

Nourishing the Noble: Breastfeeding and Hero-Making in Medieval Arabic Popular Literature

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of nursing experiences in the formation of popular heroes in Arabic literature of the medieval period, with a primary focus on the genres of siyar shaʿbiyya and qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ. I show that the miraculous nursing of heroes—many of whom are foundlings—in popular texts tends to follow a providential meeting either with an animal or with a woman who is capable of nursing. Though such tale patterns are attested across many cultures, they are also elaborated in specific, linked ways in traditional Muslim sources, as in narratives of Moses’s miraculous nursing and stories of Muḥammad’s wet nurse, Ḥalīma. Whereas prophetic literature often depicts nursing solely as a human-human relationship, the heroic literature incorporates significant human-animal encounters. Using an exemplary anecdote about a hero’s suckling found in manuscripts and early print editions of Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma, I sketch how one such instance can travel and shift across an epic tradition. I interpret the experience of the hero’s foster mother through the lens both of traditional Islamic institutions of milk kinship and of a reading practice that attends closely to women’s presences and agencies in the early lives of (mostly) male literary figures.

Introduction

יא בנתי אנתי לאש האדא מנך חתא תרבי אלאיתאם אולאד אלזנא ומלקוט.
ואלחאל מא ענדרך חאנא ביה וחליבך צאפי חלאל¹ ירנע חראם פי חראם.

يا بنتي انت لاش هذا منك حتى تربي الايتام اولاد الزنا وملقوت والحال ما عندك حاجة به
وحليبك صافي حلال يرجع حرام في حرام

O my daughter, what’s become of you that you’re raising orphan bastards and foundlings? Really, you have no need to do so, and your milk is pure and sound. Sin is recompensed with sin. –*Sīrat al-Dalhama*²

One of the first acts in many newborns’ lives is suckling at a breast—be it their mother’s or a wet nurse’s. Instances of a decisive and often providential first encounter between a

1. The Judeo-Arabic original uses the word גלאל (جلال), *jalāl*, meaning glory or splendor, rather than *ḥalāl*, meaning sound or legitimate. However, in light of the context and syntax, this seems to be a transcription error on the part of the text’s editor. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

2. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, ed. Eliezer Farḥī and Ḥai Sitruk (Tunis: Farhi and Sitruk, 1890?), 11.



child destined for heroic status and a woman capable of nursing occur throughout Arabic popular literature and folklore, and images of milk and lactation abound. In Islamic societies, milk kinship forms bonds that, in addition to implying a physical intimacy between woman and child, carry a legal status that mirrors that of agnatic ties by instantiating a prohibition against marriage among milk-siblings. In contemporary discourse, the choice of whether and how to nurse is conceived of either as a female biological imperative, and thus a foregone conclusion, or as something that has been taken from women and harnessed by patriarchal, sovereign forces and interests.³ Nonetheless, in choosing to nurse certain children, women are theoretically able to exercise gatekeeping power over the constitution of their families and social worlds, and this prospect is reflected in a number of popular narratives.⁴

This essay uses an anecdote found in less well-known versions of the medieval Arabic frontier epic *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*—the Tunisian, Judeo-Arabic version printed in the 1890s/1307-1318 and MS Arabe 3840 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (dated to the seventeenth or eighteenth/eleventh or twelfth century)⁵—as well as comparative materials from *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (stories of the prophets) and other *siyar sha'biyya* (popular epics) to show that the popular literary imaginary at times represents mother figures as wielding sizeable influence through their capacity to nurse. This ability allows them to determine the survival and loyalties of the text's protagonists well before the heroes first step into a political or military role. Moreover, nursing was commonly understood in the medieval period to impart not only nutrients but also traits, both physical and intellectual, to the child, making it even an essential feature of a hero's characterization. Ibn Qutayba captures this view—as well as the potentially negative subtext that nursing can cause a child to lose certain aspects of its pre-nursing existence—pithily with a few citations in the portion of his *Uyūn al-akhbār* concerned with the constitution of the human body:

Abū Ḥatim relayed to me through al-Asma'ī via Ibn Abī Ṭarfa al-Hudhalī via Jundab b. Shu'ayb that “When you see a newborn before he has been given his mother's milk, his face glows with pure clarity [*alā wajhihi miṣbāḥ al-bayān*],” by which he means that women's milk changes this. For this reason, they say, “Milk forges resemblances,” meaning that it renders the newborn similar to the wet nurse [*yanzi' bi-l-mawlūd fī shabah al-zī'r*]. The poet [al-Qaṭṭāl al-Kilābī] says, “I suckled from one teat, never more / for a fair-faced one better guards the door.”⁶

3. On the relation between breastfeeding and patriarchal and/or statist power structures, see Lia Moran and Jacob Gilad, “From Folklore to Scientific Evidence: Breast-Feeding and Wet-Nursing in Islam and the Case of Non-Puerperal Lactation,” *International Journal of Biomedical Science* 3, no. 4 (2007): 251–57. See also Jonathan Wells, “The Role of Cultural Factors in Human Breastfeeding: Adaptive Behaviour or Biopower,” in *Ecology, Culture, Nutrition, Health and Disease*, ed. K. Bose, 39–47 (Delhi: Kamla-Raj Enterprises, 2006).

4. On prohibited (*maḥram*) forms of marital relations predicated on kinship status, see J. Schacht et al., “Niḳāḥ,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0863. See also Q 4:23.

5. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arabe 3840.

6. Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī al-ʿAdawī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1925), 2:68. I am indebted to several colleagues for suggestions on the meaning of the final line.

Here, contact with milk and the nursing body from which it is dispensed alters the coloring of infants, who are here presumed to be born with fair skin that nursing darkens. In the quoted stich, the fairness of one's skin is tied not only to the abstract impression of childhood innocence alluded to in the *hadith*, but also to notions of aptitude that somatic qualities such as skin color are thought to suggest. Thus, viewing nursing as a formative feature in the lives of protagonists not only orients us toward a more gender-balanced reading of the texts in which they appear but also gives further insight into the forces to which the protagonist is subject socially and corporeally.

At the most basic level, portrayals of the early life of many popular heroes can be broken down into two main elements: a birth narrative—which tends to include descriptions of the hero's mother and her pregnancy as well as reference to the child's subsequent nursing circumstances⁷—and a description of what Peter Heath has dubbed the hero's "preparatory youth," usually involving the development of skills in martial arts and—if the hero is Muslim—Quran study.⁸ This pattern means that at least half of the experiences that are considered staples of a typical heroic exposition are heavily influenced by a female presence, which has often gone unnoticed. This study aims to draw out the significance of such presences (or, when heroes nurse from animals, absences), using the hero's nursing experience as a focal point. Whereas the prophetic literature sets a precedent of self-sacrificing nurses who take on maternal duties often at their personal expense, heroic narratives can include a more tempestuous set of nursing dynamics, with children refusing human milk in favor of that of animals or with mothers enduring difficult feedings and weaning. Above all, popular sources expound further on the uncertainties engendered by a hero-child's often obscure *nasab* (genealogy), and characters visibly grapple with the social implications of bringing a strange child into their homes or raising children who look starkly different from themselves. In the male-dominated recitation tradition of the *sīra* literature, such tales may have conveyed insights into the norms and expectations of

7. One common trope about pregnancies in the *sīras* is the premonitory dream (called *nubuwwa*, or revelation, by some authors), in which the mother has a vision that foretells her child's heroic (or villainous) destiny. On this feature, see Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-batal fī al-sīra al-sha'biyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991), 48–49; Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Ashkāl al-ta'bīr fī al-adab al-sha'bi* (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1966), 129.

8. On the "preparatory youth" of 'Antar, see Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 72–74. In the case of the hero Abū Zayd of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, his pious learning takes the form of a mystical initiation, in which the child falls under the tutelage of a Sufi shaykh. See Dwight Reynolds, "Abū Zayd al-Hilālī: Trickster, Womanizer, Warrior, Shaykh," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 49, nos. 1–2 (2018): 78–103. Preparatory youths are also a staple of heroic narratives in elite literature, including hagiographic works such as the *maqātil* (martyrdom) narratives of particular prominence in Shi'ī traditions, as well as in biographies of prominent historical figures embedded in projects such as universal histories and biographical dictionaries. On heroic youths in the *maqātil* genre, see Khalid Sindawi, "The Image of Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī in 'Maqātil' Literature," *Quaderni di studi arabi* 20/21 (2002–3): 80. As one reviewer of the present essay pointed out, narratives of preparatory youth are relayed with respect to caliphs and courtiers, too, as in al-Mas'ūdī's account of the curriculum undertaken by al-Amin at Hārūn al-Rashīd's bidding: he was taught (among other things) Quran, history, poetry, *sunna*, rhetorical arts, and how to convene meetings with respect to the rank of the persons involved, all of which are clearly intended to be the fundamentals of a well-bred governor. Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965–66), vol. 4, 212. See also Michael Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mūn* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 22–23.

husbandly duties, the relationship between genealogical preservation and social class, and even certain aspects of family law.⁹

Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma, which deals in the main with the legendary Arabo-Muslim heroes who battled the Byzantines in the early period of Islamic expansion, is the only text of its genre to be named for a female military personality.¹⁰ As a result, it has drawn significant scholarly attention, in particular in the work of Remke Kruk on the text's warrior women.¹¹ Most studies of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* make use of one of two printed versions, namely, the Cairo edition of 1909 (henceforth the "standard version") and its later Beirut reprinting, with some emendations, in 1980.¹² Venturing further afield from this version, however, we find some remarkable additions to the standard story of the text's first protagonist, Junduba, whose freeborn mother loses her husband, a chief of the tribe of Kilāb, and is then murdered by one of her slaves for refusing his sexual advances. The newborn Junduba is found still at his slain mother's side by Dārim, a leader from a neighboring tribe, who takes Junduba to his wife to be nursed and raised as one of the family. In the standard version of the text, this happens with some complaint about the uncertainty of the child's origins, and Dārim gives his wife monetary compensation in order to settle the debate. Upon her first nursing of Junduba, God immediately inspires her and her spouse with loving tenderness for the child (*alqā Allāh ta'ālā muḥibbatahu fī qalbihā wa-fī qalb al-amīr Dārim*), and his early childhood proceeds without further incident.¹³ However, the versions examined below

9. Although there is very little evidence about who presided over the tradition of reciting these texts in the earliest period aside from all-male lists of *rāwīs* in various *sīra* manuscripts, modern accounts of sessions in which the *sīras* were recited attest to almost solely male reciters and oftentimes predominantly male audiences. Remke Kruk notes that sessions held by the storyteller Sī Mlūd outside Morocco's Kutubiyya mosque were "almost exclusively male." In recording recitations of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in the Egyptian village of Bakātūsh, Dwight Reynolds participated in sessions in private homes with "one to two dozen men." Somewhat exceptionally, Cathryn Anita Baker records the presence of women in the audiences of *sīra* recitations throughout Tunisia's southern provinces, many of which occurred in the homes of government officials. She tells of mixed-age and mixed-gender groups, with the "littlest ones" in the sessions "peering wide-eyed from the shadows of their mothers' robes" as the stories are told. See Remke Kruk, *Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 11; Cathryn Anita Baker, "The Hilālī Saga in the Tunisian South" (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 1978), 26; Dwight Reynolds, "Start," *Sīrat Banī Hilāl Digital Archive*, <http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/node/425>, accessed September 18, 2018. See also Remke Kruk and Claudia Ott, "In the Popular Manner": *Sīra*-Recitation in Marrakesh anno 1997," *Edebiyât* 10, no. 2 (1999): 183–98.

