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To cite this article: Anny Gaul (2016) Shahrazad's pharmacy: women's bodies of knowledge in “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies”, Middle Eastern Literatures, 19:2, 185-205, DOI: 10.1080/1475262X.2016.1211407

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2016.1211407

Published online: 20 Sep 2016.
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ABSTRACT

At first glance, a group of flowers purchased in “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” a story cycle from the *The Thousand and One Nights*, seems to function merely as a way to establish the tale’s setting. However, a majority of these flowers appear in pharmacological literature contemporaneous with the *Nights*, where they are medically indicated to facilitate feasting and sexual activity, address symptoms of melancholy, enhance women’s beauty, and regulate reproduction. All of these indications have specific relevance to the narratives presented in the story cycle. This article suggests that the flowers, read in the context of Islamicate medical theory, popular medical tradition, and literary metaphor, enable a new re-reading of the story cycle and its ending. Rather than objects of a patriarchal system, the women of the story can be read as subjects of a gendered discourse of knowledge through which they affect their world in significant ways.

Questions of female subjectivity have long been a concern of scholarship on *The Thousand and One Nights*, stemming first and foremost from Shahrazad’s dual role as educator and entertainer. Judith Grossman argues that Shahrazad succeeds in convincing the king that “female subjectivity in particular is not intrinsically evil.” Fedwa Malti-Douglas, identifying Shahrazad’s role as a corrective one, describes how she embodies not merely sexual but textual desires through her storytelling, thereby instructing the king in “a more female approach to pleasure.” Sandra Naddaff’s work extends the discussion of female subjectivity into the story cycle of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies” (*al-Hammāl waṣḥabīyā al-thalāth*). Such readings assume a static, patriarchal world and consider how the women characters of the *Nights* navigate it: Naddaff argues that although the three women in the story cycle, like Shahrazad herself, set the terms of their own narrative world, this world is short-lived: in the end, they are drawn out of their female domain into an archetypal happy ending of marriages that restore, rather than alter, the *status quo ante*. With the conclusion of the story cycle, Naddaff argues, “the narrative has moved backward, has restored its characters to a time and a state predating that of the cycle’s opening. The narrative has been markedly conservative, even retrograde in its driving impulse.” Malti-Douglas makes a similar observation about the conventional ending of the frame tale:
for all the edification Shahrazad has effected, in the end she “relinquishes her role of narrator for that of perfect woman: mother and lover.”

But if Shahrazad’s pedagogical project is such a successful one, should it not bring about a new understanding of what female sexuality and subjectivity entail, shifting or qualifying in some way what it means to be a woman in the patriarchal world of the Nights? This article argues that such a reading is possible by analysing a crucial and understudied element of the narrative: the role of non-human objects. Taking up the story cycle of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” I suggest that a group of flowers purchased in the cycle’s opening scene can open up a new interpretation of female subjectivity and of its orientation to the patriarchal world in which it operates. These flowers make possible a reading of the cycle’s female characters as subjects of a gendered discourse on the body that gives new meaning to its narrative resolution.

Interpreting the flowers in this way requires not only a return to the narrative itself, to trace the flowers’ journey from the market into the embedded tales, but recourse to the medical and pharmacological literature contemporary to the version of the Nights in question. I analyse the text of Muhsin Mahdi’s critical edition, which is based on the ninth/15th-century Syrian manuscript, and examine the flowers as they are presented in both this particular version of the Nights and by authoritative medical and pharmacological texts from a similar historical milieu.

A Shopping Trip Sets the Scene

The story cycle opens with a shopping trip in the market of Baghdad. An exquisitely attired woman hires a lowly porter and proceeds to purchase a mouth-watering list of ingredients from a series of different vendors, starting with wine, fruit, and flowers. At the butcher’s she buys so much fresh meat that the porter is astonished (tā’ajjaba). Next she stops for cheeses, olives, dried fruit, nuts, a long list of sweets and confections, from qaṭāyif (sweet fritters) to “judge’s morsels” (luqaymāt al-qādī), and, finally, an array of scented waters and incense.

The scene immediately signals a shift in the overall narrative of the Nights: by invoking specific tastes, colors, and smells, the story’s tone departs from that of the preceding stories and the frame tale, which mostly take place in generic palaces, forests, and cities. Set in Baghdad during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashid, the story cycle opens with a scene that features place names absent from the Nights up to that point: Syrian cheese (jubn shāmī), Iraqi sugarcane (qaṣab ʿirāqī), and Ottoman quinces (safārjal ʿutmānī) are among its many delicacies. When the woman and the porter return to her luxurious home, she and her two sisters invite him to stay for an evening of feasting, drinking, poetry, and sexual play in and around a pool of water. Eventually three one-eyed dervishes, along with the caliph and his vizier in disguise, join the party—but only on the women’s condition that the guests refrain from speaking about what they see.

After much pleasant eating, drinking, and music, the mood of the party changes drastically as a horrific scene unfolds: one of the sisters brings out two black dogs in turn, beats them savagely, and weeps. Next, another of the sisters sings a song and is overcome with emotion; as she swoons, her dress tears and the company can all see that her body has been severely beaten. Unable to restrain themselves, the men break their promise to keep silent and ask for an explanation. Seven black men immediately appear, ready to execute the
men for their infraction—unless they ransom their lives with stories. As Tsvetan Todorov points out, the dervishes’ situation recalls that of Shahrazad herself, “who lives exclusively to the degree that she can continue to tell stories,” setting up a storytelling framework in which “narrative equals life.”

The three dervishes proceed to tell increasingly elaborate backstories detailing reversals of fortune: each of them was born the son of a king and yet has been reduced to the status of a wandering mendicant. The next day, at the behest of the caliph, the sisters are summoned to relate their own tragic tales, which explain, among other things, how they came to be living without men and in such a sorry state. In the end, all of the major players are married off (mostly to one another), their fortunes and marital statuses restored.

Several items purchased in the opening scene—including a number of the flowers—appear not only at the feast for which they were nominally purchased, but also recur throughout the cycle’s embedded stories. Yet scholars of the Nights have largely read the shopping list as incidental to the cycle’s themes and narrative structure. Charles Perry’s essay about the list, for example, is more concerned with culinary history, and focuses on identifying recipes for the confections that appear in the list without exploring their role in the stories. In her work on Mamluk pharmacology, Leigh Chipman mentions the list in the context of the shopper’s final stop at the ʿātār, where she buys scented waters, perfumes, incense, and sugar. Chipman describes this scene as one of several “incidental references to drugs and druggists” throughout the Nights. Despite pointing out that “all the items [purchased from the ʿātār] (including sugar) have medical uses,” she concludes that “the medical uses are irrelevant to the story,” and that the perfuming of the feast is the limit of the connection between the shopping list and the rest of the story cycle.

