

Chapter 3

Rabi‘a the Lover

Long ago, exchanging greetings and salutations,
the two Sufis met in Basra.

As soon as she saw him behind the gate,
she revealed her face to the beautiful young man.

Her face was wrinkled and her eyes were faded,
beneath the black face-veil and under the white lace.

Hassan bowed his head with a deep sigh,
and responded to the salutation of this dear guest.

“What are you doing Rabi‘a, for God’s sake?”
The lover asked, his chin trembling.

[Rabi‘a said,] “If only ‘Hassans’ would walk the beautiful streets of Basra,
Oh God, how decent human nature would be!

If only people like him walked our streets,
I would never have to wear the veil!”

—Bosnian *Ilahi*, “Hassan i Rabija,” by Džemaludin Latić¹

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I. FROM HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION TO CULTURAL ICON

The Rabi'a that is depicted in this *ilahi* (Islamic religious song) by the Bosnian scholar, poet and politician Džemaludin Latić never existed as an actual person. Even more, the "real" Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya most likely never met al-Hasan al-Basri.² If she had done so, their ages would have been reversed. Hasan would have been an old man and Rabi'a would have been a young girl. It is difficult to imagine the famous Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya as a Sufi sage in her pre-teen years. Al-Hasan al-Basri died in 728 CE and Rabi'a died more than seventy years after him, around 801 CE. Thus, from a strictly historical perspective, one has to conclude that this encounter is fictional and that Rabi'a as she appears in the song is a trope. Like the Native American myth described in the Introduction, the figure of Rabi'a in Latić's *ilahi* is another example of "The Old Woman Who Never Dies."

However, the historical accuracy of the friendship between al-Hasan al-Basri and Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya is not an important issue for the Bosnians who love this song, memorize its lyrics, and post it on numerous websites.³ What is most important is not its historical accuracy but its message, which alludes to the religious and political conflicts that have caused the nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina to suffer for decades. The song recalls a better time in the past when goodness and beauty (*hasan* in Arabic means both "good" and "good-looking") were easier to find. The phrase, "beautiful streets of Basra," in the song evokes nostalgically the streets of Sarajevo and other Bosnian cities and towns in an earlier time of peace and tranquility. Latić uses the figures of Rabi'a and Hasan, who love each other because of their shared love for God, to evoke this bygone world. As Lynda L. Coon has observed about the subject-matter of hagiography in general, the evocation of these two figures depends not on historical facts, but on "*topoi*, literary inventions, and moral imperatives."⁴

2 As far as can be known today, the trope of Rabi'a's friendship with al-Hasan al-Basri seems to have first appeared in Farid al-Din al-'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-awliya'* (*Memorial of the Saints*). Over time, it spread throughout the Islamic world. See Chapter 5 and the translated passages on Rabi'a and Hasan in Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic, and Theological Writings* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 160–2.

3 See, for example, <http://bosnamedia.com/media/cat6.stm>.

4 Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xv.

The key motif of “Hassan i Rabiġa” is the depiction of al-Hasan al-Basri and Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya as lovers of God. By evoking the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover, the song is related to other narratives, both premodern and modern, which have used this trope for purposes far beyond what the “real” Rabi'ā probably ever imagined. The romantic image of Rabi'ā the Lover has evoked more examples of poetic license than any of her other master narratives. For example, when imagining Rabi'ā in her book *al-'Ashiqā al-mutasawwifā* (*The Sufi Lover*), the Lebanese–Syrian author Widad El Sakkakini keeps the following vision in her mind's eye: “I see Rabi'ā as an apparition, shimmering like a wave: not unsteady with a walking-stick and in ancient and worn-out garments and sandals, but running toward the shores of heaven in a halo of light.”⁵ In *Doorkeeper of the Heart*, a reflection on Rabi'ā that was inspired by the English translation of El Sakkakini's book, Charles Upton offers a similarly romantic view. For him, the love poems attributed to Rabi'ā are precursors of the love poetry of the Persian Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273 CE): “If Rumi is the Ocean, Rabi'ā is the Well. . . Rabi'ā. . . has the virtues of maidenly simplicity, and the virgin blade; along with the taste of wine, she carries also the taste of water—a far more precious substance, when you live, like Rabi'ā did, in the desert of God.”⁶

As we can see from these modern evocations, the tropological image of Rabi'ā the Lover is both complex and contradictory. She lives in the city and in the desert; she is an old woman and a virgin maiden; she walks beside the “shimmering waves” of Basra in a haloed garment but she also walks in the “desert of God,” playing a reed flute that recalls the opening lines of Rumi's *Masnawi*.⁷ As if this were not enough, a recent French evocation of Rabi'ā the Lover, in the book *Rabi'ā: Les Chants de la Recluse* (*Rabi'ā: the Songs of the Recluse*), depicts her as a reformed sinner: “Her genius was that of Mary Magdalene. She was much loved.”⁸

5 Widad El Sakkakini, *First among Sufis: The Life and Thought of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya the Woman Saint of Basra*, trans. Nabil Fatih Safwat (London: Octagon Press, 1982), p. 62; idem, *al-'Ashiqā al-Mutasawwifā (The Sufi Lover)* (Damascus: Dar Tlas li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Tarjamat wa-l-Nashr, 1989 reprint of 1955 original), p. 98.

6 Charles Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabi'ā* (New York: Pir Press, 2003), p. vii.

7 “Listen to the reed flute how it tells a tale, complaining of separation/ Saying, ‘Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan/ I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold the pain of love-desire.’” Reynold A. Nicholson (ed. and trans.), *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi* (London: Luzac & Co., Ltd., 1977 reprint of 1926 original), vol. 1, p. 5.

8 Mohammed Oudaimah and Gérard Pfister, *Rabi'ā: Les Chants de la Recluse* (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, France: Éditions Arfuyen, 2006), p. 7.

The many “faces” of this trope support Lynda L. Coon’s view of hagiography as an “exalted” form of discourse, which fixes the representation of a saint in the cultural imaginary.⁹ For this reason, more than with the tropes of Rabi’a the Teacher and Rabi’a the Ascetic, the investigation of Rabi’a the Lover has to be more “literary” than “historical.” Although there is evidence that the “real” Rabi’a spoke of love in her teachings, there is no way to be sure how much her actual teachings conformed to our present understanding of Sufi Love mysticism. The most that can be said with certainty is that the trope of Rabi’a the Lover has persisted for many centuries and has been, in the words of the French North African writer Jamal-Eddine Benghal, “a point of reference and a model for many men and women taken by purity and love.”¹⁰ Thus, in this chapter I will not spend as much time trying to distinguish the “real” Rabi’a from her figurative persona, as I have done in the previous two chapters. Instead, most of the chapter will focus on how the trope of Rabi’a the Lover has been represented in Sufi and Sufi-inspired literature. By using this approach, I hope to shed significant light on the importance of this trope in the cultural imaginary of the Muslim world.

II. ASCETICISM AND LOVE MYSTICISM IN EARLY ISLAMIC BASRA

*a. From Asceticism to Love Mysticism*¹¹

Rabi’a’s contemporary and fellow master of spiritual training Shaiq al-Balkhi taught that the path of asceticism has four stages. The first is renunciation of the World (*zuhd*), the second is fear of God (*khawf*), the third is desire for Heaven (*al-shawq ila al-janna*), and the fourth is love of God

9 Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, p. 1.

10 Jamal-Eddine Benghal, *La Vie de Rabi’a al-Adawiyya, une sainte musulmane du VIII^{ème} siècle* (Paris: Editions Iqra, 2000), p. 8.

11 In this book, I use the term “mysticism” according to the definition recently proposed by Lloyd Ridgeon: “[Islamic mysticism refers] to the belief among some Sufis that experience of some form of intimacy with God was possible in their own lifetimes (whether it was an apprehension of ontological unity or else a vision of ultimate reality), which went beyond the piety of many Muslims who engaged in ‘normative’ Islamic ritual activity and who accepted ‘orthodox’ forms of belief.” See Lloyd Ridgeon, “Mysticism in Medieval Sufism,” in idem, *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, p. 126.

(*al-mahabba li-llah*).¹² This doctrine is important to the present discussion for several reasons. First, Shāḡiq defines asceticism as a way of truthfulness and sincerity (*sidq*). In doing so, he reaffirms the close relationship between asceticism and ethical formation.¹³ Second, by asserting that asceticism culminates in the love of God, he lends support to the view of Bishop Kallistos Ware and other religiously inspired modern scholars of asceticism that the practice of asceticism is a positive attempt to find God and is not merely a negative rejection of the World. For Shāḡiq, desire motivates the ascetic to attain the ultimate goal of asceticism, which is closeness to God. This agrees with an important statement that Bishop Ware makes about asceticism in Orthodox Christianity: “Desire, employed aright, impels us to love God; jealousy (or *zelos* [zeal]) spurs us on to make greater efforts in the spiritual life. . . our objective is not the *nekrosis* (mortification) of the passions but their *metathesis* (transposition).”¹⁴ This rather optimistic view of asceticism is quite different from the pessimistic view made famous by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). For Nietzsche, the asceticism of the saints is reactionary, passive-aggressive, and self-indulgent, “a pretext for hibernation, their *novissima gloriae cupido*, their peace in nothingness (‘God’), their form of madness.”¹⁵

Shāḡiq al-Balkhi also believed that the key to the transformation of the self in asceticism was the conquest of fear. The conquest of fear marks the transition from asceticism viewed as a form of renunciation to asceticism viewed as a form of affirmation. Freed from preoccupation with the World’s desires and cares, the ascetic opens herself up to the Nonworld and seeks her ultimate fulfillment in God. Fulfillment in God—not rejection of the World—is the true goal of the ascetic path. It is also the goal of the mystical path. According to Averil Cameron, a noted scholar of early Christian

12 Shāḡiq al-Balkhi, “Manazil al-Sidq,” in Paul Nwyia, *Trois Oeuvres inédites de mystiques musulmans, Šāḡiq al-Balḥī, Ibn ‘Atā, Niffārī* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1972), p. 17. See also, Balkhi’s discussion of the stages of love in Carl W. Ernst, “The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Rabi’ā to Ruzbihan,” in *Classical Persian Sufism*, ed. Lewisohn, pp. 439–41. Alexander Knysh (*Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 32–5) ignores Shāḡiq’s comments on Love mysticism and stresses instead his asceticism and involvement in *jihad*, describing him as “a curious hybrid of Ibrahim b. Adham and Ibn al-Mubarak” (p. 33).

13 Wimbush and Valentasis consider ethical formation to be the basis of asceticism. This also links asceticism to the concept of *ta’dib*, discussed in Chapter 1. see, “Introduction” in idem, *Asceticism*, p. xxix.

14 Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetic: Negative or Affirmative?” in Wimbush and Valentasis, *Asceticism*, p. 12.

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Boni and Liverlight, 1918), p. 94.

asceticism, by reorienting desire away from the World and toward God, the ascetic expresses “the freest form of desire in his or her individual relation with God.”¹⁶ The theorist of asceticism Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains this paradox in the following way: “Asceticism does not exclude desire, it complicates it; it proposes gratifications which are represented as both ‘anti-desire’ and yet (and for this reason) are more desirable than desire because they do not insult the conscience.”¹⁷ For Shaiq as well, a desire that is “more desirable than desire” inspires the ascetic “to love what God loves and to hate what God hates until nothing becomes more beloved than God and what pleases Him. God watches over and blesses the one who strives for the love of God and bestows Love upon him.”¹⁸

As we saw in Chapter 2, there were three main approaches to Islamic asceticism in Rabi'a's time. The first was *instrumental asceticism*, a form of asceticism that was directed toward specific goals. Instrumental asceticism was related to the practice of ascetic ritualism (*nusk*), which led the ascetic to conceive of her relationship with God as a balance sheet of religious and moral obligations. God's virtues are always greater than human virtues. Thus, there was theoretically no limit to how far the instrumental ascetic of Rabi'a's day might go in her pursuit of ritual and moral perfection. At times, such ascetics even competed with each other to attain the highest possible rank in the hierarchy of virtue. The majority of ascetics in Rabi'a's day were instrumental ascetics.

