative social bo(u)nds of womanhood established by the text; the presence of magic changes Ghaylūna's gender. It is worth noting, as well, that as the narrative progresses, God 'changes Ghaylūna's state' such that Ghaylūna becomes less a ghoul, less magical, and more a human, partaking in appropriate religious practices and social norms (such as cooking food instead of eating it raw). It is only following this change that Ghaylūna dies in combat; she is not able to express her power successfully in what was her previous arena when she was entangled with magic.

Bodily alteration

The use of magic alters bodies; this too marks the change of a particular referent within a field of power, whose shift opens the possibilities of greater gender fluidity. Ghaylūna again is an exemplar: Ghaylūna fights for King Sayf and the text reads, 'Ghaylūna grabbed a man and struck him against another, killing them both' (1: 219). Her demonstrated physical prowess is extreme. She also hunts deer for King Sayf as they sojourn, another physically-based activity in which most women of the text never partake. Ghaylūna's entanglement with magic—a combination of the inheritance and expertise she learned from her wizard father and from being something of a marvel, as an eloquent, virtuous ghoul—sees her express different physical capabilities and different capacities for violently

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impacting others, and thus a different relationship to conventional fields of power, than women in the text.

King Sayf's milk-sibling, the jinn ʿĀqiṣa, is another figure whose body is altered by magic and whose field of power and thus gender changes. ʿĀqiṣa possesses incredible physical capabilities, being able to shape matter and fly, and often saves Sayf from otherwise impossible situations on the basis of these abilities:

> A thunderbolt fell from the sky, with sparks and fire and hailstones, and smoke and fire poured down, and a hand grabbed Shāma with her son at her bosom, and a speaker said to her, 'Hold your child well,' and a second hand took King Sayf and rose into the cold and went up until they could hear the praising of angels...King Sayf shouted at his carrier and said, Are you ʿAyrūḍ?' and the carrier said, 'I'm not ʿAyrūḍ, I am ʿĀqiṣa!' (1:220)

ʿĀqiṣa navigates courtly and non-physical social settings in a manner akin to non-magical women in the text; she relies on similar tricks and accepts (or chafes against) similar boundaries with regards to social institutions like marriage. However, when her magical physicality is invoked, ʿĀqiṣa is enabled to relate to King Sayf and other characters in a manner different from non-magical women: not only is she able to alter the course of certain death, as above, but in situations contingent upon her physicality, ʿĀqiṣa is granted a particular power of refusal.

As an example, ʿĀqiṣa, rich in secret knowledge of the marvelous and the fantastic, shows Sayf seven wondrous cities and their associated marvels as she flies him across faraway and enchanted realms, educating him all the way. When 'Āqiṣa thinks that Sayf is being foolhardy in demanding to enter some of these realms, she simply refuses to comply with his wishes any longer: 'What are you trying to force upon me? By God, I will no longer accompany you; [that is for] whoever is satisfied that he has taken his brother and destroyed him' (1:111). Similarly, ʿĀqiṣa refuses to heed Sayf's wishes regarding sparing the life of his mother, Qamariyya, who is also a major villain. She is able to do this largely because she has physical control over Qamariyya, and physical control that supersedes the efforts of others: 'King Sayf shouted, "ʿĀqiṣa, lower her down to me!" ...then she flung Qamariyya into the air with determination…ʿĀqiṣa caught the sword and threw Qamariyya upon it while she screamed…' (1:368).

A referent that constructs ʿĀqila's gender and sex–ʿĀqila's body–is changed through her entanglement with magic, and thus her larger field of power–her gender–also shifts. Analogous magical entanglements similarly change the fields of power in which characters such as ʿĀqila and Ghaylūna operate and the gendered/sexed references that construct them.

Magical drag

Lastly, I want to consider the impact of magical technology on gender transitions in *Sīrat Sayf*. The previous examples of ʿĀqila, ʿĀqiṣa, and Ghaylūna all cite magical practices reliant upon ontology or study; in other words, their magic is fully embodied. What, then, is the effect of magical artifice or items on the construction of a character's gender?