This is curious, given that scholarship on medieval Islamicate medicine emphasizes that not only drugs, but also diet and all other sensory experiences, including sound and smell, were integral components of medical therapy within this tradition. It follows that firm boundaries between food, medicament, and even perfumes and incense should not be assumed in the context of the Nights. On the contrary, that context would have included an axis between food and pharmacy as well as a broader set of relationships between the body, a humor-based physiology, and social activity (including sex, eating, and emotional experience). I argue that given this particular cultural and historical context, a group of medically significant objects—such as the flowers, scented waters, and many other items purchased in the Baghdad market—that ends up at a feast which in turn prompts a cavalcade of stories must be read as inextricably linked to those narratives. To understand what these flowers are doing in the tales, however, we must first turn to the scientific texts that explain their medical and medicinal significance.

**Reading Flowers, Medically**

Nearly every item purchased on the shopping trip, not merely the items purchased from the ʿātār, had medicinal uses and therapeutic indications according to the pharmacological literature of the same era as the manuscript of the Nights. This particular group of flowers speaks to several key concerns in the Islamicate medical tradition: the concept of balancing humors, generally, and the issues of melancholy and women’s reproductive functions, more specifically.
Medieval Islamicate medicine was based upon classical Greek Galenic theory, but also included medical knowledge transmitted through Syriac, Persian, Indian, and Arab authorities. Its organizing principles are rooted in a Galenic understanding of the four humors, each of which exemplifies two of four shared properties: blood (hot/wet), phlegm (cold/wet), yellow bile (hot/dry), and black bile (cold/dry). Based on a person’s temperament and circumstances, a particular balance of humors is necessary for maintaining good health. Humoral physiology includes a range of factors essential to maintaining good health and balancing the humors, including air, food, drink, sleep, exercise and physical activity, “retention and evacuation” (which included both bathing and coitus), and a person’s mental and emotional states. Thus, in addition to food and medicine, one’s physical and social environments were essential to regulating a person’s humors and temperaments. Citing ʿAlī ibn al-ʿAbbās al-Majāṣī, a fourth/10th-century medical authority, Manfred Ullmann describes how not only foods and personal hygiene, but perfumes and even fabric were “included in the rule of life” in classical Islamicate medicine.

It is no accident that all of these elements are at play in the frame and setting of the story cycle: the women’s gustatory and sexual entertainments involve each of the five senses in some specific way, beginning with an impressive spread of food to appeal to sight and taste, sexual play in and around a pool of water, evoking the sense of touch, and finally, music and the burning of incense. Medically speaking, all of these sensory experiences would have been understood as playing a role in regulating the body’s temperament. The story further demonstrates the powers of smells and sounds to traverse the walls of the women’s private residence, as they eventually attract not only the dervishes but also Hārūn al-Rashīd, the caliph himself, to the party. This speaks to the medical principle of a correspondence between the balance of the humors in the body and the elements in the universe at large: smells and sounds that influence the body in particular ways also reach out to the entirety of one’s social world—in this case, reaching all the way to the top of the local political and social hierarchy. It is therefore unsurprising that the flowers purchased in the market strike a balance with regard to humoral understandings of the body: excesses of any one of the four humors, for example, might be addressed with multiple flowers from the list. The collection of flowers is theoretically diverse enough to address a wide variety of temperaments and humoral imbalances.

My understanding of what these flowers would have signified in the medical context of the Mamluk period is based upon two sources: Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ limufradāt al-adwiya wal-aghdniyya (The Book of Medicinal and Nutritional Terms) by Ibn al-Bayṭār al-Mālaqī (d. 646/1248), and Leigh Chipman’s edited and translated collection of pharmacological recipes from Minhāj al-dukkān wa-dustūr al-a’yān fi a’māl watārikāb al-adwiya al-nāfis a lil-insān, (The management of the [pharmacist’s] shop and the rule for the notables on the preparation and composition of medicines beneficial to Man) written in 658/1260 by Abū ʾl-Munā Dāwud b. Abī Naṣr al-Kūhin al-ʿAṭṭār al-Hārūnī al-Isnāʿī. The former (Ibn al-Bayṭār) is an encyclopaedic pharmacological text that draws heavily on classical Greek pharmacology. In addition to a wide range of other sources, it includes the entirety of the Materia Medica of Dioscurides (the greatest Greek authority on pharmacology). The latter work (al-ʿAṭṭār) was influenced by Ibn al-Bayṭār’s work, but is more practically oriented and includes passages on the practice of pharmacology and specific methods of preparation. Taken together, these two sources offer a picture of what meanings these
flowers might have indexed in reference to the characters and narratives of the story cycle.\textsuperscript{20}

Comparing the flowers from the shopping list with these sources, I compiled pharmacological profiles for the eight flowers with the most detailed data in the medical literature. This article concentrates largely on those eight flowers: violet (\textit{banafsaj}), red anemone (\textit{shaqāʾiq al-nuʾmān}), pomegranate blossom (\textit{jullanār}), iris (rendered in the episode in the Baghdad market as \textit{sawsān}, for rhyming purposes, although the more standard spelling is \textit{sawsan}), jasmine (\textit{yāsamīn}), chamomile (\textit{uqhūnān}), narcissus (\textit{narjis}), and rose in the form of rosewater (\textit{māʾ al-ward}). While roses themselves are not included in the shopping list, it does include rosewater, a common pharmacological ingredient.\textsuperscript{21}

One pattern that immediately emerges from the pharmacological literature on these specific flowers is the frequent combination of two or more of them (sometimes in tandem with non-floral items that also appear on the shopping list) in specific recipes for various medications. This suggests that the flowers on the list are significant not only as individual items, but in concert. It is also striking that approximately half of the flowers’ names or descriptions indicate Persian origin. This would not have been particularly unusual in Islamicate medicine, which incorporated many elements from non-Greek medical traditions into its corpus; but in the context of the \textit{Nights}, whose narrator has a distinctly Persian name and backstory, these flowers parallel the other Persian elements (names, cities, stories) throughout the text.

The most common uses of these flowers relate to facilitating balance when it comes to feasting and sexual intercourse, treating melancholy, and regulating women’s bodies in terms of both beauty and reproduction. All of these medical topics are integral to the story cycle, starting with their direct relevance to the lavish and lascivious feast that opens the cycle and sets the scene for its embedded stories, and including topics elaborated in the embedded tales, such as the melancholy suffered by the three dervishes and the fate of the bodies of the three women.