10. For background on the *sīra* and its provenance, see M. Canard, "Dhu 'l-Himma," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0164. On the dating of the *siyar*, see Danuta Madeyska, "The Language and Structure of the *Sīra*," *Quaderni di studi arabi* 9 (1991): 193. For a full summary of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, consult Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Storytelling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), vol. 3, 301–505.

11. See Kruk, *Warrior Women of Islam*. See also Remke Kruk, "Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannāsa bint Muẓāhim and Other Valiant Ladies," part 1, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24, no. 3 (1993): 213–30; part 2, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 25, no. 1 (1994): 16–33.

12. I cite the Cairo edition throughout using a roman numeral for the *juz'* and an arabic numeral for the page number (e.g., IV:49); *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*, ed. 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Maqānibī b. Bakr al-Māzinī and Ṣāliḥ al-Ja'farī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥusayniyya, 1909).

13. *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*, I:14.

provide a more detailed narrative, in which the wife's mother, suspecting that the child is illegitimate, proposes a novel method of testing his legitimacy: if the child consents to drink only from the right breast, he is of pure blood, but if he suckles from the left, he is a bastard. This test ends poorly when the child refuses both breasts outright, and as Dārim is unable to persuade his wife that the child is of noble birth, he promises her a monthly stipend as compensation for her breastfeeding. In this fashion, he effectively sponsors his wife during her period of nursing, assuages his harpy of a mother-in-law, and keeps his household's peace.¹⁴

Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma is a fitting text with which to begin an exploration of lactation myths and miracles in Arabic popular literature, first, because across its variations it incorporates a large proportion of the core motifs that attend nursing narratives in other works. Second, this *sīra* contains a seemingly unique pivotal element—the legitimacy test—that I have not encountered elsewhere in my preliminary survey of the literature.¹⁵ I have worked with two variations of the story in addition to the standard version in order to underscore the ways in which the narrative has traveled and been tailored to various contexts, and I note differences of interest between them throughout.¹⁶ I argue that in its various iterations, this anecdote illustrates views about the social, physiological, and psychological suitability of certain nurses and nursing contexts for certain children that can be found throughout prophetic lore and other heroic literature. In particular, these notions divulge concerns about parity of class or of “kind,” that is, the fit between the respective ethno-racial or cultural groups of the child and his or her nurse; the best and highest expression of such parity is, typically, a mother-child nursing relationship. In the *sīra*, women are portrayed

14. In some versions, the mother-in-law's name is Shu'm al-Zamān, “the ill omen of her age,” though in Judeo-Arabic she appears as Umm al-Sharr, “the mother of evil.” It is perhaps not coincidental that Shu'm al-Zamān/Umm al-Sharr is juxtaposed with the character of Ḥusna, whose name evokes beauty or goodness. It is generally the case that major heroic figures of the *sīra* (unless based on historical personages whose names are predetermined) who receive more exposition are given conventional Muslim names, while sidekick characters (even those who loom quite large, such as al-Baṭṭāl, The Idle, who is the central trickster-friend in this text) or others who stand outside the text's ethnic or social norms are given more descriptive names, which perform much of their characterization. Thus the villainous crone in this vignette, whose speaking role is relatively minor, is named for the evil that she evokes. African warriors—often stock figures in the text—are given names such as 'Ifrīt (Demon) and Abū Zalāzil (Father of Earthquakes), evoking their intimidating, exaggerated size or strength. The same applies to warrior women whose cycles as sidekicks or enemies of the main characters are relatively brief. An example is *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s Qaṭṭalat al-Shuj'ān (Murderess of the Brave), whose function and abrupt demise in the text have been discussed by Wen-Chin Ouyang, as have the symbolic portents of the *acquisition* of names (*alqāb*) in the *sīra*. See Wen-Chin Ouyang, “Princess of Resolution: The Emergence of al-Amira Dhat al-Himma, a Medieval Arab Warrior Woman,” in *To Speak or Be Silent: The Paradox of Disobedience in the Lives of Women*, ed. Lena B. Ross, 197–209 (Wilmette, IL: Chiron, 1993).

15. To be sure, trials of a hero's legitimacy are common across the *sīra* corpus, but they are often mediated by a judge or another social institution rather than an at-home remedy. Black-skinned heroes born to white-skinned parents, such as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*'s Abū Zayd and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s 'Abd al-Wahhāb, are presumed to be bastards, whose legitimacy requires verification shortly after their births. For more on paternity tests in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, see Rachel Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in *Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himma*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48, no. 3 (2017): 298–326.

16. I differentiate the various versions of the story in citations by their titles: the Cairo “standard version” is *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the Tunis version is *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, and the Paris version is *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*.

not only as being aware of their stake in these questions but also as manipulating access to breastfeeding to their direct personal benefit. They are also shown to construe their domestic, maternal labors as having economic value, and this view is supported by certain precepts in Islamic scripture that are discussed below.

Legal and scientific views on breast milk and the kinship bonds it engenders in Islamic contexts have been well documented. The legal status imparted by *riḍāʿ* (suckling), which creates a relationship between biologically unrelated persons that is tantamount to fosterage, has been used to secure the positions of children within dynasties, to prevent unwanted marriages by rendering them legally incestuous, and to bring families or tribes closer.¹⁷ Medical opinions on the health-improving qualities of breast milk and suggestions about timetables for weaning and the selection of nurses are present in some of the earliest traditional sources.¹⁸ However, despite their frequency, which has merited their registration in motif indexes of Arabic folklore, relatively little attention has been given to the mechanics and meanings of literary representations of nursing compared to these more clinical references;¹⁹ Kathryn Kueny's reading of accounts of the birth and nursing of Cain is a notable exception.²⁰ Nonetheless, nursing is a recurring element in the lives of central protagonists throughout the *sīras*, the length and popular nature of which leads them to rove over significant swaths of everyday life even as they deliver narratives of extraordinary adventures. Moreover, fundamental biological changes that accompany maternity are exaggerated or rendered uncanny in much popular literature to foretell the coming of heroes. In her recent dissertation on women's roles in the *siyar shaʿbiyya*, Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg discusses the "heroic pregnancies" that typically predict a

17. Legal adoption, in the sense of conferring one's family name to someone outside one's natal line, is prohibited in the Quran (Q 33:5, Q 33:37), but other types of fosterage are permitted, most typically that established through milk-kinship, which integrates an infant into a family through a biological process. Though cases of adults being adopted are infrequent, several Muslim legal schools permit "non-infant suckling" (*riḍāʿ al-kabīr*), typically using pumped milk, as a means of ceremonially brokering such a relationship later in an adoptee's life. For more on fosterage in Islamic law, see J. Schacht, J. Burton, and J. Chelhod, "Raḍāʿ or Riḍāʿ," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0896. On adoption, see E. Chaumont, "Tabannin," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8913. On the prohibition against marriage and copulation between those related through milk kinship (*riḍāʿa*), which is equivalent to the prohibition pertaining to those who share blood kinship (*nasab*), see Soraya Altorki, "Milk-Kinship in Arab Society: An Unexplored Problem in the Ethnography of Marriage," *Ethnology* 19, no. 2 (1980): 233–44. See also Peter Parkes, "Fostering Fealty: A Comparative Analysis of Tributary Allegiances of Adoptive Kinship," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (2003): 746. On milk kinship as a structure used to supplant or simulate adoption for political reasons in Islamic societies, see Balkrishan Shivram, *Kinship Structures and Foster Relations in Islamic Society: Milk Kinship Allegiance in the Mughal World* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2014).

18. On perceptions of maternal physiology in the medieval Islamic medical establishment, the most recent thoroughgoing study is Kathryn Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

19. Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions of the Arab World: A Guide to Motif Classification* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1:69, 2:87–89.

20. See Kathryn Kueny, "The Birth of Cain: Reproduction, Maternal Responsibility, and Moral Character in Early Islamic Exegesis," *History of Religions* 48, no. 2 (2008): 110–29.

hero's advent—pregnancies that are “unusual and challenging for the mother” and that are often accompanied by supernatural circumstances.²¹ As seen below, lactation carries some of this magic and mystery as well.

With respect to household dynamics, nursing constitutes a domestic flashpoint of sorts. It is an everyday occasion in which the conventional power dynamics of the family are destabilized, with women providing a form of nourishment that men—usually the “breadwinners”—are unable to supply. In the words of Avner Giladi, “[nursing] plays a decisive role not only in ensuring the nursling's survival prospects, the first stages of his/her socialization, and, according to Islamic medical theories, the consolidation of his/her character traits but also in corroborating women's status vis-à-vis men and the power relations that reign within the family.”²² This renders breastfeeding a contested terrain between gendered factions.²³ In some circumstances, conventionalized steps such as *taḥnīk* (the administering of date pap by a father to a male child as his first food before he takes a sip of his mother's milk) intervene against the role of the woman as sole nurturer of a newborn, so that, as Kueny's puts it, “patriarchy continuously reasserts itself through a series of postpartum rituals.”²⁴ The ability to lactate is also, of course, a defining element of our speciation (we are mammals) and sex differentiation (females have mammary glands) that is conditioned on what women *have* rather than what they lack.²⁵ Therefore, breastfeeding presents a ripe moment for the emergence of another aspect of the gender anxieties that figure in much premodern Arabic popular literature. Below, I give a preliminary assessment of the import of breastfeeding as a feature of popular literary sources. I begin with a brief survey of lactation and nursing imagery in related sources and then present the vignette from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* along with my analysis.

The Versions of *Dhāt al-Himma*

Though the earliest evidence we have of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s existence dates to the twelfth/sixth century, its extant manuscripts are from several centuries later—a trait

21. Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, “Wives, Witches, and Warriors: Women in Arabic Popular Epic” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018), 153.

22. Avner Giladi, “Liminal Craft, Exceptional Law: Preliminary Notes on Midwives in Medieval Islamic Writings,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 2 (2010): 192.

23. This tension perhaps conjures up associations with another common gender-differentiated issue evident in popular literature, namely, the *fitna*, or chaos and strife, that is often born out of a woman's sexualization and the distraction she poses to men. The management of male appetite, albeit appetite of a different nature, is at issue in debates over *fitna* just as it is in the matter of breastfeeding. On the role of *fitna* in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, see Remke Kruk, “The Bold and the Beautiful: Women and ‘Fitna’ in the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*; The Story of Nūrā,” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly, 99–116 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

24. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 141.

