

animals, interjections and sound effects achieved by ordinary words. Such sound effects as alliteration and parallelism were mostly serious as well as witty, their main aim being to convince the listener of certain facts.

The closing chapter sums up the information by dealing with more general matters such as the appropriate use of melodious and harsh sounds. Discussing the interaction of meaning and sound Van Gelder picks up the verses of al-A'shā, who was reckoned among the best poets for sonorous nature of his poetry, which were condemned by medieval critics.

Of particular interest is the practical survey provided in the appendix on Arabic prosody and phonetics that can help those inspired by the previous discussion to appreciate adequately Arabic poetry and its sophisticated poetic techniques.

Apart from being well-produced and carefully edited the present research also presents a fine piece of literature being written in light and humorous style that keeps you interested till the last page.

This masterful work is highly recommended for everyone with an interest in pre-modern Arabic literature and in medieval esthetics in general. The study of this kind can help western readers to take Arabic poetry the way English or French poetry are normally estimated with their rhetorical expressiveness and specific merits. Scholars of Arabic heritage will find the book extremely motivating for future researches and most helpful while introducing classical literature to students. As for readers new to Arabic studies it will open new areas of interest to them.

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The book *Der unmännliche Mann. Zur Figuration des Eunuchen im Werk von al-Ġāḥiẓ* is a re-elaborated version of Hans Peter Pökel's dissertation, submitted at the University of Jena in 2011. Pökel analyses how eunuchs were represented in the work of the 9th century author al-Ġāḥiẓ. Focusing on a kind of "controversial" and "ambiguous" masculinity, Pökel follows Mathew Kuefler's assumption that looking at what is described as "non-masculine" can

also shed light on coeval understandings of masculinity.¹ An important point of Pökel's analysis is the body of the eunuch and how it was understood within the context of humoral medicine. Pökel also investigates the terminology used to describe eunuchs and the different kinds of castration that were practiced. He finally contextualizes eunuchs in the wider field of slavery, investigates their sexuality and looks at their presence in liminal spaces.²

In the first chapter Pökel explains his methodological approach and his research questions. Pökel decided to analyse only literary prose texts and not judicial or religious texts because, following Thomas Bauer, he suggests that religious and legal texts are only one part of the Arabic literary corpus, and that literary prose can inform us about "menschliche Gefühle, persönliche Lebensumstände und die Verhaftung des Individuums in gesellschaftlichen Sinnstrukturen".³ The author contextualizes his sources in a "horizontal" and in a "vertical" way: on the one hand he puts them in relation with coeval sources, on the other he looks at them in a perspective of continuity with discourses in antiquity and late antiquity.⁴

Pökel is particularly influenced by the one-sex theory of Thomas W. Laqueur, according to which in the pre-modern period "die geschlechtlichen Lebewesen nicht als biologisch verschieden, sondern als mögliche Varianten einer Gattung begriffen wurden".⁵ Indeed, according to Laqueur, the construction of the sex-binary is a modern construction, and until the 18th century only one-sex was theorized, the female being considered the imperfect version of the male.⁶ Historical evidences suggest that this model, which has been anyway criticized and questioned, was probably dominant, but certainly not absolute. According to it, hermaphrodites could be considered "Abweichungen",⁷ deviations from the one-sex, and were then assigned to the masculine or the feminine gender according to medical and legal norms. Pökel suggests that the case of the eunuch is different: he is not a "natural" deviation, but the result of an artificial process that changes his body, breaking the symmetry and the harmony that in late antiquity were considered characteristics of the perfect

¹ Pökel, 14. See also Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

² Pökel, 21–22.

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁷ Pökel, 18.

body. This transformed him into “einem monströs anmutenden Wesen”.⁸

Nevertheless, for some aspects eunuchs were still evaluated according to the categories of masculinity, like for example the *murūʿa*, a system of values that according to Pökel includes “Tapferkeit und Mut im Kampfe (*ḥamāsa*) und bei der Jagd, Standhaftigkeit (*ṣabr*) im Ertragen des Unabwendbaren, Vertrauensseligkeit (*ṣidq*), Ehrhaftigkeit (*ʿirḍ*) und Großzügigkeit (*karam*) sowie Schutz gegenüber den Schwachen, Loyalität und Treue gegenüber dem eigenen Stamm.”⁹ According to Pökel this concept, which is unstable and vital, can be understood using Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, in the sense that “sie einen kompetitiven Charakter aufweist und mittels effektiver, das Publikum überzeugende Dichtung immer wieder neu errungen werden muss”.¹⁰