The second type of asceticism in Rabi'a's time was *reactionary asceticism*. This was an expression of social and ethical protest against the unequal distribution of wealth in the Abbasid Empire. The perspective of reactionary asceticism was illustrated in Chapter 2 by Mu'afa ibn 'Imran's *Kitab al-zuhd*, a book written during Rabi'a's lifetime, which was as much concerned with asceticism as a form of social protest as it was with asceticism as an approach to God. Although reactionary asceticism had a different focus than instrumental asceticism, it was not fundamentally different from the latter because it too was instrumental. Often, these two approaches to asceticism could be found together, as seen in the following statement from *Kitab al-zuhd*:

16 Averil Cameron, “Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity,” in Wimbush and Valentasis, *Asceticism*, p. 154.

17 Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, p. 46.

18 Shaiq al-Balkhi, “Manazil al-Sidq,” in *Trois Oeuvres inédite*, ed. Nwyia, p. 20; the verb translated as “strive for” in the above passage is *ibtagha*, which comes from an Arabic root that connotes “desire.”

“Your wealth calls you to hellfire but your poverty calls you to heaven.”¹⁹ This statement reflects the ethics of reactionary asceticism because it rejects wealth as a moral danger and affirms poverty as a sign of worthiness for heaven. However, it also reflects the ethics of instrumental asceticism because salvation depends on the renunciation of wealth as a means to an end. Since wealth leads to hellfire and poverty leads to heaven, rejecting wealth averts hellfire and makes the ascetic’s attainment to heaven possible.

Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya is most often portrayed as a practitioner of the third type of asceticism in this period, *essential asceticism*. In essential asceticism, the ascetic attains the Nonworld not by rejecting the World but by treating it as unimportant. The essential ascetic avoids the World not because it is evil per se but because it is a distraction from God. Essential asceticism is in agreement with normative Islam because it reflects the Qur’anic message of complete submission to God. Rabi’ā’s essential asceticism was illustrated in Chapter 2 by her statement that asceticism consists in “leaving aside all that does not concern me and by cleaving to the One that always is.” This statement implies that a major goal of essential asceticism is the love of God, because the ascetic cleaves to that which is most fundamental for her existence. Since we all depend on God for our existence, closeness to God is the worthiest of all goals. Rabi’ā is also reported to have said, “I do not worship God out of fear of God. If I did, I would be like the disobedient slave-girl who only works when she is afraid. Nor [do I worship God] out of love for heaven. If I did, I would be like the disobedient slave-girl who only works when she is given something. Instead, I worship God out of love for Him alone and out of desire for Him.”²⁰ God is the worthiest object of our love because He is the source of all that is important to us. This statement agrees with Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s assertion that the ascetic’s desire for God is “more desirable than [ordinary] desire.” The same notion is reflected in another aphorism attributed to Rabi’ā: “The best way for the slave to come near to God Most High is for him to know that he must not love anything in this world or the Hereafter other than Him.”²¹

19 Mu‘afa ibn ‘Imran, *Kitab al-zuhd*, p. 185.

20 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94; see also, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment: Kitab al-mahabba wa’l-shawq wa’l-uns wa’l-rida*, *Book XXXVI of The Revival of the Religious Sciences Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, trans. Eric Ormsby (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), p. 52. Ghazali seems to have taken this quote from Makki’s book.

21 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 80–1.

b. *Love of God in the Qur'an and Hadith*

Mahabba, the Arabic term for love that is used in the above aphorisms, appears only once in the Qur'an. However, its use is significant, because it occurs in a verse that instructs the believer to put her trust completely in God, which is an important aspect of essential asceticism. In this verse, the mother of Moses is ordered by God to put her baby in a chest and cast him into the River Nile in order to save him from Pharaoh's men. God tells her not to worry about Moses' safety, "for I have put my love (*mahabba*) upon him and he will be formed under my care" (Qur'an 20:39). God assures the mother of Moses that her trust will be rewarded by His love and care for her son.

Another woman in the Qur'an who entrusts herself to God is Mary the Mother of Jesus, who "had faith in the words of her Lord and His books, and was one of the obedient" (Qur'an 66:12). When the pain of childbirth drives Mary to seek refuge under a palm tree, she cries out to God for help. In response, God provides her with ripe dates and running water to sustain her (Qur'an 19:23–26). Although the term *mahabba* does not appear in the Qur'anic verses about Mary, the same concepts of obedience and trust apply to her relationship with God as in the verse about the mother of Moses. The Qur'an's description of Mary as "one of the obedient" (*min al-qanitin*), connotes devotion and surrender to God.²² Mary's devotion to God leads her to entrust her life completely to her Lord, an act that Tor Andrae, the Swedish scholar of Sufism, called "the sum of all devotion."²³ Some early Sufis followed Mary's path of entrustment to God (*tawakkul*) and refused to earn a living because, like Mary, they depended on God to provide for all of their needs.²⁴

Verses that discuss the love of God in the Qur'an stress the importance of reciprocity between the believer's love of God and God's love for the believer. "Say: If you love God, follow [the Prophet Muhammad] so that God will love you" (Qur'an 3:31). "Soon God will bring forth a people whom He will love and they will love Him" (Qur'an 5:54). A sense of reciprocity can also

22 See Aliah Schleiffer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1998), p. 56.

23 Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, p. 110.

24 The Iraqi Sufi Ibrahim al-Khawwas (d. 904 CE), who was a famous practitioner of *tawakkul*, even refused to beg for food from others. He said, "It is not part of Sufi conduct to have means upon which to rely in case of need, nor something that can be accepted by another [as payment], nor sight nor tongue with which to beg if one is hungry, nor a word by which to beseech human beings in case of misfortune." See Abu Madyan, "Bidayat al-murid," in V. Cornell, *The Way of Abu Madyan*, pp. 31 and 64.

be found in the numerous references to love of God in Hadith. "When I [i.e., God] love someone, I am the hearing by which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the tongue by which he speaks, and the hand by which he grasps."²⁵ Ascetic ritualists (*nussak*) in early Islam used this tradition to argue that the amount of love that God gives the believer is directly related to the amount of pious observances that the believer gives back to God. Hadith accounts also distinguish between love that is given altruistically and without hope of reward and love as a form of recompense for specific acts of devotion. For example, the notion of love as a form of recompense can be seen in the following tradition from the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal: "Renounce the World (*izhad fi-l-dunya*) so that God will love you."²⁶ However, despite its mention of love, this hadith is a justification for instrumental asceticism because devotion is not altruistic; it depends on a cause-and-effect relation between the practice of asceticism and divine favor. By contrast, a more altruistic concept of love can be seen in the following hadith from *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*: "God is an intimate friend (*rafiq*) and He loves intimate friendship (*rifq*)."²⁷ This hadith argues for essential asceticism rather than instrumental asceticism because God gives love altruistically, irrespective of the believer's ability to respond in kind.

However, one must be careful when using Hadith accounts to understand the notion of ascetical love in Rabi'a's time. Just because a statement appears in a Hadith collection, it does not necessarily mean that the Prophet Muhammad said it. The most widely used Hadith collections were compiled after Rabi'a's time and more than 200 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, Ahmad ibn Hanbal died in 855 CE, half a century after Rabi'a and 223 years after the Prophet. Thus, the traditions about love and renunciation in his *Musnad* may reflect the views of asceticism in his own time more than the views of the Prophet himself. Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, the compiler of *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, died almost a century after Rabi'a, in 892–93 CE. Nearly 260 years separate him from the Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, the traditions that support altruistic love in his Hadith collection may reflect notions of altruistic love that were popular in the Abbasid age but may not have been as popular in the time of either Rabi'a or the Prophet.²⁸

25 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Riqaq (*Book of Ritual Practices*), p. 38.

26 *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, Kitab al-Zuhd (*Book of Renunciation*), p. 1.

27 *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab al-Birr (*Book of Virtue*), p. 77.

28 Recent research has demonstrated that some Hadith traditions can in fact be dated to the Prophet's time. See, for example, Harald Motzki, "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey," *Arabica*, 52, 2005, pp. 204–53.

Nevertheless, Hadith collections can still be used to provide answers for more limited questions. For example, the modern researcher can use Hadith to get a sense of whether or not the terms for love used in later Sufi accounts about Rabi'a were authentic to Rabi'a's era. The use and meaning of key terminology can help date an account's origin. A survey of statements about the love of God in Hadith accounts reveals that the word *mahabba*—which was to become a key technical term for the practice of love as a spiritual method in Sufism—was a generic term for love in the early Islamic period.²⁹ This supports the belief that statements of early Sufis that use this term may be genuine. In one hadith from Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad*, the Prophet explains that the Qur'anic phrase "bonds of the womb" (*silat al-rahim*, Qur'an 4:1) means, "love for one's family" (*mahabbatan fi-l-ahl*).³⁰ Here, the term *mahabba* is used as a synonym for *hubb*, the most common word for love in Arabic. The Prophet could have used the phrases *hubban fi-l-ahl* and *mahabbatan fi-l-ahl* interchangeably.

Further support for the idea that early Muslims used the terms *mahabba* and *hubb* interchangeably can be found in a statement attributed to Rabi'a's contemporary Ibrahim ibn Adham. "Do not seek the love of God (*hubb Allah*) along with the love of money or honor (*mahabbat al-mal wa-l-sharaf*)."³¹ This statement is significant because it reverses the expected use of the terms *hubb* and *mahabba*. In later generations, Sufis would use the term *mahabba* for the love of God but not for the love of worldly things. The more common term *hubb* was used for the love of worldly things. However, in Ibn Adham's time, this distinction does not appear to have been important: *mahabba* is used for love of the World whereas *hubb* is used for the love of God. Numerous examples such as these provide evidence that the terms *hubb* and *mahabba* were synonymous in Rabi'a's time.

However, this was not the case for *'ishq*, another Sufi term for the love of God, which does not seem to have been used widely in early Islam.³² This term, which means, "desire," has often been used by Sufis as a synonym

29 The Abbasid-era *littérateur* Jahiz, a contemporary of Ibn Hanbal, also affirmed that *mahabba* was a common term for love in early Islam. See Joseph Normant Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1979), p. 36.

30 *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, 2:374 and *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab al-Birr, p. 49.

31 Sulami, *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*, p. 35.

32 This contention is also supported, mostly from Persian sources, by Joseph E.B. Lumbard, "From Hubb to 'Ishq: The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 18 (3) 2007, pp. 345–85.

for *mahabba*.³³ Unlike *mahabba*, *'ishq* cannot be found in any of the major Hadith collections. Only its cognate verb, *'ashiqā*, appears in Hadith, and then only once. This is in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, where *'ashiqā* refers to physical desire, such as a man's desire for a woman.³⁴ Louis Massignon asserted that the first religious figure to use the term *'ishq* for the love of God in Islam was Rabi'ā's contemporary 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd (d. 793 CE).³⁵ According to Massignon, Ibn Zayd refused to use the term *mahabba* because it "presumed too much confidence in divine favor."³⁶ Massignon's opinion was challenged by the Egyptian scholar 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, who points out that the French scholar cites no evidence for this assertion.³⁷ According to Badawi, the term *'ishq* did not become part of Sufi vocabulary until the mid-ninth century CE, a generation or so after Rabi'ā and around the time of the appearance of the root *'ashiqā* in Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad*. Consequently, the use of this term likely reflects a later stage in the development of Sufi Love mysticism.³⁸

Overall, the evidence of Hadith and the earliest Sufi and ascetical works in Islam support Badawi's contention that the use of *'ishq* as a term for the love of God was a later development. This seems to suggest that statements attributed to Rabi'ā and other early Sufis and ascetics that use the term *'ishq* are not authentic to their period. In further support of this assertion, one

33 For Jahiz, *'ishq* was a type of *mahabba*. See Bell, *Love Theory*, p. 36. On *'ishq* as excessive or mad love see Dols, *Majnun*, pp. 313–19.