Of particular relevance to the first of these topics (feasting and sexual activity) are chamomile, violet, and rosewater, which are mentioned for their capacity to increase appetite and desire for food, strengthen the stomach, and facilitate both enjoyment and digestion of food.\textsuperscript{22} Rosewater in particular is used in eight different recipes that are recommended not only for improving the appetite and strengthening the gums, but in many cases can “gladden” or strengthen the heart as well.\textsuperscript{23} Violet is cited in a recipe for cleansing the stomach and addressing flatulence—which can also be treated, along with excessive belching, using another recipe involving rosewater.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, three recipes in al-ʿAttār indicate that violet is used to make “gentle purgatives,” should one need to moderate one’s over-consumption.\textsuperscript{25} Should this prove to be too much, either pomegranate blossom pastilles made with rosewater, or a concoction including the juices from quinces and apples (two fruits also included in the shopping list), can be used to stop purging.\textsuperscript{26} Finally, should one need to cool one’s mouth, sweeten the breath, or mask the scent of wine after a meal, recipes involving pomegranate blossom and rosewater would be appropriate.\textsuperscript{27}

An even more specific case linking these flowers to the action of the story (in particular, regulating the act of feasting in such a way as to allow for sexual activity to occur afterwards) lies in the prescribed uses of both violet and iris for conditions connected to an excess of yellow bile. al-ʿAttār describes violet as an ingredient of \textit{maybukhtaj}, a Persian
concoction that includes not only flowers, but raisins (another ingredient purchased in the opening scene), and which “removes evil excesses” and can address excesses of the humors, including yellow and black bile. Ibn al-Bayṭār describes violet as particularly beneficial in the cases of dry, hot conditions, including inflammation of the stomach, that result from too much yellow bile. One of the aspects of this particular humoral excess is that it makes a person indisposed to sexual activity; thus, maybukhtaj and violets more generally would be useful for preparing for, and moderating, sexual activity due to their cooling capacities.

In addition to the general balance of humors, diet, and disposition required to prepare properly for sexual activity are the logistical and mechanical issues associated with arousal. Remedies addressing this element of sexual activity are well represented in the floral repertoire purchased in the market. Iris, lily, gillyflower, and narcissus extracts are used as ingredients in various aphrodisiacs, and narcissus, jasmine, and gillyflower are all indicated for facilitating the arousal of a flaccid penis. Finally, iris and violet are both used to achieve the desired dryness or lubrication of the vagina: iris to narrow and dry the vagina, and violet to lubricate it.

Melancholy is the next major medical concern that the flowers address. Generally understood to be the result of an excess of black bile, melancholy was a major subject in Greek medical theory, with some medical authorities devoting entire works to it. Understood as an affliction encompassing not only sadness and depression, but madness and hallucinations, melancholy was believed to be triggered by numerous physical causes, including insufficient coitus (on the part of a man), excessive drunkenness, or heavy foods, in addition to “psychical causes” – which, according to Ishāq ibn ʿImrān, a fourth/10th-century Baghdadi medical authority, could include fear, major loss, and trauma. One of the most curious symptoms of melancholy, as described by Greek physicians, is the onset of hallucinations involving the appearance of black men attempting to kill the melancholic person. The three dervishes’ backstories reveal that each has suffered significant losses, including reversals of fortune and the deaths of loved ones, and moreover they are telling their stories as seven black men stand nearby, swords at the ready—all indications that they are suffering from melancholy. Again, the flowers prove useful to the situation at hand: al-ʿAttār lists violet as an ingredient in three separate treatments for melancholy, while narcissus, chamomile, and jasmine can treat various side effects stemming from excesses of black bile.

The final realm to which the flowers’ therapeutic functions are relevant emerges largely through the sisters, their bodies, and their stories. The red anemone flower (shaqāʾiq al-nuʿmān) plays a prominent role in metaphors used to indicate physical beauty at key points within the literary text; so it is unsurprising that a significant number of the flower’s medical indications are related to women’s bodies, starting with techniques for enhancing feminine beauty. According to Ibn al-Bayṭār, the anemone can be used for clarifying the eyes, beautifying the skin in various ways, reducing a woman’s menses, and dyeing a woman’s hair darker. Further, all of the eight flowers discussed here have some relevance to women’s reproductive health: each has at least one gynaecological indication. The flowers can stop bleeding from the womb (pomegranate blossom, jasmine), address ulcers and other afflictions of the womb (violet, pomegranate blossom, chamomile, iris), and influence menstruation (iris, rosewater, chamomile, anemone).
Even more notably, these flowers as a group point to a set of very specific indications when it comes to reproduction. Lavender, saffron, and roses, which are not purchased in the market with the other flowers (despite occurring abstractly elsewhere in the story cycle in poetry) do appear in recipes of al-ʿAtṭār specifically indicated for promoting fertility and conception. Conversely, at least two of the flowers purchased in the story are indicated for use as abortifacients. Ibn al-Bayṭār cites two authorities, Ibn Sinā and al-Ghāfiqī, who describe narcissus and iris, respectively, as effective means of aborting a foetus.

Pharmacological indications of the group of flowers purchased at the outset of the story cycle thus cover the regulation of eating, coitus, melancholy, and women’s bodies—activities and states central not only to the narrative action and stories within the cycle, but to the regulation of good health in a humor-based understanding of the body more generally. These particular floral arrangements at a feast that has been organized by women, and which includes sexual activities and overtones, are difficult to write off as coincidence. In a study of the Persian poetry of Nizami Ganjavi that features the recurring use of two fruits which had specific medical indications as aphrodisiacs in poetry depicting sexual acts, Christine van Ruymbeke points out that:

the insistent use of these two images, in similar sexual contexts, points towards a conscious poetic process. It would be too much of a coincidence had this science-conscious poet been unaware that the two images were actually pharmacological recipes for aphrodisiacs and incredibly well-adapted to a passage describing a physical love scene.

If we accept that, similarly, the presence of these flowers at the party in Baghdad carries some significance to the story cycle, the dervishes’ state of mind, and the women’s bodies, how might we interpret their meaning in the narrative? How is the connection between popular fiction and pharmacology to be understood? Answering this question requires an interpretive framework for reading across the genres of popular fiction and pharmacology.

Reading Flowers in Literature

In his work on “the rhetoric of the passions,” a discourse that originated in ancient Greece but dominated theories of acting in the West until the 18th century, Joseph Roach argues that the significance of the discourse is inextricable from “the contemporaneous understanding of how the human body functioned.” Like Islamicate medicine, the tradition Roach discusses is also predicated upon a Galenic, humor-based physiology. His description of the way this medical theory was understood is a concise illustration of its implications not only for establishing balance in a person’s body, but the space and people around him:

The rhetoric of the passions … endowed the actor’s art with three potencies of an enchanted kind. First, the actor possessed the power to act on his own body. Second, he possessed the power to act on the physical space around him. Finally, he was able to act on the bodies of the spectators who shared that space with him … His passions, irradiating the bodies of spectators through their eyes and ears, could literally transfer the contents of his heart to theirs, altering their moral natures.