25. As Robyn Lee reminds us, though, the category of “mammal” is, of course, itself a construct that bears some historical contextualization. She explains that one of Linnaeus's aims in “establish[ing] the mammary gland as the defining feature of animal classification in 1758” was a political one, as Linnaeus was strongly in favor of maternal breastfeeding and was an anti-wet nursing advocate. Robyn Lee, “Breastfeeding and Sexual Difference: Queering Irigaray,” *Feminist Theory* 19 (2018): 78.

common to popular tales that circulated between oral and written modes.²⁶ *Sīra* texts are often lengthy, and their volumes were not necessarily kept consistently together. Consequently, the remnants of such works are frequently incomplete, consisting of a few manuscript volumes that are sometimes inconsecutive.²⁷ Having said that, MSS Arabe 3840–51 contain an extensive version of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* that, according to Georges Vajda’s notes on the manuscript, consists of twelve volumes that have been patched with fragments in different hands to bridge lacunae in the text. Claudia Ott notes that the patching occasionally results in overlaps, or repetition of passages.²⁸ Vajda records the names of three readers of the text that appear at the start of different volumes, given with dates ranging from 1767–68/1180–82 to 1787/1201–02.²⁹ In her extensive work on the manuscript tradition of the *sīra*, Ott identifies this large, composite manuscript as the source from which a number of other manuscripts of the text were copied over the course of the nineteenth/thirteenth century.³⁰

The Tunisian edition of the text was printed in Judeo-Arabic in the 1890s, and its provenance is better understood than that of MS 3840–51. This is in large part because one of the men who oversaw its printing and distribution, Rabbi Eliezer Farhi, was a prolific and well-networked member of the Tunisian Jewish intellectual elite of his era. His writings covered myriad topics and genres, from journalism to parables.³¹ In particular, he was avidly

26. As has been discussed by several scholars, the earliest mention of this *sīra* is found in the autobiographical section of Samaw’al al-Maghribī’s (d. 1175) polemical treatise, *Ifhām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews), written after Samaw’al’s conversion from Judaism to Islam. Strikingly, he refers to having “read” the story rather than hearing it told aloud. He encountered the story of Dhāt al-Himma as part of what Moshe Perlmann refers to as “the Arabic fiction literature of his day—stories, anecdotes, popular romances of knighthood.” The “romances” that Samaw’al lists are ‘*Antar*, *Dhū al-Himma wa-l-Baṭṭāl*, and *Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn*. See Samaw’al al-Maghribī, *Ifhām al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, ed. and trans. Moshe Perlmann (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1964), 15, 100. The earliest dated portions of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, meanwhile, are from 1430–31/833–35, according to Claudia Ott. See Claudia Ott, “From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript: The Storyteller and His Audience in the Manuscripts of an Arabic Epic,” *Oriente Moderno* 22, no. 83 (2003): 444; Claudia Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos: Sīrat al-Muḡāhidīn (Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma) zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit* (Leiden: Leiden University, Research School CNWS, 2003), 67. For a more recent discussion of versions of the *sīra*, both handwritten and printed, see Melanie Magidow, “Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma,” *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Subsidia Series no. 9, *Medieval Texts in Translation* 6 (2019): 3–5.

27. On the partitioning and condensing of popular *sīra* texts such as *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* in manuscripts used by reciters, see Ott, “From the Coffeehouse,” *passim*. On the “lending economy” of popular texts, see Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 164–96.

28. Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*, 106.

29. Georges Vajda, “Notices des manuscrits Arabe 3630–3698,” *Manuscript* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, 1940–69), Ms. Arabe 7302, fol. 53–54. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8458430f> (October 17, 2019).

30. Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*, 112.

31. On Farhī’s intellectual network, see Yosef Tobi, “Farhī, Eliezer,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/farhi-eliezer-SIM_0007630; David M. Bunis, Joseph Chetrit, and Haideh Sahim, “Jewish Languages Enter the Modern Era,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*

interested in educational reform in the Jewish community, leading him to earn the moniker *maskil* (enlightened individual, or participant in the *haskala*, a Jewish intellectual revivalist movement not dissimilar to the Arabic *nahḍa*).³² Farhi was committed to producing Judeo-Arabic editions of the *siyar shaʿbiyya*, including the *Azaliyya*, the *ʿAntariyya*, and the *Tijāniyya*, and in part through them he came to be known as a father figure of Tunisian Judeo-Arabic popular literature. Although his partner in printing, Hai Sitruk, was widely published as well, his role in the dissemination of *sīra* literature is comparatively smaller: beyond a translation of the Alexander romance and his collaboration with Farhi on *Dhāt al-Himma*, he produced or coauthored translations of more contemporary works of derring-do, such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Eugène Sue’s *Les mystères de Paris*. Both men also penned a number of creative works.³³ Eusèbe Vassel, who wrote an extensive catalogue of literature printed in Judeo-Arabic in Tunis throughout the second half of the nineteenth/thirteenth century, notes that at least for his first *sīra* publication, Farhi worked from a preexisting manuscript that he had purchased.³⁴ The occasional nearly verbatim overlap between his version of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and other Arabic versions of the text suggests that he did likewise here. But the question of how much he emended the text in his possession remains. He seems to have made certain expurgations himself: the name of the prophet Muḥammad appears virtually nowhere in the text, being usually replaced by Ibrāhīm or Sulaymān, though some slips do occur, as in the occasional reference to al-Muṣṭafā, the Chosen One, an epithet for Muḥammad. Other differences, however, may be either his own doing or quirks in the manuscript he used; dialogue in the text takes place in Tunisian Arabic, and in at least one instance of importance to the present study, a gloss on an obscure word is embedded directly into the narrative. When explaining the naming of the protagonist Junduba, who is named after the type of bird that miraculously shelters him from the heat when he has been abandoned in the desert, the narrator states:

וכאן וקתהא חר שדיד יא אללה אלסלאמא וארסל אללה תעאלא אילא דאלך
אלצבי שיר יסמא ענד אלערב ננדבא ואחנא כף מא נקולו ענאב³⁵ או נסר וצלל
עלא האך אלגני בגואנחו

in *Modern Times*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer, 113–42 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 131–32.

32. On the parallels between the *haskala* and the *nahḍa*, see Lital Levy, “The Nahḍa and the Haskala: A Comparative Reading of ‘Revival’ and ‘Reform,’” *Middle Eastern Literatures: Incorporating Edebiyat* 16, no. 3 (2013): 300–16. See also Yosef Chetrit and Lital Levy, “Haskala Movement,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Tzivia Tobi, “Ha-Rav ha-Maskil Elʿazar Farhi ve-Yetsiroṭay ha-Saṭiriyyot (Tunis 1851–1930),” in *Ben ʿEver la-ʿArav: Contacts Between Arabic Literature and Jewish Literature in the Middle Ages and Modern Times*, ed. Yosef Tobi and Yitsak Avishur, 127–44 (Tel Aviv: Afikim, 2015).

33. Several of Sitruk’s contributions are enumerated in a booklist compiled by Yosef and Tzivia Tobi that covers a century of Tunisian Judeo-Arabic works. See Yosef Tobi and Tzivia Tobi, *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia, 1850–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 303–21.

34. Eusèbe Vassel, *La littérature populaire des Israélites tunisiens, avec un essai ethnographique et archéologique sur leurs superstitions* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1904–7), 108–9.

35. *ʿUqāb* (eagle) is here transliterated as *ʿugāb* to reflect local pronunciation and the Judeo-Arabic original.

وكان وقتها حر شديد يا الله السلامة وأرسل الله تعالى الى ذلك الصبي طير يسمى عند العرب
جندبة واحنا كيف ما نقوله عغاب او نسر وظلّ على هاك الجني بجوانحه

At that time it was extremely hot—good Lord! God Almighty sent the young boy a bird, called a *junduba* among the Arabs, and we call it an ‘*ugāb* or a *nasr* (eagle), and it shaded that newborn with its wings.³⁶

In light of these ambiguities, I read the Judeo-Arabic version of the *sīra* under the assumption that it emerges from a similar context to other Arabic versions of the text, which is to say that it is the product of a primarily Muslim compositional context rather than having been noticeably tailored for a new, Jewish readership. However, as discussed below, there are some felicitous parallels between Junduba’s tale and certain midrashic or *isrā’īliyyāt*-derived representations of prophetic figures shared between Judaism and Islam.

Milk and Myth, from Moses to Muḥammad

In her work on *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, Helen Blatherwick formulates a threefold typology under which references to the prophets—or, to use her term, the “prophetic intertext”—found in popular literature may be classified. Prophets make cameos in intra-diegetic, moral tales told among the protagonists of the text; they appear as the former owners of heirlooms or relics acquired by the protagonists (a device that Blatherford reads as a form of *waṣīyya*, or prophetic inheritance, following John Renard); and they are alluded to obliquely through the reproduction of motifs drawn from apocryphal stories and regional myths.³⁷ Thus, the precedent of miraculous, providential, or bizarre lactation scenarios in the corpus of anthological literature known as the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (stories of the prophets) bears some discussion here. The following is by no means an exhaustive list of the sorts of lactation miracles and nursing tropes that appear in Arabic tales of the prophets and hero legends. However, I have attempted to account for a number of the more prominent or exemplary motifs to guide the reading of the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* excerpts below.

Perhaps the most famous case of a nursling refusing milk from an unfit source, like Junduba does, occurs in the story of Moses. According to al-Kisā’ī’s collection of tales of the prophets,

Once Mūsā, peace be upon him, was settled in the Pharaoh’s house, [Āsiya’s retinue] wished to nourish him by nursing. But he would not accept a breast, nor would he eat. They grew perplexed and made every endeavor to feed him, but he [still] would not eat—as God said, “We had prevented him from nurses previously” (Q 28:12)—so they sent him with the caravans and women to the marketplace, [hoping] that perhaps they would find someone who would agree to nurse him.³⁸

36. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 10.

37. Helen Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings in Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan: An Intertextual Reading of an Egyptian Epic* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 67. See also John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 140–45.