34 *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, 5:164.

35 On 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd, see Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 16–18. In some Sufi texts, Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya, 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd, and Riyah al-Qaysi (d. 796 CE) appear as members of a Basra Sufi Love Trio. In this trope, Rabi'ā is depicted as the founder of the doctrine of *mahabba*, Riyah al-Qaysi is the founder of *khulla* (intimate friendship), and Ibn Zayd is the founder of the doctrine of *'ishq*. See my discussion of this trope in Rkia Elaroui Cornell, "Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah (circa 720–801)," in Cooperson and Toorawa, *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, p. 294.

36 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 135.

37 In *ibid.*, p. 135, n. 346, Massignon cites a manuscript by the Hanbali theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE), as the source for this claim about Ibn Zayd. However, he does not give the title. Badawi, *Shahidat al-'ishq al-ilahi*, pp. 61–3.

38 Textual evidence to support Badawi's opinion can be found in Ibrahim ibn al-Junayd's late ninth-century *Kitab al-mahabba*. In this work, the terms *'ishq* (desire) and *'ashiq* (desirer) appear only once, in a group of teachings that summarize the relationship between ascetic rejection of the World and the love of God. These teachings were transmitted by Ibn al-Junayd's teacher, Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Burjulani, who flourished in the mid-ninth century. For Ibn al-Junayd, *'ishq* connoted mournful desire (*innama yazidu al-'ishq li-l-huzn*). Similarly, the term *'ashiq* stands for the lover whose yearning or desire causes pain or sorrow. See Ibn al-Junayd, *Kitab al-mahabba*, no. 247 and Radtke, *Materialien*, p. 179.

might also add that the basic meanings of *'ishq* and *mahabba* in Arabic are different. The term *'ishq* connotes love as desire whereas the term *mahabba*, like *hubb*, connotes love as affection.³⁹ In addition, it can be argued, contrary to Massignon, that in Rabi'a's period, love as affection (*mahabba*) would have been a more "appropriate" way of expressing the ascetic's love for God than love as desire (*'ishq*). Where, then, did the Sufi term *'ishq*, meaning, "desire for God," come from? We shall see later on in this chapter that a likely source for this term was the Greek word *eros*, which, like *'ishq*, means both "love" and "desire."

c. *The Ascetic Lovers of Basra*

In the previous chapter, asceticism was defined as "a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred." Both goals of asceticism, the attainment of a higher spiritual state and a more thorough absorption in the sacred, were part of the essential asceticism attributed to Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. Asceticism and mysticism come together as spiritual paths at the point where the goals of both practices are attained—in the "thorough absorption" in God that is the goal of essential asceticism.

In her book *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, Margaret Smith locates the meeting-point between asceticism and mysticism in the notion that "none can attain direct knowledge of God except by purification from self. The soul must be stripped of the veils of selfishness and sensuality if it is to see clearly the Divine Vision."⁴⁰ Recent comparative research on asceticism confirms Smith's hypothesis. It is now understood that a major goal of ascetic practice in all religions is to purify the self in order to aspire to a higher reality.⁴¹ However, as Bishop Kallistos Ware and others

39 In *'Atf al-alif al-ma'tuf 'ala al-lam al-ma'tuf* (*The Conjunction of the Attached Letters Alif and Lam*), Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Daylami (d. ca. 1001–2 CE) defines love (*hubb*) as "a term for affection that is pure." See Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Daylami, *A Treatise on Mystical Love*, trans. Joseph Norment Bell and Hassan Mahmood Abdul Latif Al Shafie (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 24.

40 Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, p. 5. This work, which is little known today, was published in 1931, three years after *Rabi'a the Mystic*. It remains the best available comparative study of early Christian and Islamic mysticism in the Middle East.

41 Although Smith located the meeting-point of asceticism and mysticism in the active purification of the self that leads to the vision of God, she continued to maintain the

have pointed out, asceticism as a form of active spirituality involves more than just renunciation and precaution; it requires both withdrawal from the World and an approach to God beyond the World.

The most common approach to God for early Muslim ascetics was through the practice of instrumental asceticism. Through ritualized acts of devotion, early Muslim ascetics sought to make themselves worthy of God. However, a more effective means of approach to God was the essential asceticism associated with Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. Through essential asceticism, devotion to God could be transformed into love of God. Margaret Smith regarded Love as the “guide and inspiration of the soul” that motivates the ascetic’s approach to God. “He that does not love does not know God; for God is Love,” she states, quoting the New Testament (I John 4:8).

The Oriental mystic, seeking to get rid of that element of not-being, which is opposed to true Being, the Divine Reality, finds that self, the great hindrance, can be overcome by Love alone. Love alone can perfectly purify the soul and set it free from the bonds of self-seeking and the fetters of the flesh and so enable it to pass on its upward way, to look upon God as He is in truth, and to realize that it is itself one with the Divine Goodness, one with that Reality which is also Everlasting Love.⁴²

The type of transcendent Love-mysticism that Smith describes has been a hallmark of Sufi theology since the mid-tenth century CE and is often attributed to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. This has led both medieval Sufi writers and modern scholars to assert that Rabi'ā was important—perhaps even the key figure—in introducing Love mysticism to Islam.⁴³ However, the most recent evidence indicates that just as Rabi'ā was not the first Sufi woman in

mistaken view that both asceticism and mysticism are passive forms of spirituality. In *Rabi'ā the Mystic*, she contends that early Sufism “consisted of asceticism carried to the point of quietism.” See Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Rainbow Bridge), p. 76 and (Oneworld), p. 100.

42 Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, pp. 5–6. In this passage, the phrase, “Oriental mystics” refers to Muslim and Eastern Christian mystics alike.

43 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (*Shahidat al-'ishq al-ilahi*, p. 63) claims that no Muslim mystic used the term *mahabba* for divine love before Rabi'ā. Numerous citations in Ibrahim ibn al-Junayd's *Kitab al-mahabba* clearly refute this claim. The idea that Rabi'ā was the first Love mystic in Islam goes back in modern works to Margaret Smith's *Rabi'ā the Mystic*. For more recent versions of this assumption, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 4, and Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 26–32, who ascribes to Rabi'ā the Sufi “doctrine of pure love (*'ilm al-mahabba*).”

Islam, she was also not the first Sufi lover. Although she may have been an important figure in the development of Islamic Love mysticism, she was not the first Muslim ascetic to focus on the love of God. Ibn al-Junayd's *Kitab al-mahabba* is full of ascetics who were contemporaries or predecessors of Rabi'a and who stressed the importance of the love of God. One of the earliest of these was the male ascetic 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays (d. ca. 680 CE) of Basra. Ibn al-Junayd quotes him as exclaiming, "By God, I love nothing that God does not love!"⁴⁴

According to the modern Egyptian historian Su'ad 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays was "the first lover of God (*muhibb*) in Islam."⁴⁵ Other members of his clan also focused on the love of God. Sulami's *Book of Sufi Women* mentions a woman named 'Afiya of the clan of 'Abd Qays, who was called "The Infatuated" (*al-Mushtaq*) because she focused on the love of God (*mahabba*) and the desire for God (*shawq*) in her teachings. Sulami quotes 'Afiya as saying, "The lover (*al-muhibb*) never wearies of intimate discourse (*munajat*) with the Beloved, and nothing is of interest to him other than the Beloved. Oh, may I always desire Him!"⁴⁶ This statement could just as easily have come from Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Both Rabi'a's clan of 'Adi ibn Qays and 'Amir's and 'Afiya's clan of 'Abd Qays were part of the same Arab tribe of Qays 'Aylan. Is it possible that the combination of asceticism and love of God that has been attributed to Rabi'a reflected different aspects of her tribe's spiritual traditions? Were both traditions, so to speak, "all in the family?"

In attempting to answer this question, however, it is important to keep in mind a major difference between the love doctrines of 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays and his later kinswoman 'Afiya. For the seventh-century ascetic 'Amir, the love of God does not seem to have led to a transcendent knowledge of God. Instead, his love of God was instrumental. In *Hilyat al-awliya'*, Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani quotes him as saying, "I love God, the Glorious and Mighty, with a love that eases every problem for me and God has shown his pleasure with me by granting my every wish."⁴⁷ This statement describes the love of an instrumental ascetic. 'Amir's devotion to God is instrumental because he expects tangible rewards: each investment of devotion or service leads to a problem solved or a wish granted. By contrast, 'Afiya's love of God, which

44 Ibn al-Junayd, *Kitab al-mahabba*, no. 186; Radtke, *Materialien*, p. 141; this source also contains a long statement on love via 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays from the prophet David (no. 233, pp. 168–9).

45 'Abd al-Raziq, *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya*, p. 117.

46 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 98–9.

47 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 2, p. 89.

causes her to see nothing in the world except the Divine Beloved, recalls the essential asceticism attributed to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. A change of focus seems to have taken place in the love doctrines of Basra ascetics in the hundred years between 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays and Rabi'ā.

A survey of the statements of Basra ascetics in early Sufi sources suggests that the concept of essential asceticism started to become more prominent around the second half of the eighth century CE. In this period, one can find examples of both instrumental and non-instrumental asceticism. For example, Abu Muhammad Habib al-Farisi, better known as Habib al-'Ajami (both terms refer to his Persian origin), frequented Basra around the time of the Abbasid conquest of Iraq in 750 CE. Habib al-'Ajami was famous for "ransoming his soul from God" (*ishtara nafsahu min Allah*) through ritualized acts of devotion.⁴⁸ It was so widely believed that his bargains with God would be fulfilled that people gave him money to distribute as alms in symbolic down payment on their dwellings in paradise.⁴⁹ Ransoming one's soul back from God and putting down payments on dwellings in paradise are unmistakable signs of instrumental asceticism.

In contrast to Habib al-'Ajami's instrumental asceticism was the more altruistic asceticism of Malik ibn Dinar (d. 745 CE). Ibn Dinar was a student of al-Hasan al-Basri who served as an important link between the ascetics of Hasan's and Rabi'ā's generations. Some hagiographers even claimed that Ibn Dinar and Rabi'ā knew each other.⁵⁰ The key principle of Ibn Dinar's asceticism was to accept whatever God willed. He would say, "Verily the heart of the lover of God loves hardships for God's sake."⁵¹ Unlike Habib al-'Ajami and 'Amir ibn 'Abd Qays but more like Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya and 'Afiya of 'Abd Qays, he viewed his altruistic service to God as a *mimesis* of God's own altruism. This can be seen in the following quotation: "I read in some book that God the Glorious and Mighty said, 'Oh son of Adam, my goodness descends on you and your evil rises up to me. I show my love to you by granting you grace (*ni'ma*) but you show your dislike of me through your disobedience. Yet I am still a generous king who turns aside his face from your ugly behavior.'"⁵² The altruism expressed in this tradition reflects the spiritual perspective of essential asceticism. However, even though Malik

48 Ibid., vol. 6, p. 149.

49 Ibid., p. 151.

50 See, for example, the account related by Malik ibn Dinar in 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya'* reproduced in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 167–8.

51 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 6, p. 263.

52 Ibid., p. 277.

ibn Dinar viewed his devotion to God altruistically, he did not conceive of divine love as a form of intimacy between the lover and the Beloved. Rather, his love for God was more an expression of the affection of a grateful client for a generous and forgiving patron. Because of this social distance, it still fell short of true Love mysticism.