Roach’s emphasis on the epistemological significance of an individual body, its “enchanted potencies,” and its potential impact on society as understood within a Galenic context is
essential to understanding the significance of how flowers-as-medicament might be read within the *Nights*. But Roach’s broader, theoretical point is also important here: in order to analyse the role that these flowers are playing in the literary narrative, they must be analysed in terms of prevailing understandings of the body at the time the text was written down. This includes not only the broad context of humoral physiology already outlined, but also the practicalities of how knowledge was transmitted and received in a particular society.

Given the extensive medical and pharmacological literature from the period, as well as its evident relevance to the themes of the story cycle, it is tempting to read the function of the flowers’ role in the story in the practical, literal terms of their medical application. There is even some limited textual support for such a reading: the three sisters feed the porter not only food and water, but aromatic herbs and flowers (*al-mashmūm*), as they flirt with and kiss him; in another scene, rosewater is used to revive one of the sisters from a swoon, which is a medical indication for rosewater listed in Ibn al-Baytār’s text. However, such a literal reading presents numerous problems and calls to mind Muhsin Mahdi’s point that the *Nights* should not be used as a means for understanding “the manners and customs of Oriental societies.”

James Davidson, in his study of sexual and gustatory desires in classical Athens, offers a useful articulation of how a Foucauldian concept of discourse might be applied to the reading of classical sources. “Instead of looking at the ancient sources as windows on a world,” he writes, “we can see them as artefacts of the world in their own right.” To adopt such an approach, in other words, means that instead of reading the flowers’ pharmacological meanings as literal representations of the 15th-century world of the manuscript, we can consider instead their role in its literary production: how they informed the composition of the text and made it meaningful to its audiences.

Taking this perspective as a starting point opens up several strategies for reading these flowers without asserting a literal understanding of their presence in the narrative as medications. Rather than argue that the presence of aphrodisiac or abortifacient flowers implies that they were literally being used in a particular scene, or by a character, for that specific purpose, I suggest that their presence in the story would have signaled particular meanings about how the text’s interlocutors “thought those meanings worked” (to paraphrase Davidson). The first strategy I suggest for reading the text in this way calls attention to the importance of theory over practice in the system of Islamicate medicine; the second considers the foreshadowing and dramatic irony prompted by the flowers; and the third strategy takes up the role of metaphor in driving the plot of the story cycle.

Theory and authority were significant factors in medieval Islamicate medicine, to the point that often Arabic medical texts reflect Greek theory more than the details of the context in which the texts were produced, even when authored by experienced physicians; few case notes or descriptions of actually practiced therapeutic procedures have survived. Furthermore, recent research on the medical material found in the Cairo Geniza suggests significant discrepancies between the treatments that appear in theoretical medical books and those recorded in more practically oriented medical notebooks, where they do exist. While some texts, such as al-ʿAtṭār’s, included notes on whether a remedy had been tested or not, medical authorities often included information taken from other established authorities, even if it was not a part of their own medical practice. An authoritative textual tradition of medical theory therefore existed alongside and distinct from the actual...
practices of physicians and pharmacists; this means that the existence of medicinal flowers in popular literature can be understood as indexing theoretical or symbolic meaning, regardless of how or whether those flowers were used. The presence of a particular drug in a given scene might be read, therefore, as a reference to a recognized medical authority, not necessarily a current medical practice. The textual authority of the Islamicate medical tradition is significant in the example of the Nights in part because we know that Shahrazad, the narrator of the majority of its embedded tales, was a highly educated individual whose reading list included “books of medicine.” We may safely assume that the narrator of the story cycle is familiar with a particular discourse on medicine and the body—one that would have been based on textual and theoretical more than practical authority.

The second strategy considers the foreshadowing that the flowers’ presence in the tales would have signaled, particularly given that the flowers are one of the very first stops on the trip and therefore preface the cycle’s rising action. Basim Musallam, in his study of birth control in the pre-modern Islamicate world, points out that popular medical genres like erotic literature and materia medica were important and more widely familiar sources of medical remedies, especially when it came to matters of sexual and reproductive health, than more theoretical works about medicine. Thus, books of materia medica like Ibn al-Baytār’s and guides for druggists like al-ʿAtār’s would have been popularly known to the audiences of the Nights: “It is very likely,” Musallam notes, “that only the upper classes consulted the physicians, and the poor must have relied heavily on advice from the druggists.” Just as theories of humoral balance and melancholy may have been familiar to the well-educated narrator of the Nights, the pharmacological particulars of the flowers woven into the tales would have been accessible to its audience. The pharmacological dimensions of the flowers would not have been the only, or probably the most obvious, connotations of their appearance in the stories—for example, the more ubiquitous Arabic poetic conventions associated with describing bodies and beauty through floral metaphors are certainly also at work here. Yet this need not preclude readings of the more secondary or obscure functions that the flowers might play, particularly insofar as they bridge popular genres such as materia medica, erotica, and the tales of the Nights.

Considering the flowers as indexing forms of popular medical knowledge recasts our reading of the shopping trip at the start of the cycle. If we presume that the porter, despite his humble class origins, knows what these flowers would have signaled in terms of gustatory and sexual activity, the fact that his beautiful employer purchases them in one of her very first errands adds a dimension to his growing sense of excitement. It also contributes to the suspense surrounding what will happen when the woman and the porter arrive at her home—which is of course the very moment that the break of dawn cuts off Shahrazad’s narration in what now must be read as a particularly provocative cliff-hanger. The flowers can be read as foreshadowing all of the activities that are soon to play out in the story cycle, from the feasting and sexual activity they facilitate to the forms of balance they restore, while introducing an element of humor to the porter’s excitement.

This anticipation might have added an element of dramatic suspense to the narrative for the tale’s audience: with such a set of flowers introduced at the very beginning of the story cycle, a reasonably informed reader or listener might have guessed that they portend a particularly exciting story (building, of course, on the significant instances of
transgressive sexual activity that have taken place in the *Nights* up to this point, starting with the betrayal that created the need for Shahrazad to exercise her narrative prowess in the first place). Read in this way, the implanting of particular flowers drawn from the popular medical traditions into a popular literary text points to the flowers’ significance as literary devices.