38. Al-Kisā’ī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā‘a wa-l-Nashr al-Islāmiyya, 1997), 382–83.

The women happen upon Moses's sister, who brings them to his mother's abode, where he finally nurses. Here, the mother-child bond is preserved not only because they are drawn together by their natural connection but because of divine intercession precluding Moses's nursing during their period of separation. According to the *tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr, the restoration of Moses to his mother for nursing after the divinely ordained hunger strike mentioned in verse 12 of *Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ* (*wa-ḥarramnā 'alayhi al-marāḍi' min qabl*) had benefits not only for the child but also for the mother, because she was calmed after fearing for her child's wellbeing (*wa-hiya āmina ba'd mā kānat khā'ifa*).³⁹ In rabbinic readings of the Moses story, Moses rejects the breasts of Egyptian women not merely on the grounds that they are not his mother but because of his prescient sense of community-based notions of milk purity: *halakha* frowns on Jews using non-Jewish wet nurses except when necessary to preserve life. Moses, who is "destined to speak with the Divine presence," cannot place his mouth on an impure breast.⁴⁰ Perhaps because such rules about the correspondence of a nurse's faith with that of her nursling do not apply in Islam, Muslim thinkers do not, by and large, seem to have explicitly adopted such an interpretation. However, certain mystical readings of the verse do attribute Moses's lack of desire to nurse from Egyptian women to his emerging prophetic discernment rather than to an infant's yearning for his mother. Ibn 'Arabī, for example, interprets the phrase *min qabl* (previously) in the Quranic verse as indicating that Moses was prevented from satisfying his body's base, pleasure- and instinct-driven needs for nourishment and physical fortification (*al-taqawwī wa-l-taghadhdhī bi-ladhdhāt al-quwwa al-nafsāniyya wa-shahawātihā*) before his attainment of wisdom and purity of nature (*qabl isti'māl al-fikr bi-nūr al-isti'dād wa-ṣafā' al-fiṭra*).⁴¹ Other prominent Sufi exegetes, such as al-Sulamī and al-Baqlī, claim that Moses understood that had he nursed from a transgressor of God's commands (*mukhālifa*) or an animal (*waḥsha*), he would not have been fit for a close relationship with God, metaphorically represented as being on His carpet (*bisāṭ al-qurba*). They even imply that the nursemaid of a child must be human in order for the child to attain esoteric knowledge.⁴²

Ibn Hishām, in his prophetic biography, connects God's intercession on Moses's behalf to promote nursing from a mother figure—and thus from a figure of a moral and cultural disposition that befits the prophet-child—with an experience in the Prophet Muḥammad's early infancy, involving his foster mother, Ḥalīma bt. Abī Dhu'ayb. Because of ongoing drought and malnutrition, Ḥalīma is unable to produce milk even for her own son. Nevertheless, she follows the custom of her tribe's women and rides through the environs of Mecca, seeking a child to nurse. All of the other women spurn Muḥammad because he is an orphan, not recognizing his impending significance. Failing to find a nursling and feeling

39. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), 2:201.

40. Jordan Rosenblum, "Blessings of the Breasts': Breastfeeding in Rabbinic Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 87, no. 145 (2016): 172–73.

41. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Tafsīr Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-'Arabī* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Būlāq, 1867), 2:109.

42. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid 'Umrān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 101; Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shirāzī, *'Arā'is al-bayān fī ḥaqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mizyādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008), 80.

remorse, Ḥalīma resolves to nurse Muḥammad despite knowing that she physically cannot do so at that time. Her husband advises her that “God may be on the verge of giving you a blessing through him,” and Ḥalīma returns to her mount with the child and gives him her breasts, which fill with milk to the child’s satisfaction. Even Ḥalīma’s milch camel, whose milk supply had also dwindled because of the harsh conditions, suddenly yields milk again, enabling Ḥalīma, too, to drink and to replenish herself.⁴³ In the *sīra*, Ibn Hishām prefaces the narrative of Ḥalīma nursing Muḥammad with the Quranic verse about Moses’s delayed suckling, creating a vivid similarity between the two infants.⁴⁴

According to Kueny, such stories valorize nursing women who prioritize their children’s nutrition or health over their own and thus promote an ideal of maternal self-sacrifice. But the stories may also be read to some extent as an exaggeration of the workings of the natural world, for in these tales it is not only the women who earn acclaim, but also the children whom they nurse.⁴⁵ Children who are able to nurse consistently and plentifully are likely to have better health and survival prospects. It is unsurprising, then, that super-strong champions and unblemished prophets alike should have legendarily superlative (even God-given) access to breast milk. For women, meanwhile, ample lactation is an affirmation of God’s power and has the capacity to restore their faith—Ḥalīma’s husband is quick to remark that she has been blessed by the boy, to which she replies, “Truly this is my hope (*wa-llāhī innī la-arjū dhālik*)!”⁴⁶ In this fashion, the mother-child bond becomes enveloped in a sacred or miraculous awareness.

Even when a child is consuming a mother’s milk, though, environmental factors can intervene in the nursing experience, leaving an indelible mark on the child’s traits that persists long after weaning. In her discussion of the birth of Cain, Kueny notes that al-Tha‘labī, in his collection of prophetic lore, *‘Arā’is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, claims that Cain was nursed in the heavenly Garden prior to Eve’s first menses (which is one of the punishments later visited upon her as she leaves the Garden). Most medieval thinkers believed breast milk and menstrual issue to be composed of the same material, channeled to different parts of the body.⁴⁷ The “pure milk” that Cain drank, in Kueny’s reading, ironically sets him up not to be pure of heart but rather to have a nonnormative ethical constitution that reflects his nonnormative childhood, the dark implications of which come to fruition when Cain murders his brother.⁴⁸ Being born and suckled in the Garden has left Cain poorly adapted to the earthly realm in which he later finds himself. A supernatural nursing experience portends an unnatural and at times dangerous existence. Cain’s tale is

43. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya li-Ibn Hishām* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 188–89.

44. *Ibid.*, 185.

45. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 133–34.

46. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, 189.

47. This belief has roots in ancient Greek thought and has long been used to explain such phenomena as the disappearance of the menses during lactation. At times, heavy menstruation was treated with the application of cupping-glasses to the breasts. Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 34–35.

48. Kueny, “Birth of Cain,” 115–17.

cautionary. In contrast, Moses's birth story and its citation in the Quran looms large as the guiding framework for idealizations of nursing in prophetic literature, informing narrations of Muḥammad's own struggles with nursing. The ideal of women caring for abandoned children despite adversity is visible popular literature as well.⁴⁹

Milk from Humans and Beasts in Popular Sources

In addition to their robust prophetic intertexts, many of the *sīra* texts also make frequent reference to other texts of their genre and of neighboring genres of popular literature, such as the nighttime stories (*asmār*) found in *Alf layla wa-layla*.⁵⁰ In the case of nonprophetic popular works, supernatural nursing experiences arise not only through environmental influences and divine-human interaction but also through the appearance of nonhuman nurses. Although, as noted above, prophetic narratives tend to follow the Quranic precedent of Moses in promoting tales of mothers or foster mothers who are able to sustain their nursing regimens even in dire circumstances, and portions of the exegetical tradition even militate directly against suckling from animals, there are numerous attestations in popular literature in both Arabic and Persian of children being suckled by animals when human nurses are absent or have failed to provide milk for them.

As seen below, variations of the hero Junduba's narrative describe his nurturing by a variety of animals who ensure the newborn's survival. The *jundub* bird shades him from the desert heat, and in one variant a gazelle suckles him after his mother is killed. When prince Dārim retrieves the child, he takes it as a sign of Junduba's mother's apotropaic purity and goodness that the baby has not been carried off by a desert beast. Junduba is far from the only child in Arabic literature to be reared by wild animals rather than by humans. Perhaps the best-known occurrence of this motif is in the life of the feral man Ḥayy b. Yaqzān, born from the ground itself and raised untouched by human contact; he is nursed by a female gazelle or deer (*ḡabiya*).⁵¹ In the collection of stories that make up *al-Ḥikāyāt al-ʿajība wa-l-akḥbār al-gharība*, recently translated from a sole surviving manuscript by Malcolm Lyons as *Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange*, a prince named Mauhub, who is born to king Shimrakh, a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, refuses to nurse from any of the palace

49. The story of Moses as the archetypal foundling also provides the pattern for a number of heroic childhoods in popular Arabic and Persian lore, sometimes quite explicitly. For example, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s Baḥrūn and the Persian *Dārābnāma*'s eponym, Dārāb both have names relating to their being transported by and found in the water; this naming pattern plays directly on the etymology of Moses's name, meaning "drawn from the water" (Exodus 2:10).

50. In the case of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, such borrowing is especially evident in the fact that parts of the triumphal chivalric legend of ʿUmar al-Nuʿmān (or ʿAmr b. ʿUbayd Allāh, as he is designated in the *sīra*) appear both in this *sīra* and in *Alf layla*. Following Wen-Chin Ouyang's logic, we may say that in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* this intertextuality has the effect of nesting a (mini-) *sīra* within the main *sīra*, whereas in *Alf layla* it perturbs the line between epic and romance given the star-crossed, romantic backdrop of the principal storyline. See Canard, "Dhu 'l Himma"; Wen-Chin Ouyang, "The Epical Turn of Romance: Love in the Narrative of ʿUmar al-Nuʿmān," *Oriente Moderno* 22, no. 83 (2003): 485–504.

51. Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1952), 52.

maids after his mother dies.⁵² But when Shimrakh brings home a lioness captured on a hunt, the prince suckles from her alongside the lioness's two cubs, which endows him with the lion's archetypical courage and strength. The infant *sīra* hero 'Alī al-Zaybaq is subject to a set of events that demonstrate how the nursing motifs sketched above can combine and compound: like Moses, he is removed from his mother immediately after birth, but unlike Moses he is swept off into the world of the *jinn*. When returned, he suckles from a lion rather than his mother.⁵³ Fosterage by *jinn* also occurs in *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, though this time following willful maternal abandonment. As a result, the young Sayf acquires a *jinnīya* milk-sister, who becomes a key ally—a supernatural accomplice produced by the binding of Sayf's lineage to a magical realm.⁵⁴ Such tropes appear in Persian literature as well. For example, in the *Shāhnāma* the *sīmurgh* (who, despite being a birdlike creature, has mammary glands and feeds its young with milk) nurses the foundling Zāl, abandoned by his parents because of his albinism.⁵⁵

In each case, a defining feature is once again the unique destiny of the child, who is set to attain the heights of heroism or, in the case of Ḥayy, of perspicacity and intellect. The cameoed animals often have associations that underscore the child's uniqueness and importance: a gazelle, in much Arabic literature, is the epitome of feminine grace and beauty, and so the gazelle-as-nurse in some ways not merely supplants but supersedes the image of a human woman. The nursing of a lioness—whose ferocity and role as the family's chief huntress invert norms of masculinity and femininity in human family structures—endows a male child with the lioness's qualities, which manifest as a ratcheted-up masculinity, rendering him dauntless, competent, and strong. By implication, rearing by two human, gender-normative parents may not confer such heroic traits in equal measure. And of course, the lion is a symbol of kingship, so nursing only from a lioness firmly marks a child's royal status.

Even in perfectly ordinary birth and nursing scenarios, an infant hero's response to nursing can sometimes presage his future as a fighter. This is especially evident in the *sīra* of 'Antar b. Shaddād, whose comportment on occasions when his mother delays nursing him adumbrates his preternatural strength and pugnacity. At the two-year mark—the conventional time of weaning in Islamic societies⁵⁶—'Antar's mischievous streak reaches an early apogee:

If his mother Zabība ever prevented him from nursing, 'Antar would grumble and wail and growl and reproach her, like the grouching of beasts of prey. His eyes would redden until they became like embers set ablaze. Every day he required a new swaddle because

52. Malcolm Lyons, *Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 399.

53. Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, 5. See also Malcolm Lyons, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of a Medieval Arab Hero* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 2.

54. Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings*, 32, 192–96. I am indebted to Helen Blatherwick for her comments on earlier drafts of this paper and for bringing her work on Sayf's foster family to my attention.

55. See A. Shapur Shahbazi and Simone Cristoforetti, "Zāl," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online ed., ed. Ehsan Yarshater, updated July 20, 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zal>.