By contrast, the love of God attributed to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya made greater use of the language of intimacy. The earliest recorded quotation of Rabi'a by al-Harith al-Muhasibi speaks of the relationship between God and the ascetic in terms that are more intimate in a personal sense than those used by Malik ibn Dinar: "The night has come, the darkness has mingled, and every lover is left alone with his beloved. Now I am alone with you, my Beloved." Besides Rabi'a, several other women ascetics of the Basra region are also depicted as combining essential asceticism with a personal and intimate love of God. Among the most notable of these are three women of the port town of al-Ubulla, whom we have met in Chapter 2. These are Rayhana, Hayyuna and Sha'wana. Rayhana was a slave.⁵³ However, despite her lowly status, she was also a noted poet. Sulami's notice on Rayhana in his *Book of Sufi Women* contains verses that clearly express her personal and intimate love of God:

You are my intimate companion, my aspiration, and my happiness,
And my heart refuses to love anything but you.

Oh my dear, my aspiration, and the object of my desire (*muradi*),
My desire (*shawqi*) is endless! When will I finally encounter you?

My request is not for Heaven's pleasures (*min al-jinani ni'ama*).
I only want to be together with you!⁵⁴

The portrayal of Rayhana by Sulami and other early Sufi writers includes two major tropes that would later appear in narratives about Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. First, Rayhana is portrayed as a slave: this depiction first appears in Nisaburi's '*Uqala' al-majanin*', which was written around the same time as Sulami's *Book of Sufi Women*. Two centuries later, Farid al-Din al-'Attar would also portray Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya as a slave in *Tadhkirat al-awliya'* and it remains

⁵³ Nisaburi, '*Uqala' al-majanin*', p. 147.

⁵⁴ I have changed the above translation slightly from my original translation in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 94–5.

a major part of the Rabi'ā myth today. Second, Rayhana is portrayed as a love poet. This too was to become an important part of the Rabi'ā myth. As we shall see later in this chapter, the trope of Rabi'ā the Poet first becomes prominent in Abu Talib al-Makki's *Qut al-qulub*, which was written about a generation prior to Sulami's and Nisaburi's works. Might their portrayals of Rayhana have been related to the later tropes of Rabi'ā the Slave and Rabi'ā the Poet? The possibility is worth considering although, as we shall see in the section on "Rabi'ā the Love Poet," there is evidence to support a different hypothesis.

What is most important about Rayhana's poetry to the concept of essential asceticism is that it expresses a "desire more desirable than desire," which Geoffrey Galt Harpham has identified as the goal of the ascetic's approach to God. In the verses translated above, Rayhana rejects even the pleasures of heaven for an intimate encounter with God. She expresses a similar sense of altruistic love in a statement reproduced by Ibn al-Jawzi in *Sifat al-safwa*: "The lover subsists with the object of his hopes (*al-ma'mul*), with a presence that causes the heart to take flight out of happiness."⁵⁵ In a poem from Nisaburi's *'Uqala' al-majanin*, Rayhana describes her devotion to God as a love that demands complete sacrifice of the self:

It is enough for the lover that the Beloved knows
That the lover is cast down (*matruh*) at his door.

The heart within [the lover] sighs in the darkness of night,
Pierced through and wounded by the arrows of passion (*hawa*).⁵⁶

The love that is expressed in these verses is so single-minded that the lover is willing to make any sacrifice in order to be with her Beloved. Even though Rayhana is mortally wounded by passion, she remains at the Beloved's door, sighing her last breaths and hoping to be let in.

A similar connection between essential asceticism and Love mysticism can be found in aphoristic statements attributed to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. In one early anecdote, which first appears in Ibn al-Junayd's *Kitab al-mahabba*, she is asked, "How is your love for the Prophet?" She replies, "Verily, I love him. However, my love for the Creator has distracted me from love for

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix in *ibid.*, pp. 306–7; I have changed the present translation of this verse somewhat from the original version.

⁵⁶ Nisaburi, *'Uqala' al-majanin*, p. 147.

created beings" (*shaghalani hubb al-khaliq 'an hubb al-makhlūqin*).⁵⁷ Fifty years later, the Sufi prosopographer Abu Sa'id ibn al-A'rabi (d. 952–53 CE), would explain Rabi'a's words in the following way: "What she meant was this: I love the Messenger of God with faith, belief, and conviction, because he is the Messenger of God and because God loves him and has commanded us to love him. However, my love for God demands preoccupation with constant remembrance of God, intimate converse with him, and constant delight in the sweetness of his speech and in his looking into men's hearts, while still remembering his blessings."⁵⁸ One could hardly ask for a clearer example of the devotional aspect of essential asceticism.

Another woman ascetic of al-Ubulla who appears to have combined essential asceticism with Love mysticism was Hayyuna. As noted in Chapter 2, Hayyuna is the only figure to appear in premodern sources as a teacher of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. She also appears in some sources as the teacher of Rayhana. A major source of information about Hayyuna seems to have been the early ascetic Ibrahim ibn Adham.⁵⁹ This suggests that Hayyuna flourished at the same time as Ibn Adham in the mid-eighth century CE. An elaborate statement on Love attributed to Hayyuna can be found in Nisaburi's '*Uqala' al-majanin*. In this account, Hayyuna gives a detailed analysis of the states of love (*ahwal al-mahabba*), which suggests that her path of Love was a well-defined spiritual method:

One who loves [God] becomes intimate (*man ahabba anisa*). One who is intimate becomes joyful (*man anisa tariba*). One who is joyful becomes desirous (*man tariba ishtaqa*). One who is desirous becomes infatuated (*man ishtaqa waliha*). One who is infatuated serves [the Beloved] (*man waliha khadima*). One who serves [God] attains the goal (*man khadima wasala*). One who attains the goal attains union (*man wasala ittasala*). One who attains union comes to know [the Beloved]

57 Ibn al-Junayd, *Kitab al-mahabba*, no. 65 and Radtke, *Materialien*, p. 77; see also, Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 78–9. Another version of this anecdote can be found in Daylami's '*Atf al-alif*'; see Daylami, *A Treatise on Mystical Love*, p. 112.

58 Daylami, *A Treatise on Mystical Love*, p. 112. Because of the implication that God's words are more important than those of the Prophet, this statement led Rabi'a to be accused of heresy by some opponents of Sufism. Ironically, one of those who defended her against these accusations was the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya, who was otherwise bitterly opposed to Sufism. See Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu'at al-Rasa'il wa al-masa'il*, ed. Muhammad 'Ali Baydun (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 76 and 94–7. 59 See, for example, the account attributed to Ibn Adham in Nisaburi, '*Uqala' al-majanin*, p. 150.

(*man ittāsala 'arafa*). One who knows [the Beloved] becomes close [to Him] (*man 'arafa qaruba*). One who is in a state of closeness cannot sleep and experiences moments of profound sorrow (*wa tasawwarat 'alayhi bawariq al-ahzan*).⁶⁰

Hayyuna is also reported to have made the following supplication: “Oh God! Grant me peace in my heart through my commitment (*'aqd*) to trust only you. Make all of my thoughts, ideas, and inclinations agree with your acceptance of me. Do not allow these to deprive me of you. Oh, hope of those who hope!”⁶¹ In this statement, Hayyuna’s asceticism is likened to a spiritual marriage, as discussed for Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya in Chapter 2. She makes a “contract” (*'aqd*) of commitment to God that recalls a contract of marriage (*'aqd al-zawaj*). This contract leads her to expect that God will reciprocate her commitment to Him, just as with a legal marriage contract. In another quotation from *'Uqala' al-majanin*, Hayyuna seems to admonish God for taking her love for granted and not fulfilling His part of the bargain: “You know that I am infatuated with you. So, my Lord, why don’t you protect me from the harshness of the sun?”⁶² Although it is about spiritual love, this statement still has overtones of instrumental asceticism because Hayyuna feels that God “owes” her a practical sign of recompense for her devotion.

Another important similarity between Hayyuna and Rabi’ā in Islamic literature can be seen in her vocation as a teacher-trainer (*mu’addiba*). Hayyuna was famous for giving “tough love” to her students and associates, just as Rabi’ā did with Sufyan al-Thawri. In one account from *'Uqala' al-majanin*, she is depicted as criticizing the famous male ascetic and preacher ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd. Much as Rabi’ā chastises the jurist Thawri for his worldliness, Hayyuna chastises the moralist Ibn Zayd for his hypocrisy.

One day Hayyuna was present at one of ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd’s sessions. Upon hearing him finish speaking, she stood up and shouted, “Oh so-called theologian (*mutakallim*)! Critique yourself instead! By God, if you were to die, I would not attend your funeral!” “Why?” Ibn Zayd asked. She replied, “You criticize people and then you seek their company. I can only compare you to a child in the first stages

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 149.

of learning. His way of learning is to memorize things in his mother's house in the evening and he forgets them completely by daybreak. This causes his teacher to discipline him by hitting him. So go, 'Abd al-Wahid! Chastise yourself with an abundance of discipline (*adab*). Sustain yourself with the nourishment of sufficiency in God, and earn your true reputation by applying to yourself what you say about other people!"⁶³

The third woman ascetic of al-Ubulla who is depicted as combining asceticism and Love mysticism was Sha'wana. As we saw in Chapter 2, Sha'wana was most famous as a practitioner of ascetic weeping. An explicit reference to how Sha'wana's asceticism was related to the love of God appears in an account attributed to the Persian Sufi Muhammad ibn Khafif of Shiraz (d. 982 CE).⁶⁴ According to Ibn Khafif, Sha'wana wept at having neglected her devotions "because she had been distracted by Love for so long." Later, a figure appears to her in a dream and says to her in verse:

Let your eyes flow with the tears you were holding back,
For lamentations can cure the grief-stricken.

Be diligent; keep vigils, and fast always and forever,
For wasting away is an attribute of the obedient.⁶⁵

This account supports the contention, also discussed in the previous chapter, that early Muslim ascetics regarded tears as a way of arousing divine passion. According to this view, weeping helps the ascetic cross the threshold between the World and the Nonworld. As Herbert W. Basser explains for rabbinic Jewish asceticism, "The mystery of crying is that through tears the outside worlds and the interior worlds merge deep inside the human spirit."⁶⁶ For early Muslims as well, the merging of the outside and the interior worlds was a major goal of both asceticism and mysticism.

63 Ibid., pp. 149–50; Ibn Zayd was a noted preacher whose sermons were famous for their evocations of Judgment Day and his "emphasis on humility and scrupulosity in food and conduct" (Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, p. 16). Thus, Hayyuna's criticism of Ibn Zayd for hypocrisy chastises him for the very sin he warned others against.

64 On Ibn Khafif see Florian Sobieroj, *Ibn Ḥafīf aš-Širāzī und seine Schrift zur Novizenerziehung (Kitāb al-Iqtiṣād): biographische Studien, Edition, und Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).

65 Daylami, *A Treatise on Mystical Love*, p. 199.

66 Basser, "A Love for all Seasons," p. 185.

d. *The Question of Rabi'ā's Celibacy*

Celibacy is an important ascetic practice in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Likewise, most premodern Muslim sources describe Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya as having been celibate. In her chapter on Rabi'ā's celibacy in *Rabi'ā the Mystic*, Margaret Smith cites several sources for this claim and notes that Rabi'ā was said to have refused proposals of marriage from the ascetic 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd, the Abbasid governor of Basra, and even from al-Hasan al-Basri, who died seventy years before her.⁶⁷ For Smith, stories of Rabi'ā's celibacy suggested parallels with early Christianity. "Like her Christian sisters in the life of sanctity," she writes, "Rabi'ā espoused a heavenly bridegroom and turned her back on earthly marriage."⁶⁸ Smith believed that Rabi'ā's celibacy was based on the Christian concept of divine marriage. We have seen that certain statements attributed to Rabi'ā and Hayyuna reflect this concept as well. However, Smith's explanation for Rabi'ā's celibacy was objectionable to some modern Muslim writers, who sought to distance Rabi'ā from parallels with Christianity. For example, Widad El Sakkakini countered Smith's view by arguing that Rabi'ā created a new Islamic version of celibacy: "Rabi'ā's love was not like the love known to the Greeks, which came from the teachings of Plato; nor like the pre-Islamic love familiar to the monks. Her uniquely woven model entered the Islamic creeds as a concept of beauty dissociated from the body."⁶⁹

The Egyptian historian Su'ad 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq also attempted to separate Rabi'ā from the Christian model of celibacy. However, instead of saying that Rabi'ā created a new model of celibacy, she domesticated her by making her a pious housewife. According to 'Abd al-Raziq, Rabi'ā started her adult life as a married woman who struggled to combine her physical duties to her husband with her spiritual devotion to God: "[Rabi'ā] did not practice celibacy like Christian nuns. Rather, the actual sources state that she was married and that every night she used to cook and attend to her husband, saying, 'Do you have a need?' When she had fulfilled them and left him, she would purify herself and bend her knees in prayer."⁷⁰ In 'Abd al-Raziq's view, Rabi'ā was able to commit herself to celibacy and asceticism only after her husband had died. This story is based on an account in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safwa*. However,

67 Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), pp. 29–39 and *Rabi'ā* (Rainbow Bridge), pp. 10–19.