A final strategy for analysing the role of the flowers rests on the notion that the stories themselves are fashioning an alternate world that is deliberately differentiated from “reality.” Malti-Douglas writes that the dichotomy “between reality and fiction” is a part of Shahrazad’s project as a whole, by which “literature must correct experience”—in this case, the “mislearnings” of Shahriyar. In the “Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” a transition from “reality,” marked by the Syrian cheese and Ottoman quinces of the marketplace, occurs when the flowers cross the threshold into the women’s home, the setting where the first set of embedded stories is to unfold. Naddaff notes the increasingly metaphorical language used to describe each of the three sisters as they are introduced over the course of this same transition: the first sister is simply described with little or no figurative language; the second, whom we meet at the door of the house, is described by way of simile; and the third with metaphor. This gradual shift to metaphor, Naddaff suggests, points to a transition between “the literal and the tropic.” The world that the women create in their home is also marked by metaphor, particularly in the sexual banter and word play they enjoy with the porter. In this transition, from the street into the home, one can easily imagine the flowers also taking on a new kind of metaphorical or tropic significance beyond their “market” purposes.

Significantly, with the transition to metaphorical language used to describe the three sisters in turn, the flowers also shift to become increasingly incorporated into the women’s bodies: the doorkeeper’s beauty is praised with poetry that invokes flowers, and the third sister’s teeth are described as white chamomile flowers. If, following Naddaff, we read metaphor as intrinsic to the narrative structure of the tales, then the flowers—conceived of as not only flowers, but also women as flowers—should be read as a key component of narrative’s progression as well. The incorporation of specific medicinal flowers into the text by way of metaphor drives the narrative in particular ways which suggest that its tidy and heteronormative ending is neither inevitable nor unqualified. While balance is, in a sense, restored at the end of the story cycle, the flowers suggest that the women of the story wield and embody a discourse of knowledge that shapes and informs the manner in which that balance is finally achieved.

**Bodies of Knowledge: Flowers in the Narrative**

Having established the medical significance of the flowers, and how they might be read as literary devices that shape and inform the story cycle’s narratives, I now turn to the text of the story cycle itself. By tracing the flowers from their purchase in the market to their transition into the world of metaphor within the sisters’ home and then finally as components of the embedded narratives, a new reading of women’s subjectivities emerges. Read as an integral part of the story’s female subjects and their capacities to influence their own bodies as well as the world around them, the flowers allow us to read the story’s proverbial “happy ending” not simply as a conservative regression to the *status quo ante*, but rather as a corrective progression towards a restoration of balance.
The first role that the flowers play in the narrative of the story cycle’s frame is to facilitate the arousal, digestion, and sexual activity of the characters—not only with an eye to pleasure, but to balance and moderation. Once the groceries have been brought inside, the sisters arrange the provisions carefully, with the “fruits and pickles on one side, and the aromatic items (al-mashmūm) on the other.” Referring to the category of al-mashmūm as physically divided from more straightforward alimentary items is an indication not only of a distinct category of objects whose purpose is not merely gustatory, but of the women’s knowledge and physical arrangement of the table according to that categorization.

The term al-mashmūm soon appears again, this time in poetry recited by the porter. Astonished at everything he sees—not only the abundance of purchased food and other items, but also the beauty of the sisters and their home—the porter begins angling for an invitation to stay the evening, offering to entertain the sisters as recompense and employing the language of balance and completion in doing so. The porter claims that “as a table needs four legs to stand on, you being three, likewise need a fourth, for the pleasure of men is not complete without women, and the pleasure of women is not complete without men.” To underscore his point, he recites a poem that includes additional examples of delightful things that come in fours, including four musical instruments and four aromatics (al-mashmūm): roses, myrtle, gillyflower, and the more generic “blossoms” (nuwwār).

This is a clever ruse on the part of the porter to ingratiate himself with the women, but it also signals that the flowers are shifting into their roles as drivers of the narrative in their role as facilitators and catalysts of gustatory and sexual activity. The mention of two flowers that were purchased in the market (myrtle and gillyflower, plus the generic nuwwār, which might refer to any of the blossoms) along with one flower that was not purchased in the market, the rose (ward), portends the influence of some outside element to balance or complete the world of the women’s home—starting with the porter, who is the first to introduce rose blossoms into the story cycle through his poetry. The fact that rose petals are listed in al-ʿAṭṭār as an ingredient in a recipe indicated for fertility and childbirth is a further indication that the women’s statuses as unmarried and childless may be ripe for change. The porter goes on to proclaim his own wisdom and learning, perhaps a hint that he can “read” the messages encoded in the flowers.

Soon, all four are intoxicated and, in turn, remove their clothes and plunge into a nearby pool of water, engaging in sexual and linguistic banter revolving around various names for their genitals. Food and drink are entwined with the sexual play: not only does the flirting between the women and the porter involve playful nibbles (ʿadda) in addition to kisses and other embraces, but the porter is served sweets, wine, and aromatics (al-mashmūm) throughout the scene. The speeches and toasts made, often with and about wine, proclaim the health benefits of carousing, as when one sister recites: “Drink to your health and pleasure ensure/this drink makes for a body pure.” The reference to wine’s beneficial effects in the context of sexual play reflects the ways that sexual activity, eating, and drinking are linked in key ways, and regulated by similar norms, in Islamicate medical understandings of the body. Because they were all essential for maintaining humoral balance, they were subject to careful regulation.
Musallam notes that erotica, which he describes as “Arabic popular literature par excellence,” was classified alongside fables and popular tales in Ibn al-Nadīm’s Fihrist. Thus the resonances between this scene in the Nights and Muhammad ibn Muḥammad al-Nafzawī’s Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight (Al-Rawd al-ʿāṭir fi nuzhat al-khāṭir), a 9th/15th-century erotic manual, from the nibbles al-Nafzawī prescribes as an element of foreplay to the emphasis on maintaining health and balance, are unsurprising. Advising against intercourse on a full stomach, al-Nafzawī deploys vocabulary that is often used to describe food (atʿam and atyab) to refer to the advantages of intercourse on a light stomach. Al-Nafzawī’s list of common names for male genitalia draws further attention to the feast’s sexual overtones, as “al-aʿwar,” or “the one-eyed one,” appears on his extensive list of euphemisms for the male member—and once the one-eyed dervishes appear at the door, the party features no fewer than three one-eyed men identified by precisely the same term. Musallam also notes that erotic manuals like al-Nafzawī’s were “as much medical as erotic,” and were a key source of popular knowledge of herbal remedies connected to sexual activity—aromatics that one might consume before sex, like the substances the three sisters are feeding the porter as they cavort by the pool. As aromatic elements central to the women’s initial linguistic and sexual play, the flowers are both embodiments of women’s knowledge and key factors in establishing balance in their world.

