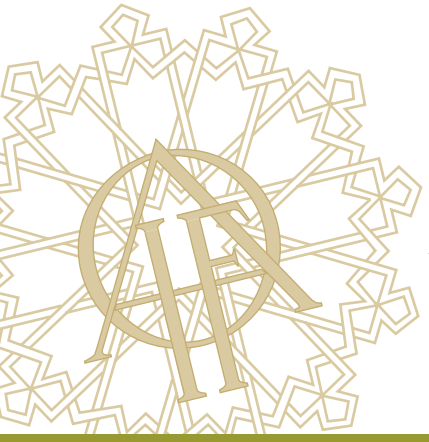
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Geert Jan van Gelder

Men in Women's Clothes. Some Curious Cases of Protection from Arabic Literary Sources

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GEERT JAN VAN GELDER*

Men in Women's Clothes

Some Curious Cases of Protection from Arabic Literary Sources

◆ ABSTRACT

Disguise is a form of protection. Women's clothes, which normally hide more of the body than men's clothes, sometimes provide a suitable disguise. The article presents and discusses some cases, taken from classical Arabic sources, of men receiving the protection and assistance of women who enable them to escape in women's clothes or to hide under them (as did the pre-Islamic brigand-poet al-Sulayk who hid under a helpful woman's skirt). The stories and anecdotes, some perhaps wholly or partly fictional, are taken from a variety of literary and historical sources and date from the pre-Islamic period and the early Islamic centuries.

Keywords: Arabic literature, Arabs, cross-dressing, Islam, protection, women

◆ RÉSUMÉ

Des hommes en vêtements de femmes.
Quelques cas curieux de protection à partir de sources littéraires arabes

Le déguisement est une forme de protection. Les vêtements des femmes, qui cachent normalement une plus grande partie du corps que ceux des hommes, offrent parfois un déguisement approprié. L'article présente et examine certains cas, tirés de sources arabes classiques, d'hommes recevant la protection et l'aide de femmes qui leur permettent de s'échapper en

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portant des vêtements de femmes ou de se cacher sous ceux-ci (comme le faisait le brigand-poète préislamique al-Sulayk qui se cachait sous la jupe d'une femme serviable). Les histoires et anecdotes, dont certaines sont peut-être entièrement ou partiellement fictives, sont tirées de diverses sources littéraires et historiques et datent de la période préislamique et des premiers siècles de l'Islam.

Mots-clés : littérature arabe, Arabes, travestissement, Islam, protection, femmes

ملخص

رجال في ثياب نساء: حالات طريفة من الحماية من مصادر أدبية عربية

التنكر شكلٌ من الحماية. وثياب النساء، التي عادةً ما تغطي جزءًا أكبر من الجسم مما تغطيه ثياب الرجال، أحيانًا ما توفر تنكرًا مناسبًا. يقدم هذا المقال ويناقش بعض الحالات، المستمدة من مصادر تراثية عربية، لرجالٍ يتلقون الحماية والمساعدة من نساءٍ يسمحن لهم بالهروب مرتدين ثياب نساءٍ أو بالاختباء تحت ثيابهن (كما فعل الشاعر الجاهلي الصعلوك السُّلَيْك حين اختبأ تحت تنورة امرأة خدومة). والقصص والنوادر، التي قد تكون من وحي الخيال كليًا أو جزئيًا، مأخوذة من مصادر أدبية وتاريخية متنوعة وتعود إلى فترة ما قبل الإسلام والقرون الأولى للإسلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب عربي، عرب، تنكر، إسلام، حماية، نساء

* * *

"MORE LOYAL than Fukayha" (*awfā min Fukayha*) is a saying found in Arabic collections of proverbial sayings.[1] It is said to be based on a story told in several sources with some variations.[2] Abū ʿUbayda (d. 210/825) tells it as follows, in a passage on three loyal women (*wāfiyāt*) in the pre-Islamic period:

1. Al-ʿAskarī, *Ǧamharat al-amṯāl*, II, p. 272; al-Ābī, *Naṯr al-durr*, VI, p. 124; al-Maydānī, *Maǧmaʿ*, II, p. 445; al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Mustaqṣā*, I, p. 438.

2. Abū ʿUbayda, *al-Dībāǧ*, pp. 71–73; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, pp. 433–434; ps.- al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād*, pp. 70–71; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XX, pp. 383–384; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-masāwiʾ*, p. 107. See also al-Maqrīzī, *al-Ḫabar ʿan al-bašar (Section on The Arab Thieves)*, pp. 254–257 (al-Maqrīzī's text with Peter Webb's translation).