68 Ibid. (Oneworld), p. 32 and (Rainbow Bridge), p. 13.

69 El Sakkakini, *First among Sufis*, p. 62; *al-Ashiqā al-mutasawwifa*, p. 98.

70 'Abd al-Raziq, *Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya*, p. 57.

in Ibn al-Jawzi’s account, the woman in question is not Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya. Instead, it is the unnamed wife of Rabi‘a’s contemporary Riyah al-Qaysi (d. 796 CE).⁷¹ Some later writers have claimed that Rabi‘a herself was married to Riyah al-Qaysi in order to resolve this discrepancy.

‘Abd al-Raziq’s denial of Rabi‘a’s celibacy can be criticized on at least three grounds. First, her concern to avoid Christian comparisons ignores a long-standing tradition in Sufism that characterizes the Muslim mystic’s intimate union with God as a type of spiritual marriage.⁷² As noted previously, the earliest citation of Rabi‘a by Muhasibi reflects this concept. Even today, in many parts of the Muslim world, the death of a Sufi saint or Muslim martyr is referred to as a “wedding” (*‘urs*). On this evidence, Margaret Smith was justified in suggesting a possible parallel between the Christian concept of celibacy as marriage to God and the well-established Sufi notion of union with God as a form of spiritual marriage.

Second, ‘Abd al-Raziq’s contention that Rabi‘a only became celibate after her husband had died makes her revisionist account seem ironically more “Christian” than the accounts of Rabi‘a’s celibacy. Although Muslim widows, like many women, sometimes refuse to remarry after the death of their husbands, this is not a recommended practice in Islam. Rather, practicing celibacy after the death of a husband is more in conformity with Christian teachings. For example, St Paul of Tarsus states in his letter to Timothy that Christian widows should take a vow of celibacy after their husbands have died (1 Tim. 5:9–12). If ‘Abd al-Raziq had not been so concerned to avoid all comparisons with Christianity—even those that are historically and culturally valid—she might have avoided this error.

Finally, ‘Abd al-Raziq cites only two sources to back up her story of Rabi‘a’s marriage and eventual widowhood and both sources are chronologically much later than those that assert Rabi‘a’s celibacy. Furthermore, both sources come from Egypt. The earlier of these sources is *al-Rawd al-fa‘iq* (*The Splendid Garden*) by the Mamluk-era Egyptian writer Shu‘ayb ibn Sa‘d al-Hurayfish (d. 1398 CE). In Hurayfish’s account, al-Hasan al-Basri comes to Rabi‘a after her husband has died and inquires whether she wants to marry

71 See Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safiwa*, vol. 2, p. 721.

72 The trope of the marriage of the ascetic soul to God has a long history. Some scholars trace it to the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria (d. 45 CE). See for example, Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase with Introduction by Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 55 and n. 12.

again.⁷³ This account can be rejected as anachronistic because Hasan died when Rabi'ā was still a young girl. Most of Hurayfish's stories about Rabi'ā were adapted from her *vita* in Farid al-Din al-'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-awliya'* (*Memorial of the Saints*). However, Hurayfish adds new features to this *vita*, such as the claim of Rabi'ā's marriage and widowhood, which cannot be found in 'Attar's work.⁷⁴ The second historical source that 'Abd al-Raziq cites is *al-Kawakib al-durriyya* (*The Pearly Spheres*), by Muhammad 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Munawi (d. 1621 CE).⁷⁵ This hagiographical work from Ottoman Egypt is notorious for its inaccuracies, such as the claim that Rabi'ā lived in both Basra and Egypt.⁷⁶ If these two works are the best that 'Abd al-Raziq can find in the way of "actual historical sources," then her denial of Rabi'ā's celibacy stands on very shaky ground.

Premodern accounts that attest to Rabi'ā's life-long commitment to celibacy are both more numerous and chronologically much earlier than accounts of her marriage and widowhood. The earliest extant reference to Rabi'ā's celibacy is in *Balaghat al-nisa'* by Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur (d. 893 CE). In this account, an unnamed person asks Rabi'ā, "Marriage is a requirement of God, the Glorious and Mighty. So why do you not marry?" She replies, "One requirement of God prevents me from fulfilling another of His requirements."⁷⁷ This account is significant not only because it attests to Rabi'ā's celibacy less than a century after her death but also because it associates her practice of celibacy with essential asceticism, in which devotion to God is an all-consuming vocation. Because Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur was both an early source on Rabi'ā and a non-Sufi, his claim that she was celibate is more credible than the much

73 Al-Shaykh ['Abdullah Shu'ayb ibn Sa'd] al-Hurayfish, *al-Rawd al-fa'iq fi-l-mawa'iz wa-l-raqa'iq* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhuriyya al-'Arabiyya, 1970), p. 183. Margaret Smith also traces Hurayfish's *vita* of Rabi'ā to 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*. In her book, she cites a passage in which Hasan al-Basri says to Rabi'ā, "I desire that we should marry and be betrothed" (*Rabi'ā* [Oneworld], p. 31 and [Rainbow Bridge], p. 13). However, in the actual passage from the Persian edition of *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*, Hasan asks, "Do you desire to take a husband?" (Pers. *Raghibti shawhar koni?*). The passage is mixed, with both Arabic and Persian words. Nowhere does Hasan indicate that he is the intended suitor. See Shaykh Farid al-Din Muhammad 'Attar Nishaburi, *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*, ed. Muhammad Isti'lami (Tehran: Intisharat Zavar, 14th edition, 2005 reprint of 1967 original), p. 47.

74 For another dubious assertion by Hurayfish, see Jonathan Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), where he adds a new plot twist to a story about Jesus (p. 49 n. 73).

75 Muhammad 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Munawi, *al-Kawakib al-durriyya fi tarajim al-sadat al-sufiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadir, 1999), vol. 1, p. 288.

76 Ibid., p. 285; A tomb that is purported to be Rabi'ā's can still be found in Cairo today.

77 Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, *Balaghat al-nisa'*, p. 204.

later Egyptian Sufi accounts of her marriage and widowhood cited by 'Abd al-Raziq. He thus provides important evidence that the "real" Rabi'a was in fact, to borrow a term from Susanna Elm, a "virgin of God."⁷⁸

Another Egyptian historian, Taha 'Abd al-Baqi Surur, agrees that Rabi'a was celibate but also argues that she was viewed by her contemporaries as a consecrated virgin. For Surur, Rabi'a's practice of celibacy was directly linked to her radical other-worldliness. In his view, she could never have married because as a committed ascetic she was psychologically detached from her body: "She had left creation in its entirety. She had left the world in its entirety. She was spirit and not body. So what could men want of her?"⁷⁹ Surur's argument raises the question of how the celibacy of Muslim ascetics was perceived in Rabi'a's time. Was it seen as similar to the Christian concept of marriage with God as Margaret Smith assumed, or was it seen as a radical expression of the World/Nonworld dichotomy, in which the ascetic is psychologically detached from worldly norms and practices?⁸⁰

The Qur'an criticizes monasticism (Ar. *rahbaniyya*)—and by implication celibacy—in *Surat al-Hadid* (57:27). Here Christians are described as creating monasticism on their own, despite the fact that God did not prescribe it for them. The verb used in this verse to characterize the invention of monasticism is *ibtada'a*, which comes from the same root as *bid'a*, the term used in Islam for the unauthorized innovation of religious practices or doctrines.⁸¹ However, in this verse, it is not clear exactly which aspects of monasticism are being called into question. The Arabic root of the term *rahbaniyya*, *r-h-b*, means "to fear." Thus, a *rahib*, or monk, is literally "a God-fearing person." Clearly, the problem with monasticism was not the fear of God, which is praised many times in the Qur'an. Rather, the question is how far one should go in expressing such fear. The remainder of verse 57:27 states that although Christians created the tradition of *rahbaniyya* for the sake of God's pleasure, they exceeded the limits that God intended for them (*illa ibtigha'a ridwani*

78 See Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996).

79 Taha 'Abd al-Baqi Surur, *Rabi'a al-Adawiyya wa-l-hayat al-ruhiyya fi-l-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1957), p. 51.

80 For an overview of the question of celibacy in Islam, see Shahzad Bashir, "Islamic Tradition and Celibacy," in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 133–50.

81 For a detailed discussion of this verse, see Sara Sviri, "Wa-rahbāniyyatan ibtada'uhā: An analysis of traditions concerning the origin and evaluation of Christian monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 13, 1990, pp. 195–208.

Allahi fa-ma ra'awha haqqa ri'ayatiha). Celibacy is merely one of several ways in which God's limits might be exceeded.

The question of celibacy in Islam is also problematical in Hadith. In the major Hadith collections there are numerous accounts in which the Prophet Muhammad encourages Muslims to marry but only a few accounts that discuss celibacy or monasticism per se. For example, the term *rahbaniyya* only occurs three times in the major Sunni Hadith collections and only in sources that are relatively late: (1) "Jihad is prescribed for you, for it is the *rahbaniyya* of Islam" (*Musnad ibn Hanbal*, 3:86 and 3:266); (2) "Verily, I [Muhammad] was not commanded to practice *rahbaniyya* (*Sunan al-Darimi*, Kitab al-Nikah, no. 3); (3) "Verily, *rahbaniyya* was not prescribed for us (*lam tuktab 'alayna*)" (*Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, 6:226).⁸²

As in the Qur'anic passage cited above, it is unclear which monastic practices are being referred to in these Hadith traditions. The collections in which they appear—the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE) and the *Sunan* of Muhammad al-Darimi al-Samarqandi (d. 869 CE)—date to the mid-ninth century CE, well after the time of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Therefore, they were compiled long after the development of the early Islamic ascetic practices discussed in Chapter 2 and also after the publication of major works on asceticism, such as *Kitab al-zuhd wa-l-raqa'iq* by Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 796 CE) and *Kitab al-zuhd* by al-Mu'afa ibn 'Imran (d. 801 CE). It is at least worth suggesting that the practice of celibacy may not be the real issue in these traditions. Instead, they might refer to controversies over the excesses of ascetic ritualism (*nusk*), of which the practice of celibacy was only one part.

