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

RACHEL SCHINE
University of Colorado, Boulder

(Rachel.Schine@colorado.edu)

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 qiṣaṣ 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, Ḥālima. 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 Siṣrat 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

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. –Siṣrat al-Dalhama’

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 (jalāl), meaning glory or splendor, rather than (halāl), 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. Siṣrat al-Dalhama, ed. Eliezer Farḥī and Ḥai Sitrūk (Tunis: Farḥī 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. 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.

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)—as well as comparative materials from qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ (stories of the prophets) and other siyar shaʿbiyya (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 ʿUyūn al-akhbār concerned with the constitution of the human body:

Abū Ḥatim relayed to me through al-Asmaʿi via Ibn Abī Ṭarfa al-Hudhalī via Jundab b. Shuʿāybat that “When you see a newborn before he has been given his mother’s milk, his face glows with pure clarity [ʿalā 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 [yanziʿ bi-l-mawlūd fī shabah al-ẓiʾr]. The poet [al-Qaṭṭāl al-Kilābī] says, “I suckled from one teat, never more / for a fair-faced one better guards the door.”


5. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arabe 3480.


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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 circumstances—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. 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 Ahmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, Mawlid al-baṭal al-sīra al-shaʿbiyya (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991), 48–49; Nabila Ibrāhīm, Ashkāl al-taʿbīr fī al-adab al-shaʿbī (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1966), 129.

8. On the “preparatory youth” of ʿAntar, see Peter Heath, The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ʿAntar 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 Bani 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 maqāṭīl (martyrdom) narratives of particular prominence in Shiʿi 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 maqāṭīl genre, see Khalid Sindawi, “The Image of ʿHuṣayn ibn ʿAlī in ‘Maqāṭīl’ 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-Masʿūdī’s account of the curriculum undertaken by al-Amīn 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-Masʿūdī, Murūji al-dhahab (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965–66), vol. 4, 212. See also Michael Cooperson, Al-Maʾmūn (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 22–23.
husbandly duties, the relationship between genealogical preservation and social class, and even certain aspects of family law.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{Sirat 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.\textsuperscript{10} As a result, it has drawn significant scholarly attention, in particular in the work of Remke Kruk on the text’s warrior women.\textsuperscript{11} Most studies of \textit{Sirat 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.\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{alqā Allāh taʿālā muḥibbatahu fī qalbihā wa-fī qalb al-amīr Dārim}), and his early childhood proceeds without further incident.\textsuperscript{13} However, the versions examined below

\textsuperscript{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 \textit{rāwī}s in various \textit{sīra} manuscripts, modern accounts of sessions in which the \textit{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 \textit{Sirat Bani 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 \textit{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, \textit{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,” \textit{Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive}, http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/node/425, accessed September 18, 2018. See also Remke Kruk and Claudia Ott, “In the Popular Manner’: Sira-Recitation in Marrakesh anno 1997,” \textit{Edebiyât} 10, no. 2 (1999): 183–98.


\textsuperscript{12.} I cite the Cairo edition throughout using a roman numeral for the \textit{juz’} and an arabic numeral for the page number (e.g., IV:49); \textit{Sirat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma}, ed. ‘Ali b. Mūsā al-Maqānībī b. Bakr al-Māzinī and Šāliḥ al-Ja’fari (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maṭba’a al-Ḥusayniyya, 1909).

\textsuperscript{13.} \textit{Sirat 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, assures his harpy of a mother-in-law, and keeps his household’s peace.  

Sirat 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. 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. 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 Šu’im 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 Šu’im 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 ʿIrīfīt (Demon) and Abū Zālāzīl (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 Sirat Dhāt al-Himma’s Qaṭṭalat al-Shujʿān (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 Dhāt 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 Sirat Barī Hilāl’s Abū Zayd and Sirat Dhāt al-Himma’s ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, are presumed to be bastards, whose legitimacy requires verification shortly after their births. For more on paternity tests in Sirat Dhāt al-Himma, see Rachel Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in Sirat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah,” 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 Sirat Dhāt al-Himma, the Tunis version is Sirat al-Dalhama, and the Paris version is Sirat 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 ṭaṭāʿ (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” (ṭaṭāʿ 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, “Radāʾ or Ridaʾ,” 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 (ṭaṭāʿa), 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).