56. Q 2:233 (discussed below).

he would tear it apart, even if it was made of iron. When he reached two full years of age, he began to move and play around the camp, and he would grab tent pegs and uproot them so that the tents would collapse upon their occupants. Many times over he did this, and he would wrestle with dogs, take hold of their tails, and strangle their young to death, and he would assail young men and children. If he saw a small child, he would snatch at his face, throw him down on his back, and take what he wanted from him. If it was a big child, he would wrestle him until his limbs failed. He did not cease doing this until he was weaned and turned three years old, and he grew, developed, and matured. Then he set out, and mention of him began to spread.⁵⁷

The significance of milk bonds and nursing practices looms large in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* also beyond Junduba. The text's central heroine, Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, is nearly killed in infancy by her father because he had so desperately wanted a son—indeed, he had staked his share of the tribal chiefdom in a pact with his brother on the prospect of having a male heir. A benevolent servant, named Su'dā, takes her in. Su'dā, who is elegized as a generous woman, is said to be of Turkish origin (*bādhila turkiyya*), but she is evidently black-skinned. This may be gleaned from the fact that when Fāṭima unexpectedly births a black child, she is accused of having had an affair with her milk-brother Marzūq, son of Su'dā.⁵⁸ The scandal of Fāṭima's alleged dalliance is magnified by the notion that it may have been with her milk-kin, making her guilty not only of adultery but also of incest; her father-in-law connects the blackness of her child with her alleged sexual deviance in a line of satirical (*hijā'*) poetry that likens the boy's origins to those of dogs and his color to that of crows.⁵⁹ The epithet “son of Marzūq” follows Fāṭima's child, the hero 'Abd al-Wahhāb, throughout his adventures and is often used as an instigating tactic by his enemies before battle. In this way, violation (or apparent violation) of the normative relationships imparted by bonds of milk—which are, in turn, underpinned by considerations of class and race—incurs castigation of both the mother and the child.⁶⁰

In an abridgement of the *sīra*, written by Shawqī 'Abd al-Ḥakīm and translated by Omaima Abou-Bakr, that is there described as a Palestinian epic, Fāṭima is so distraught at the existence of her newborn son—conceived during a sexual assault by her husband—

57. *Sīrat 'Antara b. Shaddād* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Būlāq, 1886), 1:127.

58. Su'dā being portrayed simultaneously as a Turk and a black-skinned woman likely emerges from the common semiotic conflation of black people and slaves in Arabic popular literature. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, VI:15, VII:18. On the historical development of the identification of blacks with slavery in theology, literature, and public discourse, see David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Boston: de Gruyter, 2017).

59. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, VII:36.

60. This treatment of 'Abd al-Wahhāb raises another significant parallel between his story and that of Junduba, namely, the centrality to his early childhood of a trial to ascertain his legitimacy. Having been born a different color from his parents, 'Abd al-Wahhāb must prove the nobility of his bloodline, though unlike the infant Junduba, he must do so when he is already on the precipice of warriorhood, and in his case it is his epidermal race that he must overcome, rather than his having been a foundling. See Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero.”

that she refuses to nurse him and he must be removed from her.⁶¹ This is another instance of carryover from the mother's experiences to those of her child, in that Fāṭima's sexual trauma renders her unable to nourish her son. To be sure, the idea of a milk-mediated bodily and spiritual connection between a nurse and an infant was supported by the medical discourses of the time, which held that the person from whom the child suckled, whether the mother or a wet nurse, would impart her traits to the infant, from skin color to physiognomy to general disposition. Like the uterine blood from which it was thought to be derived, breast milk was construed as a conduit through which traits were transmitted outside the womb, just as they had been transmitted through blood within it. Figures such as al-Jāḥiẓ carried this scientific analogy between milk and blood particularly far, arguing that just as blood tinctures the baby in the womb, milk clarifies and lightens the baby's skin in infancy. Ibn Qutayba noted that children would grow to resemble either their mothers or their wet nurses, depending on how they received their nourishment.⁶² According to Ibn Sīnā, wet nurses therefore ought to be chosen for their appropriate age (*sinn*), comely appearance (*suḥan*), and moral rectitude (*akhlāq*).⁶³ Consequently, if a child passes from one nurse to another, these bonds and semblances may transform, which may explain, in part, the foundling Junduba's reticence to nurse from his new mother—a reticence that she reciprocates. Such concerns about the disposition and appearance of a wet nurse are compounded by the quality of her social standing, as with the anxieties produced by Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma's association with the black Su'dā and her son. Similar anxieties—though operating in the reverse direction—about Junduba's provenance and the effect that his dishonorable birth might have on his new family's social standing come to bear on the question of whether or not to take him in as a nursling.

Junduba the Foundling

Junduba, the first major hero to make an appearance in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, is the great-grandfather of the eponymous heroine, Fāṭima. His story begins with the death of his father, al-Ḥārith, chief of the tribe of Kilāb. Al-Ḥārith's pregnant widow, Arbāb (or Rabāb), begins to fear for her safety, knowing that al-Ḥārith had kept the other tribes in line and had successfully staved off raiding parties. She decides to abscond with the slave Sallām, who had remained a loyal member of her household even after his master's death. Sallām's loyalty had an ulterior motive, however, and while on the road he propositions her, asking

61. Shawqī 'Abd al-Ḥakīm and Omaima Abou-Bakr, *Princess Dhat al-Himma: The Princess of High Resolve* (Guizeh: Foreign Cultural Information Dept., 1995), 75–76.

62. On the function of milk in forging physical and psychological resemblance, see Schine, "Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero," 14–15; Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 140; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Ibar wa-l-i'tibār*, ed. Šābir Idrīs (Cairo: al-'Arabī, 1994), 78; 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, 2:68–69. On ideas about the utility of animal milk in altering one's physical form, Aysha Hidayatullah cites a telling story in which 'Ā'isha says that Muḥammad's son by Māriyya the Copt, Ibrāhīm, resembles his father only because he was fed camel and sheep milk, which lightened his skin and fattened him up. See Aysha Hidayatullah, "Māriyya the Copt: Gender, Sex and Heritage in the Legacy of Muḥammad's *Umm Walad*," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21, no. 3 (2010): 233.

63. Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999), 114.

of her “what men ask of women.” Trying to elude him, Arbāb excuses herself to wash and immediately goes into labor, giving birth to a son. When Sallām sees what has happened, the text states:

וכזר פיהא בעין אלגנב וקאל להא לאש האד אלמכרה יא עאהרא אלדי מכרת
ואנתי מא לקית תולד אלא תווא? וקת אלדי אנא חאנתי ביד. לאנהו פי באלו אלדי
אלמראה תולד עלא כיפהא ונבדהא מן נואציהא וסתחהא אילא אלארין
ונבד אלכננר וסקט עליהא מן אלגוזא ללאעטראד.

وخزر فيها بعين الغضب وقال لها لاش هاذ المكرة يا عاهرة الذي مكرت وانت ما لقيت تولد
الاتوة؟ وقت الذي انا حاجتي بك. لانه في باله الذي المرأة تولد على كيفها وجبدها من
نواصيها وستحها الى الأرض وجبد الخنجر وسقط عليها من الجوزاء للاعطراد⁶⁴

He looked at her with an angry gaze and said, “What’s this trick you’ve pulled, you whore, that you’ve only just given birth now, right when I wanted something from you?” Because he had it in his head that a woman could give birth of her own will.⁶⁵ He pulled her by her forelocks, laid her on the ground, and brought forth a dagger. Then he fell upon her, [going] from the Gemini to Mercury.⁶⁶

Whether Sallām actually rapes Arbāb before killing her remains ambiguous. In the 1909 Cairo version, Sallām cuts off her head in a rage without fulfilling his desire, and she tumbles to the ground.⁶⁷ In MS Arabe 3840, however, Arbāb dies from the childbirth itself, with Sallām having run off in fear as soon as her labor began.⁶⁸ But all versions agree that immediately after the birth, just before she expires, Arbāb attaches to her newborn son’s forearm a small locket-like case (*ḥirz*) detailing his *nasab* (genealogy). Some time later, a prince from the nearest *wādī*, named Dārim, happens upon the child while on a gazelle hunt, trying to distract himself from the loss of his own newborn son:

ושאף אלמאליכא ארבאב מטרוחה מקתולה והאד אלמולוד ירצע מנהא ואלחליב
פאיין ויתבזע מעא קדרת צאחב אלקררה [...] ואמהו תרצעהו והיא קתילא קדאם
ננבהו ולמא נצר אלאלמיר⁶⁹ דארם אילא דאלך אלתפת אילא וזירהו וקאל להו:
איהא אלוזיר אנצר אילא האדי אלצבייה והאד אלגני אלדי בננבהא והאד אלשיר
יצלל עליה ואמהו תרצעהו והיא קתילה ואעלם ודמת אלערב

64. Though the conventional spelling is *uṭārid*, the term appears with this orthography in the original.

65. In the 1909 Cairo edition, the dialogue is more drawn out, and Sallām claims he was told by another man that women could give birth by “squeezing their bellies” and using sheer force. Arbāb rebuts this false assumption, saying that “this [would take] a stunning ability, and it is beyond [the capacity of] all humankind.” *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:10.

66. This enigmatic idiom seems to connote the length of the cut he made on Arbāb’s body with the dagger. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 9.

67. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:10.

68. *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 6.

69. *Sic.*

وفضل شهرا رنبا ايدا لم تكشف لي كبر اادي الـl

وشاف المالكة ارباب مطروحة مقتولة وهاذ المولود يرضع منها والحليب فائض ويتبزع مع قدرة صاحب القدرة وامه ترضعه وهي قتيلة قدام جنبه ولما نظر الامير دارم الى ذلك التفت الى وزيره وقال له أيها الوزير انظر الى هاذي الصبية وهاذ الجني الذي بجنبها وهاذ الطير يظل عليه وامه ترضعه وهي قتيلة واعلم وذمة العرب وفضل شهر رجب اذا لم تكشف لي خبر هاذي الصبية وسبب قتلها نرمي راسك مثلها

He saw the princess Arbāb, left behind and slain, and this newborn was suckling from her. The milk was pouring out in excess, by the power of the Possessor of Power [...], and his mother was nursing him though she was dead at his side. When the prince Dārim saw that, he turned to his advisor and said, “O *wazīr*, look at this young woman and this newborn beside her, and this bird shading him. His mother is nursing him though she is dead! By the covenant of the Arabs, and the favor of the month of Rajab, know that if you don’t find out what happened to this young woman and the reason for her death, I’ll cut off your head just like hers.”⁷⁰

By contrast, in MS Arabe 3840, Dārim finds Junduba asleep at his mother’s side:

فخرج في تلك الساعة الي الصيد والقتص ليفرج همه ويكشف غمه فراي الرباب في تلك البرية وهو⁷¹ مقتولة وذلك المولود نايم في جنبها

At that time, [Dārim] went out to hunt and shoot in order to relieve his grief and unleash his sorrow [at losing his son]. Then he saw al-Rabāb in that open space, and [s]he was dead, and that newborn was sleeping at her side [...]⁷²

Unbeknownst to Dārim, a gazelle has suckled the child before his arrival on the scene, a fact that becomes important later on. Whereas the phenomenon of suckling from animals is not uncommon in such stories, the image of a mother’s corpse continuing to lactate is a rarer feature, yet it has some overlap with another, more prevalent notion: a hadith cited in Muḥammad al-Manbijī’s *Tasliyat ahl al-maṣā’ib*, a work designed to console bereaved parents, promises that there is a tree in the Garden with teats for children to suckle at should they die in infancy.⁷³ Other variations on the idea of heavenly nursing in hadith narrations do not feature a tree but rather explain that because Muḥammad’s son, Ibrāhīm, “died at the breast” of a *qayna*, or lady’s maid, who had been suckling him, his suckling will continue

70. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 9.

