

The Life of al-Khansa' (2): To Mademoiselle Subh

Majallat al-Sufur, 19 November 1915

With pleasure and delight, dear Mademoiselle, I deny that al-Khansa', or any other poet of the pre-Islamic age, possesses a historical personality — even though you may see the matter otherwise than I do, and incline to something other than what I incline to.

Al-Khansa' is a figure unknown to history, either because she lived before it, or because history never came to light upon her.

Writing was not widespread among the Arabs in al-Khansa's day; it is easy enough, then, to count her age among the ages of prehistory. And even granting that writing had been widespread, well known, and current among every rank of the nation, and had taken in the minute and the momentous alike of its literary and political life, still, if it did not take in the life of al-Khansa' — or took it in, and it has not reached us for some reason — all of this is more than sufficient to oblige us, for now, to deny al-Khansa' any historical personality.

That is because history, as its own practitioners and the modern founders of its methods define it, is whatever is derived from a written source; where no such source exists, no history exists. Were a poet or a writer to live among us today, and yet writing never took in his life, or anything of his verse or his prose, it would be a matter of simple justice for you and me to deny him any historical personality, even though he had lived within the age of history itself.

Homer the Greek is a figure unknown to history, because he lived before writing became widespread among the Greek nation; and yet we read both of his epics in full, and derive from them the entire benefit of establishing the social and civic life of the Greeks in their own pre-historic age. It was by the Iliad especially that historians and archaeologists were aided in discovering Troy, and history gained a great deal from that discovery. Pindar the Greek, by contrast, is a historical figure, because he lived in an age in which history had already come to light upon many of the fine details of Greek life; and yet his abundant lyric poetry did not yield history nearly as much benefit as Homer's poetry did.

Here we see the difference between what we call a historical poet and a non-historical poet; and here we also see that our ignorance of a poet's historical personality does not prevent that poet from being of the fullest use to literature and history, if researchers are able to study his life and his poetry, and the legends transmitted about them, in an organized and productive manner.

It stands to reason that history should not benefit greatly from the historical poet; for whatever events and arrangements of life his poetry deals with, the history of his own age may equally well have dealt with. There is, then, nothing that obliges the historian to resort to poetry — and this is why people have relied more on what the historical poets of Greece and Rome wrote, in studying the tales and legends they transmitted, than they have relied on them for the events of their own age already secured by history. If, for instance, I wished to study the murder of al-Mutawakkil from a historical point of view, it would be a matter of simple justice for me to rely, in this study, on the historians of that age far more than on al-Buhturi's elegy for al-Mutawakkil. All of this is self-evident, and it is best we not dwell on it any further for now.

If al-Khansa' is not a figure known to history, she is, without doubt, a figure known to oral transmission; and this transmitted knowledge of al-Khansa' is itself a historical matter, since writing has taken it in, and the shadow of history has fallen across it. We have, in our hands, Ibn Qutayba's *Kitab al-Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ara'* and Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani's *Kitab al-Aghani*, and both establish that scholars have transmitted a certain amount concerning al-Khansa's life and poetry. It would be excessive and superfluous for us to concern ourselves now with establishing what others ought already to have established — the authenticity of the attribution of these two books to their authors. But what we cannot avoid addressing is this: the copies of these two books that we possess ought not to receive our absolute trust; for we have lost the authors' own copies, and their own handwriting, so it is entirely possible that some alteration or substitution has crept into their texts. It is possible — indeed, it is certain — that both have suffered additions and omissions; we have seen the author of the *Aghani* state explicitly that he will address matters of literary criticism in his book, and then fail to do so; we have seen discrepancies between the two printed editions of this book; and we have seen no small differences between what has been printed of the *Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ara'* in Egypt and in Europe.

It is obvious that differences of this kind, or worse, exist among the manuscript copies of these two books as well; and none of us is ignorant of the tampering of copyists and editors with the books they copy and edit, for their ignorance and their presumption drive them to varieties of interference from which scarcely any book escapes unscathed.

How, then, can we place our complete trust in the notion that what we hold in our hands of the *Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ara'* and the *Aghani* is exactly what Ibn Qutayba and Abu'l-Faraj left us?

The *Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ara'* is the oldest written source that has reached us for al-Khansa's life; and it might well have been possible for historical sources contemporary with al-Khansa' to reach us too, for her sons were soldiers, and their names may well have appeared in the military register in the days of 'Umar. But the loss of the registers, and the Arabs' scant care for preserving their own official documents, have carried away this source from us.

Ibn Qutayba is a well-known figure among the men of letters and scholars of the third century, but the testimony of the critics regarding him does not grant him an abundant share of truthfulness and rigor in transmission. Indeed, there is material in the *Kitab al-Ma'arif* and the *Kitab al-Imama wa'l-Siyasa* which, were it authentically attributable to Ibn Qutayba, would strip it of most of its historical value.

Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani was, among the scholars of the fourth century, the one with the greatest powers of memory and the most comprehensive gatherer of oral transmission; but he was dissolute and licentious, brazen and reckless, so that the critics' testimony regarding him is no more favourable than it was for Ibn Qutayba.

We do not hold ourselves, in assessing the reliability of literary transmitters, to the same standard that hadith scholars hold themselves to in assessing the reliability of hadith transmitters, with its requirement of religious probity; for it is not incumbent upon a man of letters, in the view of literary historians, that he be devoutly pious, or upright and religiously observant.

We are content, rather, with what might be called scholarly integrity — namely, that the man be sound and orderly of mind, not given to forgery, and not known for deliberate falsehood in matters of scholarship.

This condition is not fully met by Ibn Qutayba, for in the *Imama wa'l-Siyasa* it cannot be ruled out that his love for the House of Ali overcame either his judgement or his scholarly honesty.

As for the author of the *Aghani*, he has of this condition whatever share the scholarly life of his own age allowed him. Let us speak, next week, of the value of the transmitters upon whom the author of the *Aghani* relied.

I do not fear, dear Mademoiselle, that you will grow weary of these dry investigations, whose dryness no splendid verse or elegant prose comes to soften; for I know that you have enough of an inclination toward the purely scholarly life — a life undisturbed by the deceptions of the senses and of feeling — to make it easy and agreeable for you to share with me in this conversation, tender at its beginning and, I hope, sweet at its end. Until next time.