In the second chapter Pökel introduces al-Ġāḥiẓ, who was born in 776 in Baṣra and died in 868 or 869, and spent most of his life at the ‘Abbasid Court in Baghdad. Regarding the sources, Pökel basically focuses on the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, often translated as *The Book of Animals*. Instead, as the author demonstrates, the title “meint (...) nicht nur Tiere im engeren Sinne, sondern dient auch als Bezeichnung für Lebewesen und Leben im Allgemeinen”.¹¹ As other creatures the human being owes his existence to God, whose glorification is one of the main aims of the book. The only difference with other animals is that the human being has been infused with the rational soul which allows him to resist his instincts.¹²

As former scholars did, Pökel supports the view that al-Ġāḥiẓ was strongly influenced by Aristotle, particularly by his *Historia animalium*. Al-Ġāḥiẓ certainly knew the Greek medical and philosophical tradition, which was widely translated and available at the ‘Abbasid Court, and included Hippocrate, Galen, Polemon of Laodicea, Apollonius of Tyana, Democrit of Abdera and naturally also Aristotle. However, Pökel also restores al-Ġāḥiẓ’s own originality, pointing out that he integrated the Greek intellectual heritage into sources that belonged more specifically to his Arabo-Islamic milieu, like the Qur’an, *ḥadīṡ*s and pre-Islamic Arab traditions.

A part from the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, Pökel also integrates into his analysis a number of al-Ġāḥiẓ’s *rasāʾil* (*epistulae*) which deal with “Körper, Geschlecht, Sklaverei und ethnischer Differenz”,¹³ like for example the *Kitāb al-biġāl*

(the book of the mule), particularly useful for his understanding of the concept of the hybrid creature, the *Kitāb mufāḥarat bayna al-ġawārī waʾl-ġilmān*, which is a competition between a man preferring intercourse with female slaves and a man preferring intercourse with young boys, the *Kitāb al-muʿallimīn*, which has a chapter devoted to *liwāʾ* (sodomy), the *Kitāb an-nisāʾ*, the *Risālat al-qiyān* and the *Kitāb faḥr as-sudān ʿalā aʾl-biḍān*.

The third chapter of the book is devoted to the body of the eunuch, the different kinds of castration and the concept of slavery in the classical Islamic context. Pökel starts the chapter introducing the coeval understanding of sex: in antique and late antique medicine the two sexes were not understood according to a binary paradigm, but in a hierarchical ladder, with women being at the bottom rung of the ladder, and adult men at the top.

Pökel tries to see how eunuchs were collocated over this ladder and, to do so, starts from terminology. According to him there is a basic difference between Greek and Arabic. The Greek term εὐνοῦχος (eunouchos) comes from εὐνή (eunē), bed, and ἦχος (echo), guarding: the word literally derives from the eunuchs’ role as “bedchamber attendants”, and referred primarily to their function. The importance of “function” is also stressed by Kathryn Ringrose’s research on Byzantium: she demonstrated that the term εὐνοῦχος was used in Byzantium to indicate any kind of “non-reproductive” man, including not only men whose sexual organs had been cut, but also men who could not procreate or were impotent and men who renounced to have sexual intercourses for religious reasons, but some of them could also be considered sexually active.¹⁴

The terms which are used to describe eunuchs in Arabic are instead related to the different kinds of surgery which were practiced on them: the term *ḥaṣīy* refers to the *ḥiṣāʾ* (gonadectomy), which consisted literally in the removal of the testicles, but could be used to refer to any kind of castration, as David Ayalon demonstrated.¹⁵ The term *maġbūb* is connected with *ġibāb*, which according to the 13th century lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr included “die vollständige Entfernung von Hoden und Penis”.¹⁶ Another kind of operation was the *wiġāʾ*, or ablation, which consisted in “das Abschneiden eines beliebigen Körperteils, in

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 39.

¹⁴ Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant. Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15; 17–18.

¹⁵ David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans. A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1999), 309.