Support for this hypothesis can be found in the fact that in modern discussions of celibacy in Islam, there is hardly any mention—either in published works or on the Internet—of Hadith traditions that discuss the practice of *tabattul*. This is the Arabic term that most clearly reflects the notion of celibacy as a form of *nusk* or ritualized ascetic practice. The verb *tabattala* means, "to cut oneself off," "to devote oneself to something completely," or "to practice virginity."⁸³ The root of the term also appears in a common appellation given to the Virgin Mary in Islam. Muslims refer to Mary as *al-Batul*, "The Virgin" or "The Consecrated One." In the Hadith collections

82 A.J. Wensinck and J.P. Mensing, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 1986), vol. 2, p. 312.

83 See, for example, how the imperative (*tabattal*) and verbal noun forms (*tabtil*) of this root are used in Qur'an 73:8: "Keep the remembrance of the name of your Lord with complete and utter devotion" (*wa-udhkur isma Rabbika wa tabattal ilayhi tabtila*).

of Sunni Islam, the term *tabattul*, rather than *rahbaniyya* (monasticism), is most often associated with unequivocal prohibitions of celibacy. For example, several versions of the following tradition can be found in *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*: "Verily the Messenger of God (May God bless and preserve him) forbade *tabattul*" (3:158 and 230, 5:17, 6:125, etc.). A similar prohibition appears in *Sahih al-Bukhari*: "The Messenger of God (May God bless and preserve him) rejected *tabattul*" (Kitab al-Nikah, 8).⁸⁴ The most detailed prohibition of *tabattul* as a ritual practice can be found in *Sahih Muslim*: "Sa'id b. al-Musayyib reported: I heard Sa'd [ibn Abi Waqqas] say that 'Uthman b. Maz'un's desire to practice *tabattul* was rejected. For if [the Prophet] had allowed him to do it they (*sic*) would certainly have been castrated (*wa law adhina lahu la-akhtasayna*)."⁸⁵

In this last hadith, the reason for the prohibition of *tabattul* is quite specific and focuses on its literal meaning, "ritually consecrating oneself as a virgin." It appears that 'Uthman ibn Maz'un and his unnamed companion were planning to ritually castrate themselves in order to preserve their virginity. This hadith thus provides important circumstantial evidence for the suggestion that the main concern with celibacy in early Islam was not about refraining from marriage per se but about preventing Muslims from engaging in extreme acts of ascetic ritualism (such as castration). Significantly, 'Abdullah Ibn al-Mubarak, the noted specialist on ascetic practices in Islam, is cited as a transmitter of this hadith in its chain of transmission (*isnad*) to Imam Muslim.⁸⁶

Despite the apparent ambiguity of Islamic scriptural sources, the criticism of monasticism in the Qur'an and Hadith and the proscription of *tabattul* in Hadith are clearly in opposition to the support given to celibacy in early Christianity. In the New Testament, celibacy is prescribed for full-time priests in the Book of Matthew (Matt. 19:12). Also in the Book of Matthew, women are advised to forsake childbearing for the sake of God (Matt. 19:29). Matthew 22:30 states that the bond of marriage does not apply in heaven. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul of Tarsus argues that it is best for a man not to take a wife (1 Cor. 7:1). In the same letter, Jesus is portrayed as wishing that all men would follow his example of celibacy (1 Cor. 7:7), and that men should avoid marriage in order to resist worldly temptations (1 Cor. 7:27).

84 Wensinck and Mensing, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, vol. 1, pp. 142–3.

85 *Sahih Muslim*, 8 ("Kitab al-Nikah"), nos. 3,237–3,239 (variant readings). For the Arabic text, see: http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim/008_smt.html.

86 Ibid.

At this juncture, it is important to note that although the Qur'an criticizes monasticism, it sometimes refers to celibacy with approval. For example, John the Baptist is described as chaste or celibate (*hasur*, Qur'an 3:39). Similarly, the Virgin Mary is praised for preserving her chastity (*ahsanat farjaha*, Qur'an 21:91 and 66:12). In addition, some verses of the Qur'an even criticize family and children as worldly temptations, such as the following: "Verily, your possessions and your children are trials for you" (Qur'an 64:14).

In the time of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya, a number of well-known Muslim ascetics refused to marry. Sometimes, this was due to the misanthropic attitude of reactionary asceticism. In the previous chapter, we saw how the pessimism of works such as al-Mu'afa ibn 'Imran's *Kitab al-zuhd* led to exhortations against having children in a dangerous and sinful world. This prejudice against having a family (*ta'ahhul*) can be seen in a statement attributed to Ibrahim ibn Adham, one of the most famous celibate ascetics of Rabi'ā's day: "If a Sufi marries, his example is like that of a man who travels on a boat; if he has children, he is sunk."⁸⁷ At other times, Muslim ascetics expressed their objections to marriage or family life as part of a cynical attitude toward social relations. The Prophet's cousin Ibn 'Abbas (d. 688 CE) asked rhetorically, "Can anyone ruin people other than other people?"⁸⁸ The Basra ascetic Malik ibn Dinar stated, "A man will not attain the station of the true believers until he casts his wife aside as if she were a widow and takes refuge in garbage dumps frequented by dogs."⁸⁹ Ibn Dinar was reputedly so averse to marriage that he exclaimed, "If I could, I would divorce myself!"⁹⁰ Although Ibrahim ibn Adham also rejected marriage as a matter of principle, he was more pragmatic about the subject. When asked why he did not marry, he replied, "What would you say about a man who deceives and cheats on his wife? If I were to marry a woman, she would ask from me what women ask. Yet I have nothing to do with women."⁹¹ Abu Sulayman al-Darani, a celibate ascetic and early Sufi of Basra who later moved with his disciples to Syria, rejected marriage because he disliked women in general. Seeing women as the embodiment of the World, he forbade his followers from marrying them as a form of ethical precaution (*wara'*). Darani felt that companionship with

87 Sarraj, *al-Luma'*, p. 199.

88 Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 307.

89 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 2, p. 259.

90 Ibid., p. 295.

91 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 21; This account contains a similar trope as the "Why do you not marry?" account of Rabi'ā in Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur's *Balaghat al-nisa'*. Other examples can be found in Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 2, p. 261 and 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*, pp. 47–8.

women made men ignorant (*jahil*) and stupid (*safih*). Therefore, all men who sought the presence of God should avoid women as much as possible.⁹²

However, the negative attitude toward marriage and association with women on the part of male Muslim ascetics did not apply to women ascetics. Despite their disapproval of women in general, many celibate male ascetics—including Darani—frequently visited women ascetics such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and her contemporaries. In fact, not only did they visit them but they also visited them alone and after dark. This practice, which is attested to by many Sufi writers, has troubled modern Muslim moralists. To cite just one example: Su'ad 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's concern about the impropriety of al-Hasan al-Basri spending the night alone in prayer with Rabi'a seems to be what caused her to try to save Rabi'a's reputation by marrying her off to a husband.⁹³

Clearly, ascetic women were exceptions to the normal category of women in early Islam. As 'Attar famously states about Rabi'a in *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, "When a woman is on the path of God Most High, she becomes a man."⁹⁴ Because the reputation of ascetic women was based on their virtues and celibacy was a major sign of virtue in early Islamic society, it is not surprising to find that many of Rabi'a's female colleagues practiced celibacy as she did. Among the female ascetics in the region of Basra in Rabi'a's time, only Sha'wana of al-Ubulla is mentioned in premodern sources as having been married.⁹⁵

In light of the abundant textual evidence attesting to the practice of celibacy in early Islam, and because the criticism of this practice in the Qur'an and Hadith appears to have been focused primarily on the faults of excessive ascetic ritualism, it is necessary to find a more nuanced way to compare early

92 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, pp. 413–14. As a woman, it is difficult to read about Darani's attitude toward women without thinking of the following statement of the feminist writer Hélène Cixous: "Is that me, a phantom doll, the cause of sufferings and wars, the pretext, 'because of her beautiful eyes,' for what men do, says Freud, for their divine illusions, their conquests, their havoc?" Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 69.

93 'Abd al-Raziq, *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya*, p. 59; To underscore the moral problem of Rabi'a and Hasan being alone together, 'Abd al-Raziq cites a hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad forbids a man to be alone with a woman, "even if they are the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist."

94 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, p. 41.

95 See Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 304–5. The earliest mention of Sha'wana being married is Ibn al-Junayd, *Kitab al-mahabba*, no. 223; Radtke, *Materialien*, p. 162.

Christian and Islamic approaches to celibacy than has been the case until now. Although modern Muslim moralists try to deny that celibacy has been an accepted practice in Islam, it is undeniable that celibacy was at least widely tolerated, if not fully approved, in the early Muslim world. Even more, most, if not all, of the varieties of celibacy that were practiced in early Christianity were also practiced in early Islam.

For example, in 325 CE the Council of Nicaea forbade Christian priests and other celibate males from taking into their houses *synesaktoi*—women who lived with men as fictive “sisters” in a sort of pseudo-marriage.⁹⁶ Despite this prohibition, many Christian ascetics continued this practice, especially in Syria.⁹⁷ Muslim pseudo-marriages are also sometimes mentioned in early Sufi accounts from Syria. For example, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj mentions a male Muslim ascetic from Syria who contracted a marriage but still had not consummated his union after thirty years.⁹⁸ Another example of this practice can be found in Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Sifat al-safwa*, where relations between the Sufi Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari (d. 845 CE) and his wife Rabi’a bint Isma’il of Damascus are described in terms that are reminiscent of the practices of Syrian Christian *synesaktoi*. In this account, which was originally transmitted by Ibn Abi al-Dunya, Rabi’a of Damascus says to her husband, “I do not love you in the way that married couples do; instead, I love you as one of the Sufi brethren. I wanted to be with you only in order to serve you, and I desired and hoped that my fortune would be consumed by someone like you and your brethren.”⁹⁹

A comparative examination of celibacy as an ascetic practice in late antique Christianity and early Islam reveals that celibacy was expressed in two major forms, which I shall call “principled” and “vocational.” *Principled celibacy* is a form of celibacy that is based on scriptural foundations and is seen as fundamental to the practice of asceticism in general. Celibacy in early Christianity can be characterized as principled celibacy because it was sanctioned by scripture and was a key practice of both anchoritic (individual) and cenobitic (group) asceticism. In general, it was very difficult to call oneself an ascetic in early Christianity unless one practiced

96 Elm, *Virgins of God*, pp. 48–51.

97 Ibid., p. 206.

98 Sarraj, *al-Luma'*, Arabic text, p. 199.

99 Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 316–17. Because the source of this account, Ibn Abi al-Dunya, lived only a generation after the protagonists, it seems to argue against Julian Baldick’s assertion that Rabi’a bint Isma’il of Damascus never existed. See Baldick, “The Legend of Rabi’a of Basra,” p. 237.

celibacy. Other examples of principled celibacy can be found in Hinduism and Buddhism. However, celibacy in Judaism and Islam was conceived differently. Celibacy among early rabbinic Jewish and Muslim ascetics is best characterized as *vocational celibacy*. In late antique Judaism and early Islam, celibacy was not a universal practice for ascetics because the scriptures did not prescribe it. Celibacy was tolerated but it was not required as part of the ascetic life style. It was not seen as fundamental to the practice of asceticism itself. This type of celibacy can be termed vocational because it was based on individual choice and because it viewed marriage and family as impediments to the ascetic's principal vocation, which is devotion to God.

Vocational celibacy was closely related to the practice of essential asceticism. This can be seen in Rabi'ā's description of her celibacy as recorded by Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur: "One requirement of God prevents me from fulfilling another of His requirements." In other words, the undivided attention the ascetic gives to God leaves little room for anyone or anything else. Abu Talib al-Makki makes a similar point in his chapter on Love in *Qut al-qulub*: "He who wants to be loved by God must reject the World and must not even contemplate the love of God unless he renounces the World."¹⁰⁰ For the ascetic who follows the way of essential asceticism, marriage and family can be unacceptable distractions because they are likely to divert the attention of the lover of God from the Beloved.

The concepts of essential asceticism and vocational celibacy can also be seen in the stories that recount Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya's refusal of marriage proposals. In the original version of the account reproduced by Hurayfish, in which al-Hasan al-Basri asks Rabi'ā if she will marry again after her husband has died, the Persian hagiographer 'Attar depicts Rabi'ā as "belonging to" God. However, unlike Margaret Smith, who sees Rabi'ā as the bride of God, 'Attar sees Rabi'ā as the ward or protégé of God. In 'Attar's original Persian account Rabi'ā explains to Hasan: "I am not my own. I belong to [God] and I am under His command. Permission for a betrothal can come only from Him."¹⁰¹ The basis of this statement is the rule in Islamic law that a bride can only be given away in marriage by her guardian. For 'Attar, God is the guardian (*wali*) of his ascetic devotees; if the ascetic is celibate, it means that God has chosen to withhold permission for his ward to marry.¹⁰² In the story,

¹⁰⁰ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 92.