71. *Sic*.

72. *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 6.

73. See Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-faḍā’il*, no. 2316; al-Manbijī, *Tasliyat ahl al-maṣā’ib* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 185. See also Avner Giladi, “Concepts of Childhood and Attitudes towards Children in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Study with Special Reference to Reaction to Infant and Child Mortality,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 32, no. 2 (1989): 149.

in the Garden, and the same will be true of other infants in similar circumstances. The story of Junduba contrasts with these hadiths in that it is the mother who dies, not the child. And yet, it echoes the central theme of a child continuing to nurse after a family calamity in that the body of his dead mother continues to provide life-giving sustenance, even though it has become otherwise inert. Not unlike a tree with breasts, Arbāb is transformed through her death into a purely functional instrument for her child's survival. God's ability to revive the dead is, of course, manifest throughout the Quran, but this partial vivification of the portions of the female body essential for sustaining other life smacks of a certain alchemical reasoning that strips life down to its bare material constituents.⁷⁴ The amplification of the importance of the breasts—even to the point of neglecting the woman herself—perhaps foreshadows the gender-bending significance of breasts in the next section of the text, in which they assume a key role in adjudicating Junduba's paternity.⁷⁵

The Test of Which Breast

Having received Dārim's threat, the vizier speculates that Arbāb was of a prominent family and had an affair, compelling her family to kill her and abandon her child to the desert. Dārim grows incensed and roundly rejects this theory, pointing to the many patent signs of Arbāb's enjoyment of divine favor, from the bird shading her child to the beasts of prey leaving him be. All versions of Dārim's poetic rejoinder to the advisor contain the remark, addressed to Arbāb, "If you were not a free-born woman, you would not have [been able to] nurse your son in death."⁷⁶ Confident that Junduba is from good stock, Dārim gives Arbāb a proper burial and takes the child home to his wife, Ḥusna, jokingly telling her, "I left to capture you some beast, but instead I took this boy for quarry!" (In the Paris version, he says, "I left to capture you some beast, but instead I've brought you a person [*fa-jibtuh lakī insī!*]").⁷⁷ He gives her the child, along with the locket on his wrist, and instructs her to feed the boy and raise him as her own. He thus implies that he wants her relationship to him to closely emulate that of a mother, rather than simply a temporary wet nurse. Providentially—in the sense of a *deus ex machina*—Ḥusna is lactating because she has recently given birth, though the child has died and so her breast milk is going unconsumed. In the Tunisian version, we are told:

74. Q 2:260, Q 19:66–67, Q 22:5–7, Q 30:19.

75. A number of legal sources also deal with the prospect of *al-riḍā' min al-mayyata* (suckling from a dead woman), that is, a scenario in which a woman "lactates into a container and then dies, and the child drinks from her milk." The question is whether such "nursing" renders subsequent marriage between the child and a relative of the woman impermissible. In Arbāb's case, her lactation miraculously persists in death so that *she* remains the only necessary vessel for the milk. See, for example, Ibn Qudāma, *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, vol. 11, ed. 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbād al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw (Riyadh: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1986), no. 6419. See also Avner Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses: Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and Their Social Implications* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 87–89.

76. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 10; *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 7.

77. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 11; *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 7.

וכאנת האדי חסנא ענדהא עגוזתהא תסמא אם אלשר יסתעוץ מנהא אבליס ולעיאדו
 באללה תם קאלת להא: יא בנתי אנתי לאש האדא מנך חתא תרבי אלאיתאם
 אולאד אלזנא ומלקוט. ואלחאל מא ענדך חאנא ביה וחליבך צאפי
 [ח]לאל⁷⁸ ירגע חראם פי חראם. פקאלת להא חסנא ואנתי יא אמי באש ערפת?
 ואשכונ אלדי כברך אנהו האדא ולד זנא ולמקוט? קאלת להא אלעגוז אמאלא
 תערפשי אש תעמל באש יבאן לך האדא מן האדא אבדא אעטי בזולתך אליסאר
 ואידא שרב מנהא פהוא ולד זנא ואידא מא שרבשי מנהא אערף אלדי הוא ולד
 חלאל פענד דאלך גבת חסנא אלבזול ואעטאתו והיא מתע אלשמאל. וצאר
 אלולד יבכי וידז פיהא בשפאיפו וירדהא בלסאנו ויטבק פמהו ומא חבשי ירצע
 וצאר באכי פאחם ולמא אעטאתו תדי אלימין צאר ימנט עלא כיפהו ולם
 חב ינפס

وكانت هاذي حسنة عندها عجوزتها تسمى ام الشر يستعوض منها ابليس والعياذ هو بالله⁸⁰
 ثم قالت لها يا بنتي انت لاش هذا منك حتى تربي الايتام اولاد الزنا وملقوت والحال ما عندك
 حاجة به وحليبك صافي حلال يرجع حرام في حرام فقالت لها حسنة وانت يا امي باش عرفت?
 واشكون الذي خبرك انه هذا ولد زناء وملقوت؟ قالت لها العجوز اماله تعرفشي اش تعمل
 باش بيان لك هذا من هذا ابدأ اعطي بزولتك اليسار واذا شرب منها فهو ولد زنا واذا ما
 شربشي منها اعرف الذي هو ولد حلال فعند ذلك جبت حسنة البزول واعطاته وهي متع
 الشمال وصار الولد يبكي ويدز فيها بشفايفه ويردها بلسانه ويطبق فمه وما حبشي يرضع
 وصار باكي فاحم ولما اعطاته ثدي اليمين صار يمغظ على كيفه ولم حب ينفس

This Ḥusna had an old [mother], named Umm al-Sharr, of whom Iblīs had made an emissary—and truly God gives refuge! She said to her, “O my daughter, what’s become of you that you’re raising orphan bastards and foundlings? Really, you have no need to do so, and your milk is pure and sound. Sin is recompensed with sin.” Ḥusna replied, “What should you know, mother? And who told you that he’s a foundling bastard child?” The old woman said, “Do you know what to do in order to bring the thing to light? Begin by giving him your left teat, and if he drinks from it then he’s a bastard. And if he won’t drink from it, you’ll know that he’s a legitimate (*ḥalāl*) child.” With that, Ḥusna pulled out her breast and gave it to him, supplying him with the left one. The child began to cry, dodging it with his lips and refusing it with his tongue. He clamped his mouth shut and wouldn’t nurse, and then he began wailing. When she gave him the right breast, he pulled at it but did not have a desire to suckle [*lit. inhale*].⁸⁰

In MS Arabe 3840, the scene transpires similarly (though there, as in the standard version, the mother’s name is Shu’*m* al-Zamān), except that when given the right breast,

78. See note 1.

79. In the Judeo-Arabic, this phrase appears as *ولعياذو بالله*.

80. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 11.

فشرب منه ثلاث جرعات وبكى لانه كان معود بلبن الغزلان لان لبنها كان حلو ولبن هذه عذب
ومسكه عرق صياح من العشا الي الصباح

He took three gulps from it and cried, for he was accustomed to the milk of gazelles, which is sweet, and their milk was [like] fresh water and musk. He started screaming and kept it up all night long.⁸¹

In the standard version, meanwhile, no such test is proposed, though Ḥusna does still call the child's legitimacy into question after being egged on by a woman who is referred to simply as an old woman (*'ajūz*) but who we may presume is her mother because Dārim eventually promises to support this woman financially during Ḥusna's nursing term.⁸² The "test of which breast" subverts gender norms in almost every way.⁸³ Because the question of legitimacy typically amounts to the question "Who is the father?" it is conventionally men who do the inquiring. The adjudication of the question effectively hangs on determining which male sexual organ impelled the child's existence. Here, it is the women who want to establish the identity of the child's father, and the organ that will reveal the child's pedigree is not a penis, but rather a breast. The bodily fluid central to this paternity test is thus not semen but milk, and the source from which it is drawn will either validate or invalidate the child's legitimacy.

Recognition of the shared symbolism of the breast and the phallus as indicators of fecundity, as well as of their morphological similarities, is evident across cultures and times. As late as the nineteenth/thirteenth century, the overlapping symbolism of the breast and the phallus was utilized as part of a grotesque iconography to argue for the regulation of nursing practices. This rhetoric of analogy around the two organs, which Simon Richter has referred to as a putative "physiological isomorphism," drew on the fact that the nipples on a lactating woman, like the phallus, can become aroused to erection, ejaculate liquid, and are an erogenous zone.⁸⁴ Etymologically, certain terms in Arabic (along with other Semitic languages) bear an element of this reasoning—albeit in a far more distant and less calculated fashion than in the analogies drawn in the early modern European works in Richter's study. For example, *iḥlīl* denotes simultaneously the penis, the urethra (that is, the orifice through which urine passes), and the nipple in a breast or udder, through which milk passes.⁸⁵ In discussing the transmission of Muḥammad's intercessory capacity to his descendants, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi also notes that the relationship between milk

81. *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 7–8.

82. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:13–14.

83. I would like to thank Franklin Lewis for suggesting this nomenclature.

84. Simon Richter, "Wet-Nursing, Onanism, and the Breast in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1996): 2.

85. Ashraf M. Fathy, "Identical Familial Terms in Egyptian and Arabic: A Sociolinguistic Approach," in *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. Zahi Hawass (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 3:186. See also the definition of *iḥlīl* in *Lisān al-ʿArab* as *makhraj al-būl min al-insān wa-makhraj al-laban min al-thadī wa-l-ḍarʿ*. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955–56), 977.

and semen has been distilled into various common aphorisms that encapsulate dimensions of heredity thought to be activated by sharing these fluids:

In terms of the qualities of saintliness, Islamic sources speak repeatedly about the power of transmission of the seminal substance from Muḥammad's ancestors, manifested by the "Light" and symbolized by the *ṣulb* (kidney, loins), an organ regarded as the repository of the semen. Passing via the uterus (*rahim*) of the woman, the repository of her "seed," the man's semen forms the milk of the mother's breast, which in turn enables the transmission of the father's qualities to his child; whence the inseparable link between sperm and milk that one finds in such expressions as "milk is from man" (*al-laban min al-marʿ*), "the reproductive milk" (*laban al-faḥl*) or "the unique sperm" (*liqāḥ wāḥid*) that designate both the man's seminal fluid as well as the woman's milk.⁸⁶

Absent from this symbolic web, though, is what makes the phallic image of Ḥusna's breasts particularly trenchant, and that is the influence her breasts exert over the perceived purity of her family. Ḥusna's mother posits that her "pure milk" would be wasted on a bastard, like semen spilled in an adulterous or impure relationship.⁸⁷ Moreover, because of the workings of milk fosterage, in controlling whom she suckles, Ḥusna effectively controls who is incorporated into her line of descent. Whereas the literature discussed by Richter evinces anxiety over the use by mothers of grotesque, unclean, often lower-class wet nurses, and whereas the milk-semen relationship discussed by Amir-Moezzi functions in a positive fashion to transmit noble paternal qualities, in Ḥusna's case the priority is to preserve her purity from the classed taint of a child of unknown *nasab*. The narrative could choose to relieve this tension by simply having Ḥusna open the locket bound to Junduba's wrist that contains information about his family. Instead, it leaves his identity unresolved, and the failure of the "test of which breast" perpetuates the withholding of information.