**Floral Metaphors and Teaching Justice**

Perhaps the most obvious way that women are associated with flowers is through language, typically in lines of poetry, that uses flowers in descriptions of women (and sometimes men) in accordance with common Arabic literary convention. Throughout the story cycle, cheeks are typically described in terms of rosiness or roses. One sister, for example, sings a lament to her lover and refers to “the rose of [his] cheek,” using an idāfa construction (juxtaposing two nouns, rose and cheek) that is repeated in verse in her own backstory as well as in the story of the second dervish. The second sister, the doorkeeper, later describes another young woman as having “rosy” (muwarrada) cheeks, a descriptor in which the name of a flower is morphologically transformed into an adjective. However, the most striking case of metaphorical association of cheeks with flowers uses not the rose, but the red anemone flower, which is used to describe the doorkeeper as well as an important man in her backstory. Recall that Ibn al-Baytār classifies the anemone as particularly useful for dyeing hair darker and beautifying a woman’s eyes and skin, all elements of female beauty that also feature in poetry describing women. When the doorkeeper first opens the door to welcome her sister and the porter back from the shopping trip at the beginning of the story cycle, her cheeks are described as being “like red anemones” (kashaqāyiq al-nūmān). This particular floral metaphor then disappears from the narrative entirely until, 38 nights of storytelling later, the doorkeeper recounts her own trip out into the market, where she meets a handsome cloth merchant with a mole on his cheek and compares it with the black centre of the anemone.

The fact that the red anemone, but not the rose, is purchased in the market at the start of the tale, and the key role it plays in another market scene in the final embedded tale of the cycle (the doorkeeper’s story), suggest its significance in the narrative. The contrast between this description and the more frequent use of roses to describe red cheeks in
the various tales that are bookended by the anemone metaphors underscores this point. The trajectory of the red anemone illustrates that the flowers not only drive the narrative; they shape the message it conveys along the way.

The doorkeeper tells the story of her life as a wealthy Baghdad widow who remarries a beautiful young man and is very happy. A month into her marriage, she ventures out into the market to buy some cloth; the cloth merchant is the young and handsome man whose cheek is compared with the anemone, with a mole compared with the black spot that all such flowers feature (kullu l-shaqiqi binuqtatin sawdā’).80 He offers to sell her fabric for the price of a kiss, but when she reluctantly agrees (at the urging of her mother-in-law) he takes a violent bite out of her cheek instead. Ashamed, she tells her husband a series of lies about the cause of the injury—first that a camel driver, then a donkey driver, were responsible—but when her husband’s response is to mete collective punishment on all of the camel and donkey drivers in the city, she recants to avoid the unjust punishment of innocents. When he surmises the truth, he resolves to kill her; after the intercession of his mother, he relents and beats her savagely instead, leaving her scarred and nearly dead. It was then, she explains, that she joined her sisters and they began to live without men.

The significance of her tale, and the role of the anemone in it, is best understood in the context of Shahrazad’s narration of them, because of all the tales in the story cycle, this one is most relevant to the case of Shahriyar—a ruler who is in the process of meting out collective punishment on all of the women in his kingdom because of the transgression of one woman. The doorkeeper’s tale might be understood as communicating a lesson to Shahriyar directly through what Mark Turner terms “narrative imagining,” a process by which abstract or imaginary stories project specific meanings onto seemingly unrelated situations.81

In this reading, the doorkeeper’s story and the anemone are narrative devices through which Shahrazad is projecting specific lessons about women’s subjectivity and the nature of just rule. After the doorkeeper transgresses the gender norms that would prevent her from kissing another man, she is caught “red-cheeked” by her husband, an ironic distortion of the feminine ideals she embodies at the start of the story cycle that leaves her cheek red with literal blood rather than a figurative flower. Further emphasizing this twist is the fact that the cause of her injury was in fact an anthropomorphized anemone (the beautiful man in the market), whose violence against her begets more extensive and even permanent violence upon her body.

The figure of cheek-as-anemone continues to drive the action when the doorkeeper admits the truth behind her red cheek and chooses to suffer the consequences rather than allow her husband to perpetrate the greater injustice of collective punishment. What begins as a straightforward convention of female beauty, or a flower prescribed for enhancing it, transforms into an embodiment of just behavior: despite her mistake and the terrible punishment she suffers as a result, the doorkeeper refuses to allow others to suffer unjustly.

Through this woman’s trajectory, punctuated by the relatively rare appearances of a key flower used to describe her, the story simultaneously critiques a woman’s infidelity, humanizes her actions, and demonstrates that in the face of error, fate, and misfortune, a person can still be a force for moral good. The messages for Shahriyar are many: one mistake does not render a woman evil or untrustworthy; collective punishment is a moral ill; sometimes
justice requires an individual to suffer for the good of society; and no matter how disem-
powered an individual may feel or seem, he is never fully deprived of the power to do some
measure of good and thereby enact change. The fact that the tale’s most immediate audi-
ence includes a caliph, a worldly ruler like Shahriyar, underscores the argument that a
lesson about just rule is essential to the tale. Finally, given that the doorkeeper’s is the
final story of the cycle—the one that finally brings about the “balance” of the happy
ending with everyone in happy couples—the delay of the resolution until the anemone
has served its function as not only a beautifying device, but a pedagogical one, is surely
significant in qualifying that happy ending.

**Restoring Balance through Women’s Knowledge**

Another key aspect of the flowers’ role in the narrative is their role as a component of a
broader body of women’s knowledge, embodied not only through the individual flowers
but also through a number of female characters that possess specialized knowledge.
Given that several of the flowers purchased in the market would signal antidotes to mel-
ancholy, the final resolution of the dervishes’ fates might be read not only through the re-

toration of their social and marital statuses, but through the restoration of their troubled
mental states, thanks to the women’s expertise.

Yet it is not only the three women and their flowers who suggest the existence of this
kind of gendered knowledge: several other female characters in the story cycle, mostly
older women, are also portrayed as possessing some form of special knowledge that
enables them to act upon the world and people around them. In the second dervish’s
tale, a princess reveals that she has learned magic from an old woman, while in the first
sister’s tale another older woman brings Islamic teachings to a society of “fire worshipers.”

The example of the older woman in the doorkeeper’s tale offers the strongest correlation
between women’s knowledge and flowers: when the doorkeeper first approaches the home
of the old woman (soon to be her mother-in-law), she reads some telling verses inscribed
on the door of her home: “I am a house of mirth and joy/inside, a fountain’s water flows/
washing away all sorrow/with scents (al-mashmūm) of myrtle, chamomile, gillyflower,
rose.”^82 Once again, as in the porter’s first recited verses, a line of poetry mentions
three of the four flowers purchased in the market in connection with the theme of happi-

ness and balance.