¹⁰¹ 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*, p. 47 and Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 161–2; Sells' translation states, "You must ask permission from him."

¹⁰² This notion also corresponds to the Qur'anic view of God as the *wali* (guardian or protector) of the believers. See, for example, Qur'an 2:257: "God is the guardian of

Hasan approves of Rabi'ā's statement because it correctly portrays the close relationship between the essential ascetic and her divine guardian. However, it is also necessary to point out that although this story is about marriage, it is not about love. Although the moral of 'Attar's story is the close relationship between Rabi'ā and God, this relationship is based on guardianship and dependency, not on love and intimacy. As 'Attar describes it, essential asceticism has not yet become Love mysticism.

The themes of essential asceticism and vocational celibacy can also be found in two other accounts of marriage proposals to Rabi'ā. These stories first appear in Abu Talib al-Makki's *Qut al-qulub*, a work that was written at the end of the tenth century CE, around 200 years after Rabi'ā's death. In the first story, Rabi'ā is petitioned for marriage by the Abbasid governor of Basra, Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Hashimi (fl. ca. 762 CE), who offers her 100,000 gold *dinars* as a bride price and 10,000 *dinars* a month as maintenance. Rabi'ā refuses this offer with the following words: "It does not please me that you should be my slave and that all you possess should be mine, nor that you should distract me from God for a single moment."¹⁰³ Since Rabi'ā was born around 717 CE, she would have been around forty years old at the time of the governor's proposal. Although it is possible that the governor, who was a kinsman of the Abbasid Caliph, might have thought of marrying a famous woman ascetic as a political act, such a scenario is unlikely. Once again the moral of the story is Rabi'ā's refusal of the proposal, which expresses the idea that marriage, especially to a government official, would be a distraction for an ascetic who was devoted to the service of God.

In the second story of Rabi'ā's rejection of a marriage proposal in *Qut al-qulub*, the proposal is made by the famous ascetic and preacher 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd. As noted previously, Ibn Zayd was an important disciple of al-Hasan al-Basri.¹⁰⁴ As a preacher, he was famous for the quality of his sermons, which stressed moral virtue, sincerity and the solitary life. Given his high moral reputation, it comes as a surprise to find that he is sometimes portrayed as being rebuked for hypocrisy by Sufi women (see, for example, Hayyuna's rebuke of Ibn Zayd in the previous section of this chapter). In Makki's story, Rabi'ā acts as if Ibn Zayd has insulted her by making a marriage proposal: "Oh lustful one! Seek a lustful woman like yourself! What did you

those who believe; He takes them out of the darkness toward the light" (*Allahu waliyyu alladhina amanu, yukhrijuhum min al-zulumati ila al-nur*).

¹⁰³ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94; see also, Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), p. 29 and (Rainbow Bridge), p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Massignon, *Essay*, pp. 147–8.

see in me that aroused your desire?”¹⁰⁵ This statement once again reaffirms Rabi'ā's reputation for essential asceticism. The point of her rebuke is that Ibn Zayd's desire could only have been aroused if he had been distracted from the devotion that he had committed to God.

In his book *Plotinus, the Simplicity of Vision*, Pierre Hadot associates the Love mysticism of the Egyptian Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus (d. 270 CE) with a type of asceticism that closely resembles the essential asceticism of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. Hadot characterizes Plotinus's ideal of Love as “an invasion of the soul by a presence which leaves no room for anything but itself.”¹⁰⁶ This statement could just as well describe Rabi'ā's essential asceticism and her vocational celibacy. Her devotion to God reinforces her practice of asceticism and celibacy because nothing but God is important to her—neither the eschatological goals of instrumental asceticism nor the ideal of marriage as a social norm.

As Richard Valentasis points out in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism*, the ascetic self is always a work in progress. Ascetic practices are performed in a liminal space between one's former (worldly) identity and one's future (otherworldly) identity. Through her practices, the early Muslim ascetic acknowledged that the subjectivity to which she aspired was still beyond herself, whether it was defined ethically, as in reactionary asceticism, or eschatologically, as in instrumental asceticism.¹⁰⁷ In all forms of asceticism, the ultimate goal of the ascetic is to attain nearness to God. However, according to Valentasis, being in proximity to God is not the same as being in union with God. Being in proximity to God means that the divine presence is close at hand but is still not fully attainable. However, when the goal of asceticism is expressed through the symbolic idioms of Love or spiritual marriage, as has been described for Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya—when the lover's soul, in Pierre Hadot's words, is “invaded by a presence which leaves no room for anything but itself”—the ascetic's liminal state between her former and desired subjectivities begins to change. In her new state of intimacy with God, the consciousness of the ascetic comes close enough to the desired ideal to attain the mystical experience of a single subjectivity, in which union with God replaces proximity to God. I suggest that it is at this point—when the formerly externalized subjectivity of the ascetic becomes internalized—that the practice of asceticism is transformed into the practice

¹⁰⁵ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94.

¹⁰⁶ Hadot, *Plotinus*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁷ Valentasis, *The Making of the Self*, p. 43.

of mysticism. For Abu Talib al-Makki and the Sufis who followed his description of this process, the internalization of the ascetic identity and its transformation into a mystical subjectivity was symbolized by the image of Rabi'ā the Lover.

III. RABI'Ā THE "MUSLIM DIOTIMA?"¹⁰⁸

a. The "Incognito Presence" of Plato's Symposium

Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya is often portrayed as both the founder and the quintessential teacher of Sufi Love mysticism. Although we have seen that other Muslim ascetics followed the spiritual path of Love before her, this has made little difference to the Sufi tradition of Love mysticism. As Carl W. Ernst observes, "It is striking that the Sufi tradition unanimously credits Rabi'ā with these insights into love and regards her as the example of the pure lover of God."¹⁰⁹ Even the great Andalusian Sufi Muhammad (Muhyiddin) Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240 CE), who composed a famous collection of poems on love titled *The Interpreter of Desires* (*Tarjuman al-ashwaq*), noted that Rabi'ā "analyzes and classes the categories of love to the point of being the most famous interpreter of love."¹¹⁰ In the Arabic-language tradition of Sufism, credit for the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover can be traced to Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996 CE), who underwent much of his Sufi training in Rabi'ā's home city of Basra.¹¹¹ In the Persian-language Sufi tradition, the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover can be traced to Farid al-Din al-'Attar (d. 1220 CE).¹¹² Carl Ernst summarizes Rabi'ā's reputation in the Sufi tradition of Love mysticism in the following way: "Regardless of the difficulty of ascertaining her exact formulations, we

108 Some of the material in this section was previously published in Rkia E. Cornell, "The Muslim Diotima? Traces of Plato's *Symposium* in Sufi Narratives of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya," in *Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic and Neoplatonic Traditions: from Antiquity to the Early Medieval Period*, ed. Kevin Corrigan, John D. Turner and Peter Wakefield (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Akademie Verlag, 2012), pp. 235–56. However, much of what follows is different from the published article.

109 Ernst, "The Stages of Love," p. 439.

110 Ibid.

111 See Atif Khalil, "Abu Talib al-Makki and the *Nourishment of Hearts* (*Qut al-qulub*) in the Context of Early Sufism," *The Muslim World*, 102 (2), 2012, pp. 10–17.

112 See, for example, Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), p. 124 and (Rainbow Bridge), pp. 99–100.

may still invoke Rabi‘a as the figure who stands for the first intensive meditations on the nature of mystical love in Islam.”¹¹³

Shortly after ‘Attar presented what was to become the paradigmatic version of Rabi‘a’s life story in *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, a scholar and Sufi from Jerusalem named ‘Izz al-Din ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Maqdisi (d. 1279 CE) composed a hagiographical work titled *Kitab sharh al-awliya* (*The Description of the Saints*).¹¹⁴ One of the chapters of this work bears the title, “The Description of Rabi‘a’s Spiritual State” (*Sharh hal Rabi‘a*). In this chapter, Maqdisi portrays Rabi‘a as teaching the following lesson on the mystery of Love:

Between the lover and the beloved, there is no separation. Love is an expression of desire (*nutq ‘an shawq*). It is the description of an experience (*dhawq*, literally, “taste”) and only the one who has “tasted” it knows it. He who expresses it cannot be defined by it (*man wasafa fa-ma ittasafa*). How can one express a thing whose presence is absence, whose existence melts away, whose appearance is fleeting, whose sobriety is intoxication, whose emptiness is fullness, and whose happiness is infatuation? The awe it causes deprives the tongue of speech. The senselessness it causes makes the coward act courageously. The jealousy it causes veils the sight from anything else. The perplexity it causes prevents reasoned thought. What else is left but everlasting astonishment, permanent bewilderment, hearts that are perplexed, secrets that are hidden, and bodies that are forever wasting away? Such is Love (*mahabba*), the Ruler of Hearts under her harsh regime (*bi-dawlatiha al-sarima fi-l-qulub hakima*)!¹¹⁵

In the next section of the chapter, Maqdisi comments on the mystery of Love in a poem. At the end of this poem, he eulogizes Rabi‘a in both verse and prose:

113 Ernst, “The Stages of Love,” p. 439.

114 On ‘Izz al-Din ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Maqdisi (also called Ibn Ghanim), see, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Nazm al-‘iqyan fi a‘yan al-a‘yan*, ed. Philip Hitti (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 1927), p. 129 no. 112. Although he is not described as a Sufi in this source, Suyuti identifies him as a Shadhili Sufi in idem, *Tanbih al-ghabi fi takhti ‘at Ibn ‘Arabi*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahman Hasan Mahmud (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, 1990).

115 This selection from Maqdisi’s book are reproduced in Badawi, *Shahidat al-‘ishq al-ilahi*, pp. 177–8; According to Badawi, the manuscript of *Kitab sharh al-awliya* can be found in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, *fonds Arabes*, no. 1641.

Have mercy on the desirers (*al-‘ashiqin*), whose hearts
Are bewildered and lost in the vast wilderness of Love (*mahabba*)!

The resurrection of their desire (*‘ishq*) has taken place. Their souls
Arise, with an endless and everlasting humility,

Leading either toward gardens of eternal union
Or toward a fire that blocks hearts and keeps them aflame!

Oh Rabi‘a! You are a wonder in the domain of Love! How is it that the “face” of the Cataclysmic Event [i.e., the sudden unveiling of the Divine Reality] (*surat al-waqi‘a*), came to be called “Rabi‘a”? If the state [of Love] is one, then from whence come this sharing of two (*sharika*) and union of many (*mujama‘a*)? She said: “Oh people! Harmony is a rule of companionship. Do you not see that the Children of Desire and Awe are not fulfilled unless they drink from the Sea of Love with Love’s own drink? I saw him saying to his companion in the cave, ‘Do not despair, for God is with us.’ What do you think of ‘two’ when God is the third of two? Then, I advanced toward the solitude of the cave with true commitment. But Jealousy cried out from inside the cave: ‘Who is this infatuated and anxious woman who removes the veil of contentment and yet is content with us alone?’”¹¹⁶

This remarkable passage from Maqdisi’s chapter on Rabi‘a contains several important literary allusions. The first allusion is to *Surat al-Waqi‘a* in the Qur’an (Qur’an 56, “The Cataclysmic Event”). This *sura* contains some of the best-known Qur’anic descriptions of the rewards of heaven that await the righteous and the punishments of Hell that await the sinful in the Hereafter. In the passage, Maqdisi makes a pun out of this Qur’anic reference: instead of *sura* with the letter *sin*, meaning, “Qur’anic discourse,” he uses *sura* with the letter *sad*, meaning, “face” or “image.” In doing so, he portrays Rabi‘a as the “face” or symbolic image of *Surat al-Waqi‘a*. In his reading, the “cataclysmic event” referred to by the Qur’an becomes the mystical revelation of Divine Reality. Another literary allusion in the passage is to the cave on Mount Thawr near Mecca, where the Prophet Muhammad and his Companion Abu Bakr hid for three days during their flight from Mecca to Medina. In popular accounts of this story, the Prophet tells Abu Bakr not to fear that their pursuers will

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 178.

discover them, for “God is with us.”¹¹⁷ For Maqdisi, the point of this story is that one who trusts in the Divine Beloved is never alone; whether in solitude or in a crowd, God is always present.