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About the loyalty of Fukayha[3] it is told that al-Sulayk b. al-Sulaka[4] wanted to raid the tribe of Bakr b. Wāʾil. He did not find an opportunity to surprise them unawares, so he stayed lying in wait. They saw a footprint they did not recognise. "This, by God," they said, "is the trace of a man who wants the waterhole. We don't know him, so let us sit down and give him time, until he comes to drink. When he does so, get him!" So they did. Al-Sulayk went to the well at[5] the hottest part of the day. When he had drunk his fill he poured the water over his head and face. Then they sprang upon[6] him. Though encumbered by his now heavy belly he ran off[7] and entered the tent (*qubba*)[8] of Fukayha and asked her to protect him (*istağārahā*). She put him under her skirt (*dirʿ*).[9] They came in, following him, but she resisted. When they pulled her veil from her she cried out for her brothers and children. They came, ten of them, and protected him (*manaʿūhu*).—I heard Sunbul[10] say, "Sulayk used to say, 'I still remember feeling the stubbles of her hair[11] on my back when she put me under her skirt.'" Sulayk said [in verse]:[12]

By the life of your father (reports will multiply):
the sister of the Banū ʿUwār[13] is surely a good protector (*ğār*)!
A bashful woman who does not put her father to shame
and does not raise a scandal for her relatives.

3. She is usually identified as Fukayha bt Qatāda b. Mašnūʾ, of the tribe of Qays b. Ṯaʿlaba; she was the maternal aunt of the famous pre-Islamic poet Ṭarafa.
4. On this brigand and poet, whose name is also spelled without articles (Sulayk b. Sulaka), see e.g. Ibn Ḥabīb, *Asmāʾ al-muġtālīn*, pp. 220, 226–228; al-Balāḏurī, *Ğumal*, XII, pp. 349–351; Ibn Qutayba, *al-Šiʿr*, pp. 365–368; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XX, pp. 374–388; Sezgin, 1975, pp. 139–140; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Ḫabar*, index. Al-Sulaka was the name of his mother, a black woman; the name of his father is given as ʿAmr, ʿĀmir, or ʿUmayr b. Yaṯribī.
5. Reading *ḥīna*, with *al-Muḥabbar*, instead of *ḥattā*.
6. Reading *fa-ḥāğū bihī*, with *al-Muḥabbar*, instead of the meaningless *fa-fāʿū bihī*.
7. Like other brigands (*ṣaʿālīk*) he was famous as a fast runner.
8. "A round tent made of leather, the most costly and luxurious of Arab tents", Lyall, in *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, p. 11.
9. Also translated as "chemise" (*qamīṣ*) or "shift"; "a small garment which a young girl wears in her house, or chamber, or tent" (Lane, 1863–1877, *D R ʿ*). The following shows that she was not a young girl, if she really had sons. Other versions, such as the one in *al-Aġānī*, do not mention sons.
10. Apparently an informant, unidentified, of Abū ʿUbayda. He is not mentioned in other accounts.
11. Other versions (ps.- al-Ğāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād*, al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-masāwiʾ*), even ruder, have "the roughness of her arse's hair".
12. The lines are often quoted. Together with four more lines and further references they are found in al-Sulayk's collected verse, *al-Sulayk b. al-Sulaka, aḫbāruhū wa-šiʿruhū*, pp. 54–56. The poem praises Fukayha as a protector and a chaste woman, but also contains, somewhat incongruously, an erotic line more appropriate in love-poetry: "Her buttocks, together, are a collapsed sand-dune over which the wind has blown in stages". The image is conventional, but in this case could have been based on personal observation. The eroticism of this line and the titillation suggested by al-Sulayk's later comment about feeling her hair (if truly reported) contrast strangely, and perhaps intentionally, with the absence of subsequent scandal.
13. The Banū ʿUwār or al-ʿUwār (rather than ʿAwār as vowelled in *Dībāğ*) are said to be a clan of Mālik b. Ḍubayʿa, a branch of Qays b. Ṯaʿlaba (al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XX, p. 383; Ibn Durayd, *al-Ištiqāq*, p. 215).

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The story is told with admirable concision, as often happens in early Arabic narrative. Much is left to the imagination which in traditional western novels and romances, or in *1001 Nights* fashion, would be supplied in detail: the woman's reaction, the presumed dialogue between the two, the aftermath. All that matters to the narrator is the unusual act of protection. The crucial word *ǧār* in the poem, often translated as "neighbour" but implying protection (*ǧiwār*) to a stranger, most often denotes the person protected but may also refer to the protector, as it does here.[14] The same root is used when al-Sulayk asks for protection (*istaǧāra*). One is morally obliged to honour such a request under normal circumstances, and women could also give protection.[15] The circumstances of the story of Fukayha and al-Sulayk, however, can hardly be called usual. Al-Sulayk, the brigand, comes not as a friend but as a raider; the verb *ġazā* is used in all versions. One might have expected Fukayha, the "bashful woman", to call for help when a stranger intrudes on her privacy. Instead, she willingly admits him to the most private place imaginable. Her next-of-kin, defending her against their fellow tribesmen, also defends the intruder, who escapes with his life and lives to eulogise Fukayha in verse, even though his gossip about feeling her hair seems a flagrant disloyalty to his most loyal rescuer (he was killed some time afterward, having betrayed a man by bedding his wife). The version in *al-Aġānī* gives Fukayha a yet more active, even heroic role:

> … She put him under her skirt and unsheathed a sword, defending him. When they were too many for her, she removed the veil from her hair and shouted for her brothers, who came and who defended him so that he escaped from being killed.