This would not have been unusual given the nature of Islamicate medicine. Musallam
observes that for the most part materia medica, in contrast to other kinds of medical texts,
was largely oriented towards women’s use—at least in the category of contraception
(medical and legal texts addressing this issue, on the other hand, focused on male
forms of contraception).^83 “The nearly exclusive emphasis on female contraceptives in
materia medica,” he writes, “makes one wonder whether most persons requiring this
service from the druggists were women.”^84 With a strong undercurrent of women with
gendered knowledge, including that of flowers and other aromatics, the story cycle
seems a plausible setting for the restitution of the dervishes not merely on a social level,
thanks to the decree of the caliph, but on physical and psychic levels as well, thanks to
the three sisters’ medical knowledge.

Given the dervishes’ traumatic backgrounds, we can surmise that they are already suf-
ferring from melancholy when they arrive at the party; and by the time two of the sisters
weep and beat themselves and their dogs, they are even more miserable and disturbed (tanakkada, tanaghghasa). The women’s purchase of violet, narcissus, chamomile, and jasmine, all of which might help treat melancholy, signals not only the potential restoration of the dervishes’ health, but offers a crucial new angle from which to read the role these women play in restoring balance to the situation. They are doing so not merely through their participation in the institution of marriage, as passive objects married off by the caliph to socially suitable companions, but through offering their knowledge of healing. Not only their figurative “flowers” (metaphors for feminine virtue) but their actual flowers, and the knowledge behind them, are essential to the story’s outcome.

Regulating Women’s Bodies

The final role that the flowers play in the story cycle relates to their abortifacient and contraceptive functions. At face value, this would appear relevant if only for the fact that these women live alone, are unmarried, and yet seem to engage in sexual activities with some abandon (but appear to be childless): their purchasing of key abortifacient flowers would have let the tales’ audience know this was not an accident, but a further expression of these women as subjects of a gendered discourse of medical knowledge. The porter himself, speaking to the other male guests of the party, states out loud what everyone must be thinking: “I wondered how they could be women without men” (kayf hum nisā bilā rijāl).

The flowers can begin to answer the porter’s question, and shed further light on the story’s ending—which resolves the women’s puzzling scenario. But they must be understood in the context of what the concepts of contraceptives and abortifacients meant in the Islamicate medical context: although the presence of abortifacient flowers in the shopping list hints that marriage does not necessarily mean a total loss of control for these women over their bodies, neither does it necessarily mean a complete rejection or abandonment of certain pro-natalist principles.

Among medical anthropologists, the concept of regulating menstruation (which, again, is an indicated function of several flowers on the shopping list) is both an integral part of humor-based medical theories and a practice that has been deployed to “both contraceptive and pro-natalist ends.” This is particularly important in the context of medicaments that are used to expel foetuses, because it implies that flowers which may work to purge the womb might be understood not exclusively as abortifacients, but as substances that might play other crucial roles in regulating humoral balances and in preserving or maintaining long-term fertility.

It is therefore essential to qualify and historicize what an abortifacient flower might signify in the context of the Nights. Musallam notes that birth control—which included both contraception and abortion—was “a normal part of the physician’s art,” based on Arabic medical texts, and that in fact “Arabic medicine became the primary repository of female contraceptive experience before modern times.” Not only was birth control religiously permissible, generally speaking, it was also “part of the popular consciousness,” referred to frequently in popular and literary texts.

Moreover, the indication of a flower as an abortifacient does not imply that ending a pregnancy is its only use or function. Monica Green’s analysis of medieval European women’s medical writing highlights another point relevant to understanding abortifacient
flowers in the *Nights*: she suggests the need to qualify and complicate interpretations of women’s medical practice as necessarily counter-hegemonic in any straightforward way, and likewise to understand their significance beyond the binary of contraception versus conception. She notes that while Trota of Salerno, a prominent 12th-century Italian female medical authority, was “decidedly pronatalist,” her works also demonstrate:

particularly nuanced understandings of the plight of women wishing to employ technologies of the body to enhance their ability to navigate the patriarchal structures in which they lived—“faking” virginity, dealing with the pain caused by heterosexual intercourse, [and] improving their appearance through cosmetics.90

This implies that there are possibilities for reading the role of abortifacient flowers in the *Nights* as playing much more subtle roles than simply combating or limiting fertility in a straightforward manner. In discussing the complexities of abortifacients and their role in both impeding and promoting fertility, Green makes reference to “flipping technologies,” a concept developed by anthropologist Alexandra Brewis Slade. Slade suggests that “if a society has developed a medical technology for one purpose, it can sometimes be ‘flipped’ to produce an opposite result when the need arises,” citing the example of purgative medicines that may be used to cleanse the womb in order to aid conception or to remove an unwanted foetus, depending on the context.91

The ultimately ambiguous role this concept assigns to abortifacients suggests that the story’s archetypal ending need not be read in terms of women surrendering to a patriarchal structure in which they are mere objects. It may be read instead as a narrative in which women rejoin that structure as active subjects, embodying discourses of medical and moral knowledge. The flowers force a reconsideration of women in the cycle not as bodies that are married off, but as agents of specific modes of pleasure, entertainment, healing, and balance.

**Conclusion**

The flowers purchased in the Baghdad market exemplify an overlapping of alimentation, medication, and behavior central to Islamicate understandings of health and the body. They work throughout the narrative itself to illustrate that both “cultures” and what we might term “pharmacies” of gustatory and sensory consumption are deeply imbricated in the worlds of the *Nights*. This understanding of the potential influence the flowers wield is crucial to reading the story cycle as a transposition of a popular medical discourse into a fictional narrative. Opening up our reading of the three women at the heart of the Baghdad story cycle to recast them as active subjects of their own story, the flowers become even more potent in the hands of Shahrazad as narrator—a character who herself is projecting important messages through these stories about sex that end in happy marriages.

Naddaff points out the connection between textual, or narrative, activity and sexual activity in the *Nights*, observing that “the humanly creative aspect of the sexual act is mirrored in the textually creative aspect of the verbal act,” with one activity instigating the other.92 Malti-Douglas describes the relationship between textual and sexual activity in terms of Shahrazad’s transformation, by way of her narrative prowess, of a pattern in which sex leads to death into one in which sex leads to procreation.93 Factoring the flowers into this reading adds an additional dimension to the relationship between
textual and physical intimacies at the heart of the *Nights*: both Shahrazad and the women in the story cycle not only narrate specific forms of knowledge, they embody that knowledge—it is part and parcel of their subjectivities. This interpretation, which insists upon reading knowledge and virtue as they are written and enacted in and through bodies, resonates with Foucault’s reading of philosophical *parrēsia*, a classical concept signifying critical free or frank speech. Foucault explains that in Plato’s *Gorgias*, “philosophical *parrēsia*, which … operates between master and disciple, leads not to rhetoric, but to an erotics.” The notion of a Platonic *eros* arising from a particular mode of *askēsis*—a mode of exercising moral virtue in such a way as to influence others—is a striking parallel for the process Shahrazad is undertaking in leading the king to certain truths not merely through rhetoric and language, but as she transforms her own relationship with him through embodied intimacy.