There is, perhaps, another, more oblique way in which this portion of the text reflects an ancient literary association, by evoking a test that Moses was compelled to endure in his infancy and that figures in collections of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʿ* as well as in Midrashic literature.⁸⁸ Fearing that the child might grow up to be a usurper because he keeps grabbing for the Pharaoh's scepter, the Pharaoh permits his wife, Āsiya, to place two vessels before the child, one containing jewels and the other hot coals. Choosing the former will confirm Moses's lust for power; choosing the latter will certify his humility. Below is William Brinner's translation of the subsequent events as they appear in al-Thaʿlabī's anthology:

86. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Reflections on the Expression Dīn ʿAlī: The Origins of the Shiʿi Faith," in *The Study of Shiʿi Islam: History, Theology, and Law*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, 17–46 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 39.

87. In some circumstances, this logic cuts both ways. Many Imāmī Shiʿi legal scholars as well as Mālik b. Anas advise against employing a woman known to have been born from an adulterous relationship as a wet nurse whenever it can be avoided. In actuality, however, as Etan Kohlberg notes, this rule seems "not to have been rigorously applied, perhaps because it was not always possible to find a wet-nurse the purity of whose origins could be ascertained." See Etan Kohlberg, "The Position of the *Walad Zinā* in Imāmī Shiʿism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, no. 2 (1985): 247.

88. Exodus Rabbah 1:26.

“I shall put in front of him a trinket of gold and sapphire, and I shall put in front of him a live coal. If he takes the sapphire, then he understands, and you may kill him; but if he takes the coal, you will know that he is only a lad.” Thereupon she placed before him a basin in which were the gold and sapphire, and another basin in which was the coal. Moses stretched out his hand in order to take the jewel and seize it, but Gabriel turned his hand away to the coals, and he grabbed a coal and put it in his mouth.⁸⁹

As with Junduba, at issue is whether the child is worthy of a place in a well-off household, and so the test becomes a determiner of the child’s survival. However, whereas the apprehension about Moses stems from the prospect of his social ambition, the concern over Junduba centers instead on his possible social inferiority. Furthermore, whereas Moses’s test produces a result, Junduba’s situation is left unresolved. As a consequence, the test feature of the vignette is reduplicated and refracted, with Ḥusna facing a perceived choice between taking the route of the nurses who spurned Muḥammad or “sacrificing” her pure milk for the survival of a child whose importance will prove far beyond her immediate estimation.

Nursing at a Price

Dārim returns to find his wife crying. When he inquires after the cause of her distress, she poetically recounts her misgivings about the child while giving him an all-too-familiar account of a mother’s sleepless night. Below I provide the original versions of the poem and then a translation that balances the two versions, as they are quite close, in rhythmic and rhymed English:

<p>ואסהרת לילי ואלבחאר נואצירי באבן לקיט נסל קום פואגירי מכצרא מא אכתשאת רבהא קאדירי וקד נחרוהא מתל נחר אלבעירי ואלבן להו דאם עלא אלארץ פאירי וואד אלבכא מנהו ואליל עאכירי אנוח ונככי באלדמוע אלחואדירי לתאמל פיה אלוחוש ואלטאירי לאקתל נפסי בסיוף אלבואתירי</p>	<p>ואללה יא דארם קד כסרת בכאטרי כרנת אילא אלבר ורנעת לי לקיט זנאת ביה אמהו פי אלפפא לא אבוהא רצא ולא אכוהא בפעלהא ונבתהו אליא וקלת ארצעיה לאגל כאטרנא ונאולתהו אלבוז אלימין ולם רצא וצאר ישול אלנוסואני חזינא ואחרמני אלנום מן כתרת נוחהו אירא לם תדיה מכאנהו תרדהו</p>
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<p>واسهرت ليلي والبحار نواظيري بابن لقيط نسل قوم فواجيري مخضرة ما اختشأت ربهها قادييري وقد نحرها مثل نحر الابعيري</p>	<p>ولله يا دارم قد كسرت بخاطري خرجت الى البرء ورجعت لي لقيط زنات به امه في الفة لا ابوها رضى ولا اخوها بفعلهها</p>
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89. Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*, or “Lives of the Prophets,” translated by William M. Brinner (Boston: Brill, 2002), 286.

وجبته اليّ وقلت ارضعيه لاجل خاطرنا
 وناولته البز اليمين ولم رضى
 وصار يطول النوسواني حزينه
 واحرمني النوم من كثرة نوحه
 اذا لم تديه مكانه ترده
 والبن له دام على الارض فانري
 وزاد البكاء منه والليل عاكيري
 انوح ونكي بالدموع الحواديري
 لتأمل فيه الوحوش والطائري
 لاقتل نفسي بسيوف البواتيري

Sīrat al-mujāhidīn

الا يا ملك دارم قد كسرت خاطري
 خرجت الي البر الفسيح وعدت لي
 لقيط زنت به امه وهو في الخبا
 ابوها ردي وبلي اخوها بفعلها
 وجبته وقلت ارضعيه من اجلنا
 اخرجت له الثدي الشمال فامتنع
 وناولته البز اليمين فلم رضى
 وقلبي يقول لي ليس لي به حاجة
 وسار ينوح بالليل واني حزينه
 واحرمني النوم من كثرة نوحه
 فخذه وارميه في مكان لقيته
 اذا لم توديه مكانا لقيته
 واسهرت في الليل الطويل بذاكري
 بابن لقيط نسل قوم فواجري
 مخدرة ما اختشت رب قادري
 لقد نحرها مثل نحر الاباعري
 ومن اجل هذا الامر كدرت خاطري
 وعاد اللبن منه علي الارض فاييري
 ومن اجل هذا الامر كدرت خاطري
 لانه لقيط نسل قوم فواجري
 انوح وابكي بالدموع الحواديري
 ومن اجل هذا الامر دادت فكايري
 لياكلوا منه وحشها والطوايري
 لاقتل روعي بالسيوف البواتيري

I swear to God, Dārim, I'm going mad
 I didn't sleep a wink, thoughts in a spin
 You headed to the countryside but then
 Brought me home an orphan born in sin
 A child whose mother must've whored around
 Inside her own home, heedless of the Lord
 The men of her house heard what she had done
 And, like a camel, put her to the sword
 You brought this child to make of me a nurse,
 But when I gave my left side, he abstained
 Its milk spilled, wasted, gushing on the floor
 And when I gave my right, he just complained
 He kept up crying through the whole dark night,
 And here's the thing that has me going mad—
 In my heart I know there's no good cause
 For taking in a boy who has no dad.
 He kept on wailing, whimpering in the dark,
 Until, at last, I started crying too
 And as his sobs were mounting ever higher
 My own mind's afflictions only grew

Take him back and leave him where he lay,
Exposed to hungry bird and beast alike
If you don't dispose of the boy where he was found,
I'll run myself through with your sharpest spike⁹⁰

Two motifs recur throughout this poem, especially in the more repetitious Paris version: the deteriorating mental state of Dārim's wife and her suspicion that the child is from a "fornicating people" or, more literally, a nation of adulteresses (*qawm fawājir*). The former refrain captures the psychological and physical strain of motherhood, with its sleepless nights and difficult feedings, whereas the latter raises the question of value: is this exhaustion worth it for such a child? The main consideration that undermines the infant Junduba's value is the possibility that his *nasab* has been squandered—that is, that he is the product of an extramarital flirtation between a high-born woman and a strange man—and that Ḥusna might in turn squander her lineage by bringing the child into her family.

This concern over pedigree calls to mind a staple feature of foster relationships in reality and in narrative as analyzed by anthropologist Peter Parkes, namely, that in a number of societies many pathways of milk-based fosterage were exercised almost exclusively by elite families. These fosterage methods were a means to orchestrate allegiances, creating tributary relationships aimed at developing cliental ties or shoring up loyalties to the existing social hierarchy. Relationships of milk kinship thus often emanated from higher-ranked individuals to lower-ranked ones. In certain myths, such relationships serve to ennoble humble peasants who care for displaced future protagonists in their infancy.⁹¹ In Ḥusna's account, we see that the prospect of a reversal of this directionality is abhorrent: an elite woman suckling a lowly nursling is anathema. Compounding this concern about the maintenance of social decorum are the physiological implications of Ḥusna's continuing to nurse the foundling, which are left implicit: it will likely suppress her menses and make it difficult for her to quickly conceive a new child of her own. Continuing to nurse may also injure Ḥusna's practical chances of conceiving a child, as both medical and religious authorities often cautioned against sexual intercourse during nursing.⁹²

These considerations are perhaps not at the forefront of Dārim's mind when he responds to his wife, but he nonetheless does offer to compensate her for her suffering. In the poem below, Dārim's castigation of his wife for her ill-tempered speech against Arbāb is coupled with his seeming bafflement at her refusal to nurse such a clearly noble child. Both failings,

90. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 12; *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 8.