hero’s advent—pregnancies that are “unusual and challenging for the mother” and that are often accompanied by supernatural circumstances.\(^\text{21}\) 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.”\(^\text{22}\) This renders breastfeeding a contested terrain between gendered factions.\(^\text{23}\) In some circumstances, conventionalized steps such as ṭahnīk (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.”\(^\text{24}\) 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.\(^\text{25}\) 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

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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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. In particular, he was avidly

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30. Ott, Metamorphosen des Epos, 112.

interested in educational reform in the Jewish community, leading him to earn the moniker maskīl (enlightened individual, or participant in the haskala, a Jewish intellectual revivalist movement not dissimilar to the Arabic nahḍa). 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.

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. 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 Muhammad. 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:

وسمى وكتها نور الشريف أي أسلام أرسل علامة إن شيء الفرد في العربة أخذه من جندب والد creams and here transliterated as 'ugāb to reflect local pronunciation and the Judeo-Arabic original.
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 *ʿugāb* 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 *isrāʾiliyyāt*-derived representations of prophetic figures shared between Judaism and Islam.

**Milk and Myth, from Moses to Muhammad**

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 *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (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-Kisāʾī’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


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-marāḍiʿ 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 khāʾifa). 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. 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 ʿArabī, 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-taqawwūl wa-l-taghadhdhī bi-ladhdhāt al-quwwa al-nafsāniyya wa-shahawātihā) before his attainment of wisdom and purity of nature (qabl istiʿmāl al-fikr bi-nūr al-istiʿmāl). Other prominent Sufi exegetes, such as ʿAlī ʿArabī and ʿAlī Baqī, claim that Moses understood that had he nursed from a transgressor of God’s commands (mukhālīfa) 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.

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 Dhuʾayb. 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

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.\(^4^3\) 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.\(^4^4\)

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.\(^4^5\) 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-lāhī innī la-arjū dhālīk)!\(^4^6\)” 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-Thaʾlabī, in his collection of prophetic lore, ‘Arāʾis al-majālis fi qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, 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.\(^4^7\) 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.\(^4^8\) 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

\(^4^3\) Ibn Hishām, al-Sīra al-nabawiyya li-Ibn Hishām (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1990), 188–89.
\(^4^4\) Ibid., 185.
\(^4^5\) Kueny, Conceiving Identities, 133–34.
\(^4^6\) Ibn Hishām, al-Sīra al-nabawiyya, 189.
\(^4^7\) 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
Nourishing the Noble: Breastfeeding and Hero-Making

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 Muhammad’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. Yaqẓān, born from the ground itself and raised untouched by human contact; he is nursed by a female gazelle or deer (ẓabiya).51 In the collection of stories that make up *al-Ḥikāyāt al-ʿajība wa-l-akhbār 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...

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49. The story of Moses as the archetypical 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 ‘Umar al-Nu’mān (or ‘Amr 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 ‘Umar al-Nu’mān,” *Oriente Moderno* 22, no. 83 (2003): 485–504.

maids after his mother dies. 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. Fosterage by jinn also occurs in Sirat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, though this time following willful maternal abandonment. As a result, the young Sayf acquires a jinniya milk-sister, who becomes a key ally—a supernatural accomplice produced by the binding of Sayf’s lineage to a magical realm. Such tropes appear in Persian literature as well. For example, in the Shāhnāma the simurgh (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.

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 ʿAntar 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 societies—ʿAntar’s mischievous streak reaches an early apogee:

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

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.
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.

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 Suʿdā, takes her in. Suʿdā, 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 Suʿdā. 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 (hijāʾ) poetry that likens the boy’s origins to those of dogs and his color to that of crows. The epithet “son of Marzūq” follows Fāṭima’s child, the hero ʿAbd 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—incur castigation of both the mother and the child.