A line from the poem confirms this—unless one assumes that the prose story is merely a fleshing out of the poem:

> Fukayha was not powerless (*mā ʿaǧizat*), the day she stood
> with the sword-blade and they robbed her of her veil.

The upshot was that Fukayha became immortalised and proverbial for her *wafā*ʾ, a term usually denoting loyalty and being faithful. Fukayha, who did not know al-Sulayk, was not so much loyal to him as to her own sense of obligation, her binding offer of protection. Her brothers adopted her loyalty instead of siding with their fellow tribesmen and killing al-Sulayk, or berating their sister for her startling behaviour. Her reputation remained intact. as did al-Sulayk's reputation despite his decidedly unheroic act of hiding under a woman's skirt.

Clothes play a prominent role in this story, as they do in some other cases in which men are protected by women's clothes, though with the man wearing them rather than the woman. Not all cases involve being protected by a woman. One may disguise as a woman not to escape

14. Watt, 1969, pp. 1017–1018.
15. "Den alten Grundsatz, daß auch eine Frau Schutz gewähren kann, hat auch der Prophet mehrfach gebilligt", Fraenkel, 1906, I, p. 296.

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but, for instance, to facilitate an assassination, as did Mālik b. ʿAğlān in a pre-Islamic legend, when he murdered the Jewish tyrant al-Fiṭyawn when he reigned in Yaṯrib (Medina).[16] Female protection, however, was certainly useful to al-Qattāl al-Kilābi (d. soon after 65/685), a brigand and poet.[17] When he was pursued after having killed someone, he went to a female cousin of his called Zaynab. "Throw you cloak over me!" he said to her, and she did, putting her veil (*burquʿ*) over him and daubing his hands with henna. The pursuers passed by him thinking he was Zaynab. "Where is the villain?" they asked, and he replied (presumably imitating a woman's voice) by sending them in the wrong direction. The story, including some verses by him describing his escape, is told in *al-Aġānī*.[18]

A well-known case of female protection concerns ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa (d. 103/720 or 93/712), one of the great poets of love poetry, who often boastfully describes in verse his adventures with women in Mecca and Medina. In his most famous poem, a long *rāʾiyya* (poem with rhyme consonant R) beginning *A-min āli Nuʿmin*,[19] he tells that he visited his beloved Nuʿm at night. She warns him about the dangers but accepts his advances; her kinsmen are asleep. When people begin to wake up, he has to make his escape, which is described as follows:[20]

When almost all of the night had passed
and the Pleiades were steadily sinking to the horizon,
She signalled: "The tribe is about to stir.
But your appointment is at ʿAzwar."
Immediately I heard someone cry: "Depart! Mount the camels!"
And a reddish morning light became visible.
When she saw the men had woken up
and were alert, she said, "Tell me what to do!"
I said, "I'll confront them! I shall either escape from them
or the sword will have its revenge of me!"
She said, "Must what our enemies say about us be confirmed
and what is being told be shown to be true?
If it must be—but there's another way,
more likely to keep the matter hidden and concealed!
I'll tell my two sisters the beginning of our story;
and I cannot postpone letting them know.

16. Ibn Ḥabīb, *Asmāʾ al-muġtālīn*, p. 136.
17. Sezgin, 1975, pp. 143–144.
18. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XXIV, pp. 171–173; a shorter version in Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, p. 229.
19. ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa, *Dīwān*, pp. 84–95. See on the poem e.g. al-Mubarrad, *al-Kāmil*, II, pp. 261–265; III, pp. 62–63; Ibn Abī Ṭayfūr, *al-Qaṣāʾid al-mufradāt*, pp. 56–62; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbuh, *al-ʿIqd*, V, pp. 401–403; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, I, pp. 79–84; al-Marzūqī, *Amālī*, pp. 346–355; Ibn Maymūn, *Muntahā al-ṭalab*, II, pp. 11–15; al-Baġdādī, *Ḫizāna*, V, pp. 312–322. For a summary of the poem see Abdallah, 2005, pp. 345–346.
20. ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa, *Dīwān*, pp. 90–92 (lines 41–58 of the poem).