If the three sisters of Baghdad are so capable, we might ask, why must they marry at the end of the tale? The simple answer is that they get married because Shahrazad already has: they are the narrative manifestation of the very terms that are being set for Shahrazad’s own fate. Like the scents of the flowers and the wafting of amorous music and poetry, there is no confining this story to the courtyard or the bedroom. Like the “enchanted potencies” of Roach’s classical actor, the stories are meant to emerge from Shahrazad’s body to transform not only Shahriyar, but the social order itself, to complete the ultimate life-ransoming tale.

**Notes**

3. Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 101–103. Customarily, the title of the story is translated using the word “ladies,” even though the Arabic title refers to ʂabąya, which would more accurately be translated as “girls.” I have retained the conventional “ladies” when referring to the story cycle by its title, but otherwise refer to the characters as “women” or “sisters.”
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 98.
7. Mahdi, *Thousand and One Nights*. “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies” is presented as pages 126–219 of Part I. In most cases, translations are my own; in some cases, I have noted where I have relied upon Husain Haddawy’s *Translation of the Arabian Nights*. Haddawy’s work was indispensable to the initial task of identifying the various flowers purchased in the Baghdad market. It must be mentioned that the specific combination of flowers discussed in this article is unique to the Mahdi edition, and that other Arabic editions of the *Nights* do not include several of the flowers that are key to the argument presented here. The scope of this article, however, is limited to a discussion of the flowers as they appear in this particular edition—which, significantly, was written in Middle Arabic. I suggest that its colloquial register offers specific interpretive possibilities for reading the *Nights* in relation to other popular oral and written traditions. Regarding the dating of the Mahdi manuscript, see Grotfeld, “Age.”
9. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. This excludes the confections bought in the market, but includes fruits, flowers, and spices appearing on the shopping list; that is, items that could be either ingredients in medicinal concoctions or simple remedies on their own.
18. Mahdi, *Thousand and One Nights*, 130–138. Passages related to specific senses in the party setting can be found as follows: sight and taste at ibid., 130–133; touch at ibid., 133–136; smell at ibid., 136; and hearing at ibid., 138.
19. Chipman, *World of Pharmacy and Pharmacists*, 123. Chipman notes that al-ʿAṭṭār’s book was so popular that it remained widely consulted until the 1960s.
20. Although medical indications in Ibn al-Baytār are for the flowers themselves, as his text is organized by ingredient rather than by recipe, al-ʿAṭṭār’s text is organized as a collection of recipes, many of which include the flowers as components. In a number of cases, recipes call for roots or oils derived from the flowers rather than the blossoms.
21. In both Ibn al-Baytār and al-ʿAṭṭār, rose and rosewater are treated as separate items. Data on other flowers from the shopping list, including myrtle, lilies, and gillyflowers, do exist in the pharmacological literature, but in less detail than the other flowers discussed here.
26. Ibid., 190 and 219.
27. Ibid., 226, 257 and 258.
28. Ibid., 43. Steingass defines *maybukhtaj* as Persian for “wine boiled down to a consistency” or “syrup of dates and grapes.” Although recipes for concoctions by this name vary, Chipman notes that a similar recipe for *maybukhtaj*, also including violets and raisins, also appears in the 12th-century *al-Dustūr al-bimarštīnī fi al-adwiya al-murakkabba* (The rule for the hospital on compound medicines) written by the physician Ibn Abī al-Bayān. Chipman, *World of Pharmacy and Pharmacists*, 43.
30. Ullmann, *Islamic Medicine*, 58–59. This is even more interesting when considered alongside the fact that the foreplay between the three sisters and the porter is punctuated by swift dips into the courtyard pool, a full-body cooling process that would restore balance much in the same way that a cooling dish or medicament might.
34. Ibid., 73–74 and 100–102.
35. Ibid., 74–75.
40. The iris is said to remove the foetus, “yukhrij al-janīn,” while narcissus is said to bring down foetuses live or dead, “isqāṭ al-ajinna al-ḥayā’ wa-l-mawtā.” Ibn al-Baytār, *Kitāb*, vol. II,
58 and 477. For more on al-Ghāfiqi, see Ibn al-Baytār, *Colección de medicamentos y alimentos*.

43. Ibid., 27.
44. Ibid.
47. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, xxi.
48. Ibid.
51. Chipman, *World of Pharmacy and Pharmacists*, 18. Chipman notes, for example that some recipes have the notation “mujarrab,” indicating they have been tested.
54. Ibid., 72.
55. In a ludic reading of the figures of the one-eyed dervishes and the porter, Elliott Colla makes a similar argument about the possibilities that arise from reading the text as polysemic. Non-literal or unconventional connotations of words, he suggests, can introduce a sense of “chaos and play” into a text that “disrupts” the same words’ more conventional functions. Colla, “The Porter and Portability,” 96–97.
56. I would like to thank Paulo Horta for suggesting this possibility.
59. Ibid., 22.
60. Mahdi, *Thousand and One Nights*, 129.
64. Ibid., 131.
65. Myrtle is identified as mursin in the shopping scene and as ās in the poem, but both terms can refer to the same flower.
68. Ibid., 133–136.
70. Ibid., 132 (translation mine). Haddawy’s rendering of the verse is even more straightforward about the health benefits of drinking: “Cheers, and drink it in good health / This wine is good for your health.” Haddawy, *Translation of The Arabian Nights*, 87.
77. Ibid., 211.
78. Ibid., 129.
79. Ibid., 213.
80. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 99.
88. Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam*, 60 and 68.
89. Ibid., 93–94.
91. Ibid., 500.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Elliott Colla, Michael Allan, and Adam Talib for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article, as well as two anonymous *Middle Eastern Literatures* reviewers for numerous suggestions, corrections, and improvements. Earlier versions of this article were presented at Harvard University at the conference The Thousand and One Nights: Sources, Transformations, and the Relationship with Literature, the Arts and the Sciences (April 2015) and at the Middle East Studies Center at the American University in Cairo (March 2014), and I am grateful for comments and feedback from the audiences at these events.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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