91. Peter Parkes, "Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 3 (2004): 595.

92. Though there are reports of Muḥammad explicitly deciding not to prohibit intercourse while nursing "because the Byzantines and Persians nurse their children while sexually active or pregnant and it does no harm to their children," elsewhere there is a precedent cited by some legal scholars for not having sexual intercourse with a nursing woman (*ghīla*), due in part to Muḥammad's insistence that his wife, Umm Salama, cease nursing before they could consummate their marriage. See Giladi, *Infants, Parents, and Wet Nurses*, 31–32, 98–100; Ruth Roded, "Umm Salama Hind," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7723; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-nikāḥ*, no. 2704.

he implies, call her own social mores into question. Again, both versions of the poem are fairly close:

ומן קול שר אלנאס כוני האדירי	הא יא בנת אלעם אקצרי דיאל אלתפכאירי
ובנת אמיר נסל קום אכאבירי	מעא אם דא אלמולוד אלאמירא
לא חסן להו אלרחמאן וחש נאפירי	פאן כאנת אמהו קד זנאת ביה כפיא
ואן גמיע האדא בקדרת קאדירי	ואמהו תרצעהו ואלטיר יצללהו
דכורא וצלח ללמלוך אלאכאבירי	וחרז דא אלמולוד מרמי בגנבהו
פלא כייב אלרחמאן מן כאן צאבירי	פמני כוד מאלא גזילא וארצעיה

ومن قول شر الناس كوني حاذيري	ها يا بنت العم اقصري ديال التفكاري
وبنت امير نسل قوم اكابيري	مع ام ذا المولود الاميرة
لا حسن له الرحمان وحش نفايري	فان كانت امه قد زنات به خفيا
وان جميع هذا بقدرة قاديري	وامه ترضعه والظير يظله
ذخيرة وصلح للملوك الاكابيري	وحرز ذا المولود مرمي بجنبه
فلا خيب الرحمان من كان صابيري	فمני خوذ مالا جزيلا وارضعيه

Sīrat al-mujāhidīn

ومن قول شر الخلق كوني محاذري	الا يا بنت عمي اقصري ذا التفكاري
وبنت امير نسل قوم اكابيري	فما ام ذي المولود الا اميرة
لما حسن الرحمن له وحش نافرري	فلو كانت امه زنت به
وان جميع هذا بقدرة قادري	غزالا ترضعه وظيرا يظله
دخيرا ويصلح للملوك الاكابيري	وحرز ذا المولود مرمي بجانبه
فما خيب الرحمن من كان صابيري	فمني خذي المال الكثير ورضعي

O my cousin, how dare you think this way?
 And surely you know better than to slander,
 The mother of this child is noble-born!
 When have princesses been known to philander?
 If she had conceived the boy by whoring,
 Would God have kept him from stampede and sun?
 And would his mother's milk have flowed in death
 [*alt.* would he have nursed from a gazelle],
 Were it not the work of the Most Able One?
 And beside the child was flung a locket,
 Hewn from fine metal, fitting for a king,
 So take my fortune and go nurse him, now
 Surely God aids the long-suffering⁹³

93. *Sīrat al-Dalhama*, 12; *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 8-9.

Dārim then promises his wife thirty dirhams per month, with ten more for her mother. At this promise, “Ḥusna was gladdened and nursed,” and, perhaps in light of her changed attitude, Junduba readily accepts her breast. Although it might seem that Ḥusna has won one over on her beleaguered spouse, the Quran explicitly prescribes payment to wives for nursing newborns as well as fair compensation for wet nurses (Ḥusna presumably acted in the former stead rather than the latter). Verse 233 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* reads:

Mothers suckle their children for two whole years, if they wish to complete the term, and clothing and maintenance must be borne by the father in a fair manner. No one should be burdened with more than they can bear: no mother shall be made to suffer harm on account of her child, nor any father on account of his. The same duty is incumbent upon the father’s heir. If, by mutual consent and consultation, the couple wish to wean [the child], they will not be blamed, nor will there be any blame if you wish to engage a wet nurse, provided you pay her as agreed in a fair manner. Be mindful of God, knowing that He sees everything you do.⁹⁴

Exegetes debate the exact nature of the provision that is due a nursing wife from her husband (called *rizq*, maintenance or sustenance). Though the Quran specifies material goods such as clothing and food, it does not name amounts beyond *bi-l-maʿrūf*, “according to what is known or intuitively correct.” Al-Ṭabarī connects the quantity of *rizq* to the subsequent injunction against overburdening a parent, concluding that the amount must be in proportion to the husband’s means: because God has created people rich and poor, He “commands the two alike to provide that which is required for his wife’s provision, [according to] the measure of his wealth.”⁹⁵ Ibn Kathīr adds a stipulation about local standards of living, saying that *bi-l-maʿrūf* should be interpreted as “taking the customs of similar people [i.e., other women] in their local community into consideration, [at a level that is] neither excessive nor privative,” in addition to being within the husband’s means.⁹⁶

Interestingly, the Shiʿi commentator al-Ṭūsī takes a slightly more legalistic approach to this verse, arguing that the interpretation of *bi-l-maʿrūf* hinges on whether ceasing nursing when the child turns two is merely recommended (*mandūb*) or incumbent upon the individual (*farḍ*). In his view, payment is required only for an obligatory service. Therefore, if a woman continues nursing beyond the two-year mark in a supererogatory fashion, she may have no claim to further payment.⁹⁷ Al-Ṭūsī thus seeks to prevent wives from using prolonged nursing as a means of extracting excessive allowances from their husbands, though one may reasonably wonder how often such cases would occur. The anecdote in the *sīra* provides an opposing example of a husband initially withholding the requisite funds.

There are also precedents for supplementing a wife’s income when she is caring for a newborn that perhaps deepened the resonances of this vignette for the Tunisian version’s intended audiences. Masekhet Ketubbôt, the section of the Talmud most directly concerned

94. Translation from *The Qurʾān*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26–27.

95. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1955), 5:44.

96. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:634.

97. Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1830), 2:255.

with contracts and contractual obligations in marriage, advocates that a wife's budget be increased and her other household chores and handiwork decreased while she is nursing.⁹⁸ And, of course, such precedents also emanate from nature, as the physical demands of nursing lend support to the idea that a nursing woman should enjoy increased access to food when possible.

These scriptural and exegetical passages posit breastfeeding as an exercise of social capital rather than a simple means of supplying nutrition and mandate the compensation of aspects of childrearing labor. Situating Ḥusna's interaction with Dārim within this framework complicates the superficial reading of Ḥusna as a minor villain whom an ominous old crone manipulates into showing callousness toward a newborn child. Dārim promises her a handsome amount of money, and as a tribal chief he can clearly afford it. Moreover, he is supposed to be sponsoring her financially as a new mother, and the exegetical consensus is that this funding should be in accordance with his ostensibly ample means. Such a reading transforms the scene from one in which a wife imposes on her husband to one in which she negotiates with him to have her needs met, leveraging the exclusive resources that she possesses in order to do so. Thus, although we could see Ḥusna as the anti-ideal, contrasted with the likes of Moses's tenacious mother and the self-sacrificing Ḥalīma, we can also recognize in her a more pragmatic and even necessary image of a wife and a new mother, namely, one who cares for her own mental and physical wellbeing, values her own labor, and ensures that her childcare burdens are understood and supported by her spouse.

Conclusion

The femininity of women has often been interpreted as a force of chaos and subterfuge in Arabic popular literature: using their womanly bodies and speech, they exercise *kayd* (wiles) and foment *fitna* (discord).⁹⁹ Many of the female figures in Arabic *siyar* that have drawn the most curiosity and admiration from modern audiences and scholars are those who embody what might be considered relatively androgynous or masculinized ideals, as the warrior women whom Remke Kruk has analyzed illustrate. However, as Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg has argued, there are also many quieter and more quotidian female exemplars in the *siyar*. I have argued that Ḥusna belongs to this type. Although she at first glance appears to be using her body's gendered capacities in a calculating manner reminiscent of the sexualized, wily, and chaotic women of the popular imagination, with her breasts playing the part of a phallus in Junduba's "paternity test," ultimately Ḥusna uses her ability to nurse to enforce the rights that the Quran guarantees to her as a caregiver. Furthermore, by calling attention to her bodily and mental hardships and needs, her behavior challenges the silent and solicitous ideal of maternal behavior embodied in the self-sacrificing women of prophetic literature.

As a nursing woman, Ḥusna is in good literary company, given the wealth of lactation and nursing motifs in prophetic and popular lore. However, there is a notable difference

98. Masekhet Ketubbôt 5:9. See also Rosenblum, "Blessings of the Breasts," 158.

99. On the significance of *kayd* in *Alf layla wa-layla*, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), *passim*.

between these two corpora on the issue of who does the nursing. Tales of the prophets are populated solely by human nurses (with the occasional angelic intercessor), who are celebrated for continuing to nurse even under difficult circumstances. By contrast, legendary heroes are often nursed by beasts in the absence of their human parents, and through their milk these creatures can impart certain animalistic qualities, affinities, and preferences to their nurslings. Both forms of nursing are found in variations of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, with Arbāb continuing to nurse even in death in some versions and a gazelle taking up the task in others. Because such episodes are didactic or legendary, they often play with or actively reject the “real,” in ways big and small. So, Muḥammad’s wet nurse Ḥalīma seems completely unconcerned by the personal and financial ramifications of her actions, agreeing to nurse the prophet despite his family’s inability to pay and implicitly censuring the other wet nurses of her tribe for not wanting to provide for an orphan at what would likely have been their personal expense.

By this metric, despite the miracle of his suckling in the desert, the auspicious coincidence of Ḥusna’s lactation and childlessness, and the absurd test of his legitimacy, the story of the foundling Junduba nonetheless provides a realistic and candid portrayal of the considerations that accompany the nursing of others’ children. Though the text primes us to see her as a bad actor by drawing a direct link between Ḥusna’s behavior and the devilish inclinations of her mother, her conduct discloses anxieties about class, genealogy, and stigma as well as about the physiological and psychological logistics of nursing. These anxieties have echoes in traditional discussions of kinship structures and familial duties, suggesting that Ḥusna’s trepidation reflects a broader social discourse. Moreover, her concerns underscore the social and legal problems inherent in nursing foundling children—an issue that is endemic to popular literature, which is rich with heroes who have been orphaned or estranged from their natal families. The circumstances of their displacement often mirror social plights typical to the stories’ settings, from internecine warfare and practices of captivity and slavery to anxieties over disability and difference and even suggestive references to female infanticide and sex-selective family planning.¹⁰⁰ In this fashion, the story of Ḥusna and Junduba innovates on a common literary topos

100. Regarding the uses of *siyar* as social allegory, Robert Brunschvig argues that *Sīrat ‘Antar*, in which the black-skinned ‘Antar is separated from his father because of the latter’s rejection of his slave son, may be construed as a *roman à thèse*, advocating more complete recognition for children born from concubinage (the effect of which is compounded, in ‘Antar’s case, by racial difference). See R. Brunschvig, “‘Abd,” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0003. A similar reading is possible in the case of Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, whose father initially wishes to kill her because of her gender but is forced to rethink his position upon confronting her later in life on the battlefield, where she proves her mettle as an elite warrior. These questions often have a transhistorical resonance, both at the emotive level and because of the intimate empathy brought about by personal experience. Dwight Reynolds notes that an episode in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in which the medieval hero Abū Zayd kills his Quran tutor for beating another student prompts “heated discussions” when recited to contemporary audiences. He speculates that rural listeners may harbor bitter memories of the physical brutality inflicted along class lines in Quran schools, with poorer children receiving the brunt of beatings, “whereas boys from rich and powerful families are left untouched.” In this way, the demise Abū Zayd’s Quran teacher distills elements of contemporary audiences’ experiences of education and class—and perhaps their fantasies of vindication—into a single, brief episode. Reynolds, “Abū Zayd al-Hilālī,” 93–94.

by showcasing one such issue. Ultimately, by speaking up—flouting her husband’s initial demands, questioning his social judgment, and defying common assumptions about the absolute, universal nature of maternal instinct and affection—Husna calls attention to her status as a new and hesitant foster mother and asserts control over her domestic realm. In the process, she guides her husband toward correct practice vis-à-vis a nursing spouse and positions herself as central to their new family arrangement.

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