¹⁶ Pökel, 100.

diesem Falle der Hoden, als auch deren Abbinden”,¹⁷ and caused a total necrosis of the testicles. Apart from these specific terms, other euphemistic terms were used, like for example “*mu‘allim* (Lehrer), *ustād* (Meister), *šaiḥ* (Alter, Gelehrter) und *ḥādim* (Diener)”.¹⁸

After this terminological analysis, Pökel contextualizes the case of the eunuch within the larger field of slavery in the Islamic world and, in general, in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Pökel considers eunuchs and slaves in general as “Fremde, die sich sprachlich und religiös von der sie absorbierenden Gesellschaft unterschieden”.¹⁹ Often they were stereotyped,²⁰ and with the emergence of the Islamic imperial ideology and the strict interrelation between masculinity and *ḡihād*,²¹ even feminised.²²

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to an analysis of the masculine body according to humoral pathology. Pökel shares the view that the body should be understood as a cultural and historical construct and, for this reason, meticulously contextualizes the understanding of the body during the ‘Abbasid time, referring to the coeval medical knowledge and in particular to the Greek medical heritage.

According to the Greek understanding of the body, good health was guaranteed by the equilibrium between the four humours of the body (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood) and the related four temperaments (hot, cold, moist and dry): heat was believed a sign of perfection and men were considered superior to women because of an excess of it. Pökel also deals with the meaning of the semen in the construction of masculinity and with different theories on its origin, like the encephalomyelogenic theory, introduced by Alcmaeon of Croton in the 5th century, according to which semen derives from cerebral matter and then flows down from the head, or the pangenetic theory, according to which sperm comes from the entire body, also the feminine one.²³ Finally, Pökel

describes the Aristotelian hematogenic theory that identifies blood as the source of the sperm. According to Aristotle, after man reaches puberty, his body also reaches a degree of heat that allows a process of “cooking” of the blood, which transforms it into the semen. Testicles were not particularly important in the semen production, because the semen was produced in the blood vessels, but in its transportation. Still, “[d]ieser fruchtbare Samen war für Aristoteles das Merkmal, das Männlichkeit schlechthin konstituierte und auch für die Ausbildung sekundärer männlicher Geschlechtsmerkmale verantwortlich war”.²⁴ This process is negatively affected by adiposity and humidity: therefore, because of their natural disposition, eunuchs and hermaphrodites could not produce semen.²⁵

These different theories were somehow synthesized by Galen, who heavily influenced Islamic medicine. Even though he still supported the hematogenic theory, he also stressed the importance of the testicles, which he identified in both the masculine and the feminine body, and attributed them a central role in the production of the semen. Testicles and the secondary sexual marks were rudimentary in the feminine body for its humidity and its coldness, and he assumed that the vagina was a penis entrapped within the feminine body for these reasons.²⁶ This also explains why the eunuch assumed some characteristic of the female: indeed, the cut or the damage to the testicles changed “notwendigerweise sowohl die Physiologie als auch die Physiognomie des männlichen Körpers”.²⁷

In the fifth chapter Pökel focuses more closely on the work of al-Ġāḥiẓ and on the importance of the integrity of the masculine body, looking at the effects that castration has on it.

Castration was already practiced in antiquity and late antiquity, but it assumed a new relevance from the 3rd and even more the 4th century CE onwards, when, notwithstanding the theoretical protection of the human body in Christianity, a new ideal of morality started to appear. This morality particularly valued sexual “Enthaltsamkeit, die sowohl von Männern als auch von Frauen praktiziert wurde”.²⁸ This process brought to the construction of a new kind of masculinity, where “natural” eunuchs were associated with angels and were praised for their sexual purity.

17 Ibid., 103–104.

18 Ibid., 72–73. This last term has been already debated in a *querelle* between David Ayalon, which considers it to be a synonym of eunuch, and Abdallah Cheick Moussa, which does not share this opinion. See David Ayalon, “On the term ‘Khādim’ in the sense of ‘Eunuch’ in the Early Muslim Sources,” *Arabica*, 32, 3 (1985): 289–308 and Abdallah Cheikh Moussa, “De la synonymie dans les sources arabes anciennes. Le cas de ‘Ḥādim’ et de ‘Ḥasiyy,’” *Arabica*, 32, 3 (1985): 309–322.

19 Pökel, 106.

20 Pökel, 81–82.

21 Ibid., 84.

22 Ibid., 81–82.

23 According to this theory, both sexes produce strong semen (which is masculine), and weak semen (which is feminine): the one which prevails is the one that determines the sex of an individual.