In an abridgement of the sīra, written by Shawqī ʿAbd 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—

60. This treatment of ʿAbd 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, ʿAbd 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{62} According to Ibn Sinā, wet nurses therefore ought to be chosen for their appropriate age (\textit{sinn}), comely appearance (\textit{suḥan}), and moral rectitude (\textit{akhlāq}).\textsuperscript{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 Suʿdā 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.

\textbf{Junduba the Foundling}

Junduba, the first major hero to make an appearance in \textit{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 Kīlāb. 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

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Shawqī ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm and Omaima Abou-Bakr, \textit{Princess Dhat al-Himma: The Princess of High Resolve} (Guizeh: Foreign Cultural Information Dept., 1995), 75–76.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} On the function of milk in forging physical and psychological resemblance, see Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero,” 14–15; Kueny, \textit{Conceiving Identities}, 140; al-Jāḥiẓ, \textit{al-ʿIbar wa-l-iʿtibār}, ed. Šābir Idrīs (Cairo: al-ʿArabī, 1994), 78; ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba, \textit{ʿUyūn 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 Āʾisha 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,” \textit{Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations} 21, no. 3 (2010): 233.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Ibn Sinā, \textit{Qānūn fi al-ṭibb} (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 114.
\end{itemize}
of her “what men ask of women.” Trying to elude him, Arbâb excuses herself to wash and immediately goes into labor, giving birth to a son. When Sallâm sees what has happened, the text states:

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. 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.

Whether Sallâm actually rapes Arbâb before killing her remains ambiguous. In the 1909 Cairo version, Sallâm cuts off her head in a rage without fulfilling his desire, and she tumbles to the ground. In MS Arabe 3840, however, Arbâb dies from the childbirth itself, with Sallâm having run off in fear as soon as her labor began. But all versions agree that immediately after the birth, just before she expires, Arbâb 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 wâdī, named Dârim, happens upon the child while on a gazelle hunt, trying to distract himself from the loss of his own newborn son:

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 Sallâm claims he was told by another man that women could give birth by “squeezing their bellies” and using sheer force. Arbâb rebuts this false assumption, saying that “this [would take] a stunning ability, and it is beyond [the capacity of] all humankind.” Surat Dhât-al-Himma, 1:10.
66. This enigmatic idiom seems to connote the length of the cut he made on Arbâb’s body with the dagger. Surat al-Dalhama, 9.
68. Surat al-mujâhidîn, fol. 6.
69. Sic.
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 wāzīr, 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.”

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

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 [...]

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 Muhammad al-Manbijī’s Tasiyyat ahl al-maṣāʾib, 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. 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. Sirat al-Dalhama, 9.
71. Sic.
72. Sirat al-mujāhidīn, fol. 6.
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. 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.

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.” 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 laki insi]!”). 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:


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-Mughni*, vol. 11, ed. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbād al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw (Riyadh: Dār ʿĀlam 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-muṣāhidīn*, fol. 7.

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].

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

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78. See note 1.
79. In the Judeo-Arabic, this phrase appears as وليتادو بالله.
80. ʿSīrat al-Dalhama, 11.
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 (ʿajūz) 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, ḥilīl 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 Muhammad’s intercessory capacity to his descendants, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi also notes that the relationship between milk

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81. Sīrat al-mujāhidīn, fols. 7–8.
83. I would like to thank Franklin Lewis for suggesting this nomenclature.
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 (raḥim) 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-mar’), “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 qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ 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:


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.

“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 Husna 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:

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

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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 spike\textsuperscript{90}

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 fawājjir). 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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,

\textsuperscript{90}. Sirat al-Dalhama, 12; Sirat al-mujāhidīn, fol. 8.
\textsuperscript{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:

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?
Hewn from fine metal, fitting for a king,
So take my fortune and go nurse him, now
Surely God aids the long-suffering

93. Sirat al-Dalhama, 12; Sirat al-mujāhidin, 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 *ṣira* 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 Ketubbōt, the section of the Talmud most directly concerned

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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 Ketubbōt 5:9. See also Rosenblum, “‘Blessings of the Breasts,’” 158.

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 *Sirat 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, Muhammad’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. 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 *Sirat ‘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 *Sirat 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—Ḥusna 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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