However, along with these Islamic literary allusions, the passage also contains other literary allusions, which evoke the Greek philosopher Plato as much as they evoke the Qur’an or the Prophet Muhammad. One indication of Platonic influence can be seen in Maqdisi’s conflation of love-as-affection (*mahabba*) with love-as-desire (*‘ishq*). As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the original connotation of spiritual love in early Islam was affection, which corresponds to the Arabic terms *hubb* and *mahabba*. Only later was spiritual love expressed as *‘ishq*, which connotes mournful longing or desire. In Plato’s *Dialogues*, the Greek term *eros*, which connotes physical desire, was primarily used for the concept of Love as a principle. Because the term *‘ishq* began to appear as a synonym for *mahabba* in Islamic texts around the same time as Greek philosophical texts were first being translated into Arabic, some scholars have suggested that *‘ishq* originally entered into Islamic discourse as the Arabic translation of *eros*.¹¹⁸ According to some other scholars, the Abbasid inquisition of Baghdad Sufis in 885 CE, which resulted in the blacklisting or imprisonment of many of the most prominent early mystics of that time, was due to their use of the term *‘ishq* to discuss the divine–human relationship. During this inquisition, Sufis were accused

117 This popular version of the story of the cave does not appear in *Sirat Rasul Allah* (*Biography of the Messenger of God*) by Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 768 CE) or in the later recension of this work by Ibn Hisham (d. ca. 833 CE). See Arnold Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1970 reprint of 1955 first edition), pp. 224–5. Many Muslims believe that Sura 29 of the Qur’an, *al-‘Ankabut* (*The Spider*), refers to a spider’s web that hid the Prophet and Abu Bakr from their pursuers by being stretched across the mouth of the cave. However, the title of the *sura* actually refers to the vain hopes of those who take worldly powers instead of God for protection. These hopes are likened to the thinness of a spider’s web (Qur’an 29:41).

118 See, for example, Bell, *A Treatise on Mystical Love*, who uses the construct “*‘ishq* (eros)” in his translation of Daylami’s *‘Atf al-alif*. Richard Walzer also draws a contrast between the terms *‘ishq* and *eros* (Gr. “love-as-desire”) and *mahabba* and *philia* (Gr. “love-as-affection”). Walzer attributes the use of *‘ishq* in Sufi works and Islamic Love treatises to the influence of the Arabic translation of the sixth book of Plotinus’ *Enneads* (Ar. *Uthulujiya Aristatalis*), which deals in part with the concept of divine love. See idem, “Commentary” to Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State* (*Mabadi’ ara’ ahl al-madinah al-jadilah*), ed. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1998 reprint of 1985 Oxford University Press original), p. 352.

of advocating love between human beings and God and condoning sexual misconduct.¹¹⁹

Maqdisi's "Description of Rabi'ā's Spiritual State" contains other examples of the influence of Plato as well. For example, Rabi'ā's personification of Love as a great feminine ruler may allude to Plato's personification of Love as the goddess Aphrodite or to Phaedrus' description of Love as a "mighty god" in the *Symposium*.¹²⁰ In addition, Maqdisi's description of Love as a paradox recalls Plato's discussion of the spirit of Love in the *Symposium*, which he describes as occupying a liminal space between the human and divine realms.¹²¹ Other possible echoes of the *Symposium* can be found in Rabi'ā's statement about the harmony of souls that Love seeks to create. This brings to mind Eryximachus' description of Love in the *Symposium* as the creator of harmony among the elements.¹²² Maqdisi's depiction of the lover as the Child of Desire and Awe brings to mind another mythological part of the *Symposium*, where Eros is portrayed as the Child of Poverty and Plenty.¹²³ Another possible allusion to Plato is in the passage where Jealousy cries out from "inside the cave" and asks, "Who is this infatuated and anxious woman who removes the veil of contentment and yet is content with us alone?" This statement brings to mind the Myth of the Cave in Book VII of Plato's *Republic* and the figure of the priestess Diotima of Mantinea, who teaches the higher mysteries of Love to Socrates in the *Symposium*.¹²⁴

Clearly, there seem to be a number of allusions to Plato's *Symposium* in Maqdisi's "Description of Rabi'ā's Spiritual State." Might this allow us to suggest that Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya was for Maqdisi a sort of "Muslim Diotima?" If so, then it might be possible to find further traces of Plato's *Symposium* in other Sufis' descriptions of Rabi'ā's teachings on Love. Although she does not discuss this subject directly, the same thought appears to have occurred to Margaret Smith, for she includes a passage from Plato's *Symposium* in the chapter on Love mysticism in *Rabi'ā the Mystic*.¹²⁵ She also makes a statement

119 See, for example, Khalil, "Abu Talib al-Makki and *The Nourishment of Hearts*," pp. 5–6.

120 Plato, *The Symposium*, in *The Dialogues of Plato in Four Volumes*, ed. B. Jowett (Boston and New York: The Jefferson Press, 1871), vol. 1, p. 473 (178a).

121 See Louis A. Ruprecht Jr., *Symposia: Plato, the Erotic, and Moral Value* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), pp. 48–57, and Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 495 (202c–203a).

122 Plato, *The Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 481 (187a–187c).

123 Ibid., pp. 495–6 (203b–203e).

124 On Diotima of Mantinea, see *ibid.*, p. 494 (201d); on the Myth of the Cave, see Plato, *The Republic*, in Jowett, vol. 2, pp. 841–7 (514a–519c).

125 Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), p. 119 and (Rainbow Bridge), pp. 94–5.

that would not make sense unless she were thinking of a comparison between Rabi'a and the figure of Diotima in the *Symposium*: "[Plato] makes Diotima of Mantinea set forth the doctrine of love leading to the beatific vision, and foreshadow the ideals of the mystics of all creeds who were to come after her, and who were to seek the way to God through love."¹²⁶

As Plato describes her, Diotima of Mantinea was "a wise woman in [Love] and many other branches of knowledge."¹²⁷ The Sufi Abu Talib al-Makki makes a similar comment about Rabi'a when he introduces her in *Qut al-qulub*. Makki's book is the earliest Sufi treatise to employ the trope of Rabi'a the Lover extensively. He states, "[Rabi'a] was noted for her expertise in the doctrine of Love" (*idh kana laha fi-l-mahabba qadama sidqin*).¹²⁸ Plato also describes Diotima as a religious sage and teacher, who initiated male students into the truth that lies behind the sacred mysteries. The same could be said for the figure of Rabi'a the Teacher, discussed in Chapter 1. Another important similarity between the literary depictions of Diotima and Rabi'a, as Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan have observed about Diotima, is that both figures are portrayed as "a dialectical image, not thrice removed from the original, but a paradigm herself through which one may see the truth she represents and of which she speaks."¹²⁹ The Greek word for "image" is *ikon* (Ar. *sura*, "face," "form," or "image") and both Diotima and Rabi'a have come down to us through history as literary and cultural icons whose significance transcends the limitations of time and space.

Despite these important similarities, however, the problem with thinking of Rabi'a as a Muslim Diotima is that no conclusive evidence yet exists that Muslims were acquainted with Plato's *Symposium* in detail before the modern period. According to the historian of Islamic philosophy Dimitri Gutas, "Plato's *Symposion* (*sic*) was very little known in the medieval Arab world. As far as it can be ascertained, no direct translation of the full Greek text was ever made; the Arab bibliographers say nothing on the subject, and no verbatim quotations that might derive from such a translation have ever been recovered."¹³⁰ Gutas characterizes the *Symposium* as an "incognito

126 Ibid. (Oneworld), p. 120 and (Rainbow Bridge), p. 95.

127 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 494 (201d).

128 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 95. The phrase, *qadama sidqin*, comes from Qur'an, 10:2 and literally means "sure-footedness."

129 Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and Myth in the Symposium* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 115.

130 Dimitri Gutas, "Plato's *Symposion* in the Arabic Tradition," in idem, *Greek Philosophers in the Arabic Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Variation, 2000), IV, p. 36.

presence” in Islamic thought, and claims that Muslims first came to know about it either through a paraphrase by the Arab philosopher Abu Ya'qub al-Kindi (d. 866 CE) or through “gnomic fragments current in Graeco-Arabic wisdom literature.”¹³¹ Indirect evidence to support Gutas's contention can be found in the fact that most of the extant allusions to the *Symposium* in medieval Islamic literature discuss theories that Plato rejects in this work, such as the myth of Aristophanes that souls were originally created round or that Love consists of the soul's search for completeness by finding its missing half.¹³² Nowhere does one find Diotima mentioned by name, nor does one find detailed references to her teaching the higher states of Love, which is the real message of the *Symposium*.

However, as the historian of Islamic philosophy John Walbridge has noted in another context, one can respond to Gutas's skepticism about the existence of an Arabic *Symposium* with a different but equally true observation: “There is no unambiguous evidence of a complete Arabic translation of *any* Platonic dialogue before modern times.”¹³³ In other words, if the existence of a complete premodern Arabic translation of Plato's *Symposium* is the main criterion by which to consider the influence of this text on Islamic thought, then the argument used by Gutas to dismiss the influence of the *Symposium* can be applied to every other dialogue of Plato as well.¹³⁴ Clearly, this would be absurd. Examples of the influence of Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* are too numerous to mention and major Islamic philosophical works have been based on Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. Furthermore, as Walbridge points out, it is impossible to prove a negative; the lack of mention of a full translation of the *Symposium* in extant Arabic sources does not necessarily mean that such a translation never existed.¹³⁵

131 Ibid., pp. 37–8.

132 See Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, pp. 483–4 (190e–191e). Extant references to the myth of Aristophanes first appear in Arabic literature in the late ninth and early tenth centuries CE. See, for example, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Dawud al-Isfahani (d. 910 CE), *al-Nisfal-awwal min Kitab al-zahra*, ed. Louis Nichol Al Bouhaymi and Ibrahim 'Abd al-Fattah Tuqan (Beirut: Jesuit Printing House, 1932), p. 15.

133 John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 88; emphasis added.

134 Franz Rosenthal went so far as to doubt that any complete dialogue of Plato would ever be found in medieval Arabic sources. This was because of the reliance, going back to late antiquity, on paraphrases of Plato's works by Galen, Themistius, and other Neoplatonic writers. See idem, “On the Knowledge of Plato's Philosophy in the Islamic World,” *Islamic Culture*, XIV (4), 1940, pp. 393 and 395.

135 Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*, On the Knowledge of Plato 88.

Indeed, there is evidence that an Arabic translation or at least a fairly detailed paraphrase of Plato's *Symposium* existed in the early Abbasid period. Ihsan Abbas (1920–2003), the noted Palestinian scholar of medieval Arabic literature, argued that Plato's *Symposium* was in fact translated into Arabic and was known in the Abbasid capital of Baghdad by the end of the second century AH (eighth century CE).¹³⁶ If this were true, then knowledge of the *Symposium* in Arabic would date to around the time of Rabi'a's death in 801 CE. Thus, it is not far-fetched to suggest that this work might have provided the rhetorical model for the Sufi depiction of Rabi'a as the Muslim Diotima.

Abbas bases his argument for an Arabic translation of the *Symposium* on a chapter in *Muruj al-dhahab* (*The Pastures of Gold*) by the Abbasid-era historian 'Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'udi (d. 958 CE). This chapter contains the account of an intellectual salon (*majlis*) on the subject of Love that was organized by the Abbasid vizier Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki (d. 805 CE). According to Abbas, the very institution of the *majlis* (literally, "sitting" or "assembly") in medieval Islamic society was based on the model of the symposium, which became known in the Middle East through the influence of Hellenism.¹³⁷ Historical sources mention the existence of elite Arabic literary salons as far back as the second