24 Pökel, 122.

25 Ibid., 122.

26 Ibid., 111.

27 Ibid., 127.

28 Ibid., 140.

Al-Ġāḥiẓ was generally critical of the concept of abstinence in Christianity, and moreover believed that “jede Kastration hat ihren Ursprung in den Byzantinern”.²⁹ He does not only criticize Byzantines because they change the divine creation (and for this reason he compares them to *mušrikūn*, polytheists),³⁰ but also for their institutional use of eunuchs, which often caused free men to undergo voluntarily castration in order to obtain power and prestige.³¹

In this chapter Pökel also discusses how al-Ġāḥiẓ dealt with the Tradition according to which the Prophet Muḥammad received and accepted a eunuch as a gift: al-Ġāḥiẓ states that there should be no discussion on the topic if the tradition was not authentic. If instead it was authentic, then it could be that the Prophet did not even know that the slave was castrated. Moreover, even though al-Ġāḥiẓ considers castration absolutely forbidden, he does not see a direct connection between this procedure and the ownership of eunuchs.³²

Pökel then looks at how castration affected the eunuchs' body according to al-Ġāḥiẓ: for example he mentions that eunuchs have a terrible stink, that their skin becomes dry and wrinkled, that they have a heavy walk, as if they cannot control anymore the legs and the muscles. Al-Ġāḥiẓ also believes that if a man is castrated before puberty he loses all his hair, with the exception of the pubic hair.³³ Castration changes the eunuch's voice, which becomes different from the masculine and the feminine.³⁴ In general, al-Ġāḥiẓ considers that the eunuch has a hybrid nature, and the main problem he identifies is that of ambiguity: because of castration, the eunuch's characteristics become partially masculine and partially feminine, to the point that he compares him with the mule, symbol of hybridity par excellence.³⁵

The sixth chapter of the book looks at the construction of the ideal masculinity. Pökel underlines that already in late antiquity self-control and *mesotes* (the middle way, moderation), were two characteristics attributed to men, on the assumption that they were connected with the higher heat and dryness of their bodies.³⁶ *Mesotes* “besitzt

keine mathematische Genauigkeit“,³⁷ but was understood as a life style, which included a distancing from the extremes of excesses and privation, and also had ethical connotations.³⁸ It was believed that women and non-men, including eunuchs, were not able to reach this state: for example, according to al-Ġāḥiẓ eunuchs have an extreme desire for food and are described as greedy, both characteristics that he also ascribes to women and young boys.³⁹ From an emotional point of view, eunuchs are described as moody, quick in moving from anger to happiness and incapable of keeping secrets, all characteristics also ascribed to women and young boys.⁴⁰

Regarding sexuality, Pökel attempts to sketch a “kleine Geschichte der ‘Sexualität’”,⁴¹ in order to show that sexuality is a historical construct and that, as such, should not be essentialised. For this reason he discusses same-sex acts and not homosexuality, a concept that did not exist during the period under scrutiny, when the focus was not “auf der Ebene der Identitäten, sondern auf der Ebene der Handlungen”.⁴² Pökel discusses then al-Ġāḥiẓ's “Ökonomisierung des Semens”:⁴³ eunuchs were believed to have long lives, due to “the lack of coupling, because the shortage of ejaculation does not weaken the dorsal spine”.⁴⁴ Even though this was a somehow “positive” effect of castration, holding back the semen was considered dangerous for the humoral equilibrium and was also used to explain the particular smell which was attributed to eunuchs. Pökel also discusses the “unmännlichen Sexualität“, addressing both the concepts of *ubna* (passive sodomy), which was stigmatized and even pathologised in Islamic medicine,⁴⁵ and that of *liwāṭ* (active sodomy), which was forbidden from a legal perspective, but was still socially acceptable because “der sexuelle Verkehr eines Mannes [...] war anscheinend unproblematisch, so lange die penetrierende Rolle auch tatsächlich vom Mann eingenommen wurde”.⁴⁶ However, for al-Ġāḥiẓ eunuchs „erscheinen nicht nur als Sexualobjekte von Männern, sondern können unter Umständen auch als sexuell Handelnde agieren und eine *quasi-männliche Sexualität* ausüben,

²⁹ Ibid., 134.

³⁰ Ibid., 184.

³¹ Ibid., 148.

³² Ibid., 159.

³³ Ibid., 180.

³⁴ Ibid., 182.

³⁵ Ibid. See also Abū 'Uṭmān 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (al-Qāhira: Muṣṭafā al-bābī al-ḥalabī, 1938), 1:108.

³⁶ Pökel, 187.

³⁷ Ibid., 188.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 198.

⁴¹ Ibid., 200.

⁴² Ibid., 237.

⁴³ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁴ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 1 : 137.