A clarifying example is that of Munyat al-Nufūs. Munya is the princess of the Diamond Isle, an island at the end of the world, who vacations in the enchanted Garden of Delights, which cannot be entered by jinn and has never been entered by a man. She and her companions have magical feather robes, which enable them to fly like birds. Sayf, who falls in love with Munya after secretly spying on her and her companions while adventuring through marvelous realms with ʿĀqiṣa, steals her robe, thus trapping Munya in the garden.

When her companions leave to search for the robe, Sayf and ʿĀqiṣa kidnap Munya, who is quickly convinced to marry Sayf. Eventually they return to Sayf's kingdom. Munya tricks Ṭāma, another of Sayf's wives and ʿĀqila's daughter, into bringing her back her feathered robe. She dons the robe, flies to the top of the palace, and declares:

> I have remembered my family, my neighbors, my kingdom, and my court, and I have no intention aside from going to them. My longing for them pours down and I have been away from them for too long, so do not censure me…If King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan comes and asks you about me, then say to him: she left for her country for the comfort of her heart and soul, and her son is with her. It is beyond you or one thousand [other] kings to possess Munyat al-Nufūs, daughter of King Qāsim al-ʿAbūs, as the daughters of kings are not taken by thievery, rather by proper contract and amicable manner. You stole me from among my companions and afflicted me with grief and abandonment. But what has been, has been. (1:377 and 1:378)

The use of the magic robe immediately changes Munya's capabilities; she is captured and domesticated without it, but immediately upon its reacquisition, her field of power changes.

I would argue, however, for the interpretation of Munya's case as one of not just magical gendering, but specifically magical drag. In putting on the robe, Munya demonstrates how magic actively constructs and modifies gender. In so doing, Munya also reveals the perpetual instability of gender categories within the text. Drag, Butler writes, 'fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (Butler 1989, 186). The performance forces an audience to

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consider one's anatomical sex, their gender, and the gender they are performing simultaneously. The existence of these three elements as different from each of the others necessarily suggests that gender cannot be an essential characteristic or quality. Thus, '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*' (Butler 1989, 187). Donning the magical robe, Munya's performance nods to the way in which magic shapes gender while also reminding us that magic can do so because gender is a fluid, fictive phenomenon.

Conclusion

The use of magic in *Sīrat Sayf* can be read as a factor that shifts gender expectations and facilitates gender transitions. This reading depends on a rigorous definition of gender as a concept or category unbound from binary sex; this definition is drawn from feminist history, queer theory, and trans theory. As the above examples have shown, magic impacts a character's power and socialisation, enabling them to shift from the structured boundaries of manhood or womanhood into a magical, nonbinary gender that is uncorrelated with their assigned sex. This can be a stable state over the course of a character's lifetime, such as we see in the example of ʿĀqila, or a regular aspect of a character's life in situations relevant to their magic but irrelevant in others, like ʿĀqiṣa. Furthermore, the use of magical items and artifice throughout the text can be read as instances of magical drag, which both highlight the ability of magic to structure gender and also reinscribe the inherent instability of gender throughout the narrative.

Interpreting *Sīrat Sayf* in this way offers, first, an example of how scholars might continue to develop queries into medieval Islamicate fictionalities with attention to the inadvertent stabilisation and reproduction of gender binaries that can occur through analytical approaches beginning with the assumption of binaries as opposed to an interrogation of the terms of production of gender difference in texts and sources. While historicist approaches often urge caution in such readings, concerned with the potential for anachronism against overt and contemporaneous formulations of gender, sex, and sexuality, scholars need not reify a culture of hesitancy that disregards the possibilities queer theories make available in our readings of medieval texts. Even when linked, binary sex-gender systems operate normatively in the worldview of a medieval text, gender and analyses of gender in that text can be more capacious and offer us new insights in that capaciousness, as I hope I have demonstrated here.

Directly following from that, the second possibility this interpretation offers is a new avenue for considering how fictivity constructs and affects gender. Much work in Islamicate fiction considers how gender operates within the bounds or frame of a fictive text or genre of texts. Little work seems to ask how fictivity shapes and makes gender itself. This piece is an initial step in pursuing that question. It shows how fictive aspects of the text that open imaginative possibilities within the construction of the narrative (here, magic) also open imaginative possibilities within the realm of gender by relocating characters within gendered systems of social relationships, disrupting their normative conformity to sex- and gender-based social roles, altering their bodies, and producing drag.

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