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Perhaps they will find a way out
and relieve my soul from my anxiety."
She got up, distressed, all blood having left her face,
with her tears streaming down.
Then two noble women came to her, wearing
clothes of silk and wool, one violet[21] and one green.
She said to her two sisters, "Help this young man
who came as a visitor! One thing is destined to lead to another."
They came and were shocked. Then they said,
"Do not blame yourself too much. The matter is easy."
The younger one said to her, "I'll give him my gown (*muṭraf*)
and my skirt (*dirʿ*), and this cloak (*burd*), if he is careful!
He'll get up and walk between us, disguised.
Our secret will not be disclosed and it will not be known."
Thus my protection (*miǧann*, literally "shield") against what I feared were
three persons, two full-breasted women and one who had just reached puberty (*kāʿibān wa-muʿṣir*).
When we crossed the open space in the tribe's encampment they said to me,
"Aren't you afraid of the enemies, now that the moon is shining?
And is this a habit of yours, being heedless?" they said,
"Aren't you ashamed? Will you not mend your ways and think?"

ʿUmar has a safe escape, dressed as a woman and shielded by three women. It may seem unheroic but he clearly does not think so. ʿUmar is not given to self-mockery. He boasts of his exploit,[22] he seems to describe it as a humorous episode but not a humiliating one, and he is clearly unashamed of being protected by women and donning women's clothes, even though cross-dressing is explicitly forbidden according to Hadiths accepted as authentic. But such prohibition is of course directed at behaviour thought to be effeminate, against blurring the differences between the male and female, and not against cross-dressing as a means to save one's life.

Another well-known poet and contemporary of ʿUmar, al-Kumayt b. Zayd (d. 126/743 or 127/744)[23] also made an escape in woman's clothes. With his ʿAlid or Shiite sympathies expressed in eloquent poems he had incurred the anger of the Umayyad caliph Hišām and his

21. I prefer reading, with al-Marzūqī (*Amālī*, p. 350): *banafsun* (as a licence for *banafsaǧun*) *wa-aḥḍarū*, instead of the awkward *dimaqsun wa-aḥḍarū*, as in the *Dīwān*. Syntax and sense demand a colour, rather than yet another textile after *ḫazz* (a tissue of silk and wool). For *ḫazz banafsaǧ* see e.g. al-Ǧarīrī, *al-Ǧalīs*, II, p. 234.
22. Those who have read *The Wind in the Willows* will be reminded of Toad of Toad Hall, who escapes dressed as a washerwoman and composes boasting verses in the manner of ʿUmar ("The Queen and her-Ladies-in waiting | Sat at the window and sewed. | She cried, 'Look! who's that *handsome* man?' | They answered, 'Mr. Toad'", Grahame, 1973, p. 202).
23. On him see e.g. Sezgin, 1975, pp. 347–349; Horovitz, Pellat, 1980, pp. 374–375.

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governor Ḫālid al-Qasrī, who imprisoned him. The story is told in lively detail in *al-Aġānī* in two somewhat different versions[24], the first of which is given here:

> When he (viz., the caliph Hišām) read the poem [a long elegy on Zayd b. ʿAlī and his son al-Ḥusayn b. Zayd and eulogising the Banū Hāšim] he took it badly and greatly disapproved of it. He wrote to Ḫālid, swearing an oath that he should cut off al-Kumayt's tongue and hand. In no time al-Kumayt saw his house surrounded by horsemen and he was taken to al-Muḫayyas prison. Abān b. al-Walīd, governor of Wāsiṭ, was a friend of al-Kumayt. He sent a slave servant on a mule to him, telling him, "You will be free if you reach al-Kumayt, and you can keep the mule." In a letter he wrote, "I have heard about your situation; you will be executed, unless God Almighty averts it. I think you ought to write to Ḥubbā"—that was al-Kumayt's wife, the daughter of Nukayf b. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid; she was also of Shi'ite persuasion—"and if she visits you, you must put on her veil, dress yourself in her clothes, and escape. I expect you will not be bothered."
>
> Al-Kumayt sent messages to Abū Waḍḍāḥ Ḥabīb b. Budayl and some of his kinsmen from the clan of Mālik b. Saʿīd. Ḥabīb visited him. Al-Kumayt told his story and asked his advice. When Ḥabīb approved of it al-Kumayt sent for Ḥubbā, his wife, told her the story and said to her, "Wife,[25] the governor will not act against you, nor will he send you back to your family. If I had fears of him on your account I would not risk exposing you to him." Then she dressed him in her clothes, including her waist-wrapper (*izār*) and her veil (*ḫamra*).[26] "Show yourself, front and back!" she said, and he did. "The only thing I don't like", she said, "is the boniness[27] of your shoulders. No go outside, God help you!" She made a servant girl leave with him. Abū Waḍḍāḥ was waiting at the prison gate with some men from the tribe of Asad.[28] No one paid attention to al-Kumayt, who walked behind the men to Šabīb Street in the Kunāsa quarter. They went past a gathering of men of the tribe of Tamīm. One of them said, "That's a man, I swear by the Lord of the Kaʿba!" He told his servant to follow him. Abū al-Waḍḍāḥ[29] shouted at him, "Hey you so-and-so,[30] let me not see you follow this woman from today" and he shook his sandal at him; the boy fled and Abū al-Waḍḍāḥ brought al-Kumayt home.

24. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XVII, pp. 4–5 and a different account XVII, pp. 17–18; much shorter versions in Ibn Sallām, *Ṭabaqāt*, pp. 268–269; al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawān*, II, p. 364; Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-aḫbār*, I, p. 81; al-ʿAskarī, *Ǧamharat al-amṯāl*, II, p. 202; Ibn Ḫallikān, *Wafayāt*, V, p. 220. Instead of the single visit of al-Kumayt's wife in *al-Aġānī*, other versions (Ibn Sallām, *Ṭabaqāt*; al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawān*; al-ʿAskarī, *Ǧamharat al-amṯāl*) mention multiple visits to the prison, so that the goalers and porters were accustomed to her dress and her gait.

25. He calls her *ibnat ʿammī*, "my paternal cousin", which is a not unusual address to a wife, but it is not to be taken literally if the genealogies of Ḥubbā bt Nukayf and al-Kumayt (given in *al-Aġānī*, XVII, p. 1) are correct.

26. One assumes she brought a spare set for herself.

27. Literally *yubs*, "dryness".

28. Al-Kumayt's tribe.

29. Here and in the following with the article, instead of Waḍḍāḥ.

30. No doubt a euphemistic phrase instead of a vulgar insult.

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> When the goaler was getting impatient he called out to al-Kumayt, without receiving an answer. He went in to investigate; the woman screamed at him, "Turn round, damn you!" The man rent his cloak; he ran, shouting, to Ḫālid's house and told him the matter. Ḫālid let Ḥubbā be brought to him and said to her, "Enemy of God! You have plotted against the Commander of the Believers and have let his enemy escape! I'll make an example of you, I'll do this, I'll do that...!" Then the men of Asad gathered to him and said, "You cannot do anything to a woman of ours who has been tricked!" Afraid of them, the caliph let her go.

In the alternative version given in *al-Aġānī* the caliph orders Ḫālid al-Qasrī to cut off al-Kumayt's hands and feet, then to cut off his head, demolish his house, and gibbet him on its rubble. The governor, for tribal-political reasons, is unwilling to execute the order and he is instrumental in effecting the poet's escape, involving the boy with the mule (said to be one of the caliph's mules), and al-Kumayt's wife (here unnamed and said to be his paternal cousin) who brings the clothes. Ḫālid lets the wife go, calling her "a noble woman who personally helped her paternal cousin". She had staked her life and reputation; she was attacked in verse by a poet from the tribe of Kalb ("South Arabs", opponents of the fanatically "North Arab" al-Kumayt), accusing the woman of indecent behaviour with the prison personnel, which in turn inspired al-Kumayt to compose a poem of three hundred verses (known as *al-Muḍahhaba*) inveighing against all South-Arab tribes.[31] He went into hiding. Unlike ʿUmar, al-Kumayt did not compose a narrative poem about his escape, but he did boast of it in verse:[32]

> I escaped like an arrow-shaft, Ibn Muqbil's arrow-shaft,[33]
> in spite of those barking dogs and the dog-baiter,[34]
> While on me were the clothes of pretty women, but, underneath,
> a resolution resembling a drawn blade.

Eventually he was pardoned by the caliph Hišām, through the mediation of the caliph's son Maslama. The two passages in *al-Aġānī* describing this in detail are riddled with words derived from the root *Ǧ W R*, involving "protection".[35] Al-Kumayt asks Maslama, son of the earlier caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, for protection (*istaǧāra*), who tells him that his protection (*ǧiwār*) will not avail him and that he should ask Maslama b. Hišām, who grants it. Hišām hears about this and is angry: "Are you granting protection (*tuǧīru*) against the Commander

31. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XVII, p. 18, al-Baġdādī, *Ḫizāna*, I, pp. 179–181. For the 283 extant lines of *al-Muḍahhaba* with commentary see al-Kumayt, *Dīwān*, pp. 427–483.

32. Al-Kumayt, *Dīwān*, p. 348; Ibn Sallām, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 269; al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawān*, II, p. 364; Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn*, I, p. 81; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XVII, p. 18; al-ʿAskarī, *Ǧamharat al-amṯāl*, II, p. 102; Ibn Ḫallikān, *Wafayāt*, V, p. 220.

33. Referring to a verse by the poet Tamīm b. Muqbil, see e.g. al-ʿAskarī, *Ǧamharat al-amṯāl*, II, p. 102; al-Ṯaʿālibī, *Ṯimār al-qulūb*, p. 218.

34. *Al-mušlī*, said to refer to Ḫālid.

35. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XVII, pp. 10–15 and 19; what follows is from the former passage.

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of the Believers without his permission?" He summons the poet, but Maslama has a plan: al-Kumayt should go to the grave of Muʿāwiya, the recently deceased son of the caliph, and meet Muʿāwiya's young children there. "You must tie their clothes to yours, and they will say, "He has sought protection (*istaǧāra*) at our father's grave!"

> The following morning Hišām, as was his wont, looked out from his palace at the grave. "Who is that?" he asked. They replied, "Perhaps it is someone seeking protection (*mustaǧīr*) at the grave." "Whoever he is, he should be granted protection (*yuǧāru*)—except al-Kumayt, for he shall not have protection (*ǧiwār*)!" "It is al-Kumayt!", they said. The caliph said, "Let him be brought, in the harshest possible way!" When he was summoned, al-Kumayt tied the children's clothes to his. When Hišām saw this his eyes became tearful and he started crying, while the children were saying, "Commander of the Believers! He has sought protection (*istaǧāra*) at the grave of our father, who has died and whose share of this world died with him! Grant this man to him and to us and do not put us to shame concerning whoever seeks protection (*istaǧāra*) with him!" Hišām wept until he was actually sobbing…

A lengthy dialogue ensues, during which the caliph reproachfully cites some of the poet's verses while al-Kumayt defends himself and apologises. Finally, the caliph pardons him, commands Ḫālid to set free the poet's wife and to give her twenty thousand dirhams and thirty robes. There are other instances of seeking protection at a grave. The poet al-Farazdaq (d. *c.* 110/728) "used to give protection (*yuǧīru*) to those who sought protection (*istaǧāra*) at his father's grave." A woman fearing being lampooned by al-Farazdaq did so, with the desired result.[36] The poet Ḥammād ʿAǧrad (d. between 155/772 and 168/784), fleeing from the anger of the Abbasid Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān, sought protection (*istaǧāra*) at the latter's father's grave, exclaiming in verse that "I did not find among men one who would protect me, so I sought protection at earth and stones".[37] In one version of the story of the execution of the poet Diʿbil (d. 246/860) it is said that he, fearing the anger of caliph al-Muʿtaṣim, was unsuccessful when he sought protection (*istaǧāra*) at the grave of the caliph's father Hārūn al-Rašīd.[38] I have been unable, however, to find further examples of tying one's clothes to those of others at such an occasion.

It may well be that the details of al-Kumayt's story are "romantic embellishments which are to be treated with caution",[39] but they serve to illustrate the practice of obtaining protection. The poet's wife played an essential role with her assistance but in the end the true protection is provided through the intercession of powerful men. Just as in the stories of al-Sulayk and ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa, one notes the prominent role of clothes, first as disguise, then as a symbol of alliance and protection, and finally as a reward. Escape from prison in women's clothes is recorded more than once. The last Samanid ruler, al-Muntaṣir Abū Ibrāhīm Ismāʿīl b. Nūḥ, had been

36. Al-Mubarrad, *al-Kāmil*, II, pp. 117–118.
37. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XIV, p. 377.
38. Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Buġyat al-ṭalab*, p. 3531.
39. Horovitz, Pellat, 1980, p. 374a.

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imprisoned and escaped in the clothes of a woman who used to visit him in prison. He hid for some days with an old woman before fleeing away but was eventually overtaken and killed in 395/1005.[40]

The story of al-Kumayt and his wife may contain romantic embellishments, but at least he was a historical figure. With another couple, al-Aštar and Ǧaydāʾ, however, one seems to enter the realm of pure romance and possibly pure fiction. Their story was popular and is told in numerous sources.[41] The narrator, who plays a prominent part in the story, is said to be a certain Numayr b. Muḫlif (or b. Quḥayf) al-Hilālī, a contemporary of caliph al-Mutawakkil (reg. 232–247/847–861). A handsome young Bedouin, Bišr b. ʿAbd Allāh known as al-Aštar,[42] is in love with Ǧaydāʾ, a woman of his tribe Hilāl, but she is married, or in another version, their clans were enemies. Helped by his friend Numayr and a woman servant of Ǧaydāʾ he contrives to meet her at an arranged place. In order to continue their relationship more intimately, Ǧaydāʾ takes off her clothes, tells Numayr to put them on, while she dresses herself in Numayr's clothes. She instructs him to enter her tent, await her husband, and give him his drink of milk. The man suspects nothing but beats Numayr for being clumsy with the milk-bowl. His mother and sister rescue him from the husband but they, too, are fooled. Ǧaydāʾ's sister lies down next to him, wanting to console, as she thinks, her sister. He puts his hand on her mouth and tells her that Ǧaydāʾ is with al-Aštar and that she should keep silent and not cause a scandal. The girl, shocked at first, is soon reconciled to the situation and they have a pleasant night together (only talking, as Numayr stresses[43]). The following morning Numayr leaves and meets Ǧaydāʾ and al-Aštar, who are grateful and commiserate when he shows the signs of his beating.

This story is obviously a close variant of the story told by Ṭurayḥ b. Ismāʿīl (d. 165/782), a poet from al-Ṭāʾif.[44] Like Numayr in the preceding tale he had helped an unnamed fellow poet and his married lover. Again, it is the woman who takes the initiative and suggests exchanging clothes with Ṭurayḥ, who complies and pretends to be her, leaving the lovers to have a good time together. He, too, spills the milk and is severely whipped by the unsuspecting husband while he hides his face pressing it to the floor so as not to be discovered. He apparently manages to escape. There is no mention of a sister.

In the preceding stories, whether true or fictional, the men could boast of a successful escape disguised as women. Not everyone who attempted this was successful and to be discovered and exposed was a humiliating experience. This happened to the famous and versatile

40. Al-Ḏahabī, *Tārīḫ al-Islām*, p. 231.

41. Ps.- al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād*, pp. 304–307; al-Tanūḫī, *al-Faraǧ*, IV, pp. 354–357; al-Tanūḫī (tr. Hottinger), *Ende gut, alles gut*, pp. 374–377; al-Tanūḫī, *Nišwār*, VI, pp. 256–260 (from *Maṣāriʿ al-ʿuššāq*); ps.- al-Tanūḫī, *al-Mustaǧād*, pp. 35–37; al-Ǧarīrī, *al-Ǧalīs*, III, pp. 37–40; al-Sarrāǧ, *Maṣāriʿ al-ʿuššāq*, II, pp. 148–151; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Taḏkira*, IX, pp. 271–274; al-Ġuzūlī, *Maṭāliʿ al-budūr*, I, pp. 200–201; al-Anṭākī, *Tazyīn al-aswāq*, I, pp. 243–244.

42. *Aštar* means "having inverted eyelids". In Hottinger's German translation the name is garbled as "Sīrīn Ibn ʿAbd Allāh... Ibn al-Aschtor".

43. Thus in the version of *al-Faraǧ baʿd al-šidda*. In *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād* Numayr says: "I had my desire of her completely" (*niltu minhā al-šahwa al-tāmma*), and in *al-Mustaǧād* he says that they talked and laughed and that she was wholly in his power (*tamakkantu minhā*).

44. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aġānī*, IV, pp. 326–329, ps.- al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād*, pp. 301–304.

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Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (162-224/779-839), son of a caliph, man of letters, poet, gifted singer and musician, and cook. In the year 202/817, during the reign of his nephew al-Maʾmūn, who had not yet entered Baghdad and still resided in the East, the people of Baghdad, unhappy with al-Maʾmūn's appointment of an ʿAlid as his heir, proclaimed Ibrāhīm as caliph. He took their oath of allegiance under the regnal name of al-Mubārak. His reign never extended beyond Baghdad and while al-Maʾmūn slowly progressed from the East Ibrāhīm's support dwindled and he resigned in in 203/819. He managed to remain in hiding for several years but was finally apprehended, dressed as a woman. The story is told in several sources.[45] Al-Ṭabarī relates that Ibrāhīm went out one evening in women's clothes together with two women. A guardsman questioned them, asking where they were going. Ibrāhīm, attempting to get rid of him, gave him a ring with a ruby. Unsurprisingly, the man noticed it was a man's signet ring with a valuable stone and he got suspicious.[46] The three were apprehended and ordered to unveil. Ibrāhīm resisted in vain, his beard showed and he was taken to al-Maʾmūn, who detained him in his palace, only to expose and humiliate him publicly on the following morning:

> On Sunday morning he was made to sit in al-Maʾmūn's palace, to be seen by the Banū Hāšim,[47] the army commanders, and the troops. They draped the veil (*miqnaʿa*) that he had worn as his disguise around his neck and the wrap (*milḥafa*) that he had worn round his chest, so that people could see him and learn how he had been apprehended.

According to al-Masʿūdī he was subsequently taken to the barracks of the guardsmen, where he remained on public display for some days.[48] Naturally, such a public shaming would effectively put an end to any further political aspirations that Ibrāhīm or his supporters might have had. The story has a happy ending, for al-Maʾmūn and his uncle were reconciled after the latter's repentance in prose and verse.

Al-Muwaffaq Abū al-Karam Muḥammad b. Maʿṣūm al-Tinnīsī (d. 544/1150), an official in the Fatimid *dīwān*, was not so lucky.[49] He had incurred the wrath of al-ʿĀdil b. al-Sallār (or al-Salār)[50] before the latter's vizierate under the caliph al-Ẓāfir, by refusing to comply with a request, saying, "Your words will not enter my ear." When Ibn al-Sallār was in power, Abū al-Karam went into hiding. The vizier proclaimed that anyone who hid the man would be killed and he was forced to leave his hiding-place, disguised as a woman, "with a waist-wrapper and shoes" (*bi-izār wa-ḫuff*). He was recognised, however, and taken to Ibn al-Sallār, who gave

45. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baġdād*, p. 127; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫ*, III, pp. 1074–1075 (year 210); al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ*, IV, pp. 325–326 (mentions AH 207); al-Tanūḫī, *al-Faraǧ baʿd al-šidda*, III, pp. 334–338.
46. In al-Tanūḫī's version the guardsman, noticing Ibrāhīm's perfume, addressed him. Not receiving a reply he became suspicious and arrested him.
47. Members of the Abbasid family.
48. Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ*, IV, p. 326.
49. Ibn Ḫallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 417; al-Maqrīzī (*Ittiʿāẓ al-ḥunafāʾ*, III, pp. 199–200) has the story but does not mention Abū al-Karam's arrest in women's clothes.
50. On him see Wiet, 1955, p. 198; al-Imad, 2009, online.

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orders for his ears to be nailed to a plank, saying, "Have my words entered your ears or what?" It is said that he was subsequently hanged.

There are more men who tried to escape dressed as a woman, among then the vizier al-Ḫaṣībī in the year 322/934; they found him and arrested him (he survived).[51] When in hiding, in 312/924, al-Muḥassin b. al-Furāt, son of the vizier Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Furāt, was protected by his mother-in-law, who accompanied him on daily outings to a cemetery while he was dressed as a woman, his beard shaven and his hands and feet dyed with henna, until he was recognised by another woman who betrayed him, and he was killed.[52] The Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Ẓāḥir Qānṣawh is said to have disappeared from the Citadel in Cairo in the year 905/1500, dressed in women's clothes;[53] it is not clear why.

Cross-dressing in literature is a well-known theme and there are many studies of the topic in various languages, cultures and genres. There are some studies on cross-dressing or related subjects in premodern Arabic literature, including the "warrior woman" motif frequently found in the popular epics.[54] Many of such studies are the result of the fashionable interest in, and sometimes even obsession with, gender identity and sexuality. The present article is not intended as a contribution to this field, even though anonymous readers of an earlier draft seem to have thought it was, or wished it were. The somewhat motley collection of stories it presents and discusses are, strictly speaking, about "cross-dressing", but it is cross-dressing as a mode of protection and they are not primarily about gender or sex. It may be worth stressing that of the men donning female attire in these stories no one intends to become a woman, acts like one, displays female desires, or takes pleasure in strutting around in drag. The stories, historical or fictional, have little in common except the motif of men disguising themselves in female clothes in order to escape,[55] and it would be unwise to draw any broad conclusions on the basis of only a handful of cases, or to try and differentiate between subtypes. It would be difficult to make any hard and fast distinctions between "fictional" and "historical" or between "literary" and "non-literary". The problems with applying such terms and categories have been shown in many recent studies.[56] Disguise is a useful means of protecting oneself in certain circumstances and women's clothes, which normally cover more of the body and often the face than do men's clothes, are an obvious choice. Thus men may protect themselves, but it is

51. Ibn al-Ǧawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, XIII, p. 335: *ḫaraǧa fī ziyy imraʾa wa-istatara*.

52. Ibn al-Aṯīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 20; al-Ḏahabī, *Tārīḫ al-Islām*, XXIII, p. 354; al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfī*, XXV, p. 179; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Šaḏarāt*, IV, p. 61.

53. Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat al-ḫullān*, p. 186: *iḫtafā min qalʿat Miṣr; qīla ḫaraǧa minhā fī ziyy imraʾa*.

54. See e.g. Rowson, 1991 (on the *muḫannaṯūn* or "effeminates"); Amer, 2007; Cuffel, 2007; Epps, 2008; Kruk, 2014.

55. The motif is widespread in world literature and world history. Well-known cases in British history are the escape of the Duke of York (the later King James II) in women's clothes in 1648 during the Civil War, helped by Lady Anne Halkett (née Murray), and the escape of Prince Charles Stuart ("Bonnie Prince Charlie") in 1746 dressed as a female servant of Flora MacDonald. The story of Fukayha and al-Sulayk reminds one of Joseph Koljaiczek, the grandfather of Oskar, protagonist of *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*) by Günther Grass, who is pursued by the police and hides under the skirt of Anna Bronski.

56. See, for instance, the studies in Leder, 1998 and Kennedy, 2005.

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clear that in most cases women are actively involved, explicitly in some stories—none more so than Fukayha—and implicitly in others, for they would have provided the necessary disguise. Moralising comments are, refreshingly, almost wholly absent from the stories. I cannot detect any explicit or implicit condemnation of the behaviour of the women and men involved. One person is awarded with praise and proverbial fame: it is Fukayha.

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