⁴⁵ Pökel, 227.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 228.

womit sie in einzelnen Fällen die hegemoniale Stellung des Mannes untergraben können“.⁴⁷

In the seventh chapter Pökel brings into focus the intersection of gender and race: al-Ġāḥiẓ supported the idea that castration affected in different ways different races. He identifies five different groups of castrated men: the *ṣaqāliba*, coming from Eastern Europe, eunuchs coming from the Sind,⁴⁸ black eunuchs (coming from Ethiopia, Nubia and Sudan), the Rūmī (Byzantium), and the Sabaeans. According to him castration has positive effects on intelligence and eloquence in the case of the *ṣaqāliba*,⁴⁹ and makes the castrated men more “civilized” in comparison to their equals,⁵⁰ while, regarding black eunuchs, he states that it “takes away from them and does not give to them, it makes them lower compared to their equals”.⁵¹ For what regards eunuchs coming from the Sind, al-Ġāḥiẓ believes that they have a particular ability in taking care of mounts, but also in domestic activities and in pharmacology.⁵²

In the eighth and last chapter of the book Pökel looks at how eunuchs’ particular gender allowed them to occupy “vermittelnde Positionen in liminalen Räumen”.⁵³ These positions included for example the office of the *ḥāḡib*, which he compares to that of the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* in Byzantium.⁵⁴ Eunuchs often belonged to the inner circle of people surrounding the ruler (the *ḥuddām al-ḥāṣṣa*), and this closeness, with the gradual isolation of the caliph, increased their power. Indeed, if during the Umayyad period the position of an individual within the society derived from his lineage, during the ‘Abbasid time it was connected with his closeness to the ruler:⁵⁵ for example, eunuchs were always involved in critical moments like the death of a caliph and the coronation of the following ruler.⁵⁶

Eunuchs could also act as military leaders, a characteristic that Pökel believes to be peculiar of the ‘Abbasid Court,⁵⁷ especially in those areas adjacent to the Byzantine territories. According to al-Ġāḥiẓ eunuchs showed a particular hostility against Byzantium because “ihre einst-

maligen Patrone für die Modifikation ihres geschlechtlichen Körpers verantwortlich machten”.⁵⁸ Eunuchs also acted as “Grenzgänger zwischen den Geschlechtern”,⁵⁹ as Nadia El-Cheikh already pointed out,⁶⁰ having the possibility to stay in a continuous contact with the ruler, but also with the women of his *ḥarīm*, which was an important center of power. Finally, in his short conclusion Pökel stresses the ambiguity of the eunuch, pointing out that al-Ġāḥiẓ attributes to him both non-masculine characteristics and masculine virtues, like those connected with the concept of the *murū’a*.

Pökel’s book is certainly accurate for what regards the analysis and translation of primary sources, and also for his contextualization of them. He takes into account not only the coeval Arab-Islamic socio-historical context, but also the antique and late antique heritage. However his approach to the “gender” of the eunuch and his use of Connell’s hegemonic masculinity are a bit confusing. On the one hand, Pökel embraces since his introduction the one-sex model of Laqueur, a concept which has been developed (but also questioned) for the pre-modern period, on the other he uses the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which Connell developed in reference to modern history, without problematizing it. Connell understood hegemonic masculinity as “the currently most honored way of being a man”, which “required all other men to position themselves in relation to...”.⁶¹ Even though this concept can probably also be applied to pre-modern times, Pökel does not address at all the difficulties of doing that, neither does he look at how eunuchs are positioned in relation to this hegemonic form of masculinity. Moreover, I found surprising that Pökel did not address “historical” eunuchs, a part from very few exceptions, and did not include a proper conclusion to his book, which would have allowed him (and the reader) to sum up his findings and to identify that common thread which sometimes gets lost in the many detailed digressions Pökel makes on concepts like slavery, race, *ḥarīm* or sexuality: these excursus are certainly important for his analysis, but often become dispersive for the reader.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁴⁸ This name was given to the region around the lower course of the Indus river. It was the easternmost province of the Umayyad Caliphate. See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, s.v. “Sind”.

⁴⁹ Pökel, 258–260.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 280.

⁵¹ Ibid., 280.

⁵² Ibid., 284.

⁵³ Ibid., 331.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 305.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 311.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ This is not completely correct. In the Fatimid case, for example, several eunuchs acted as military commanders.

⁵⁸ Pökel, 309.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 312.

⁶⁰ Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, “Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of al-Muqtadir,” *The Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient* 48 (2005): 234–252.

⁶¹ R. W. Connell, James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, 6: 829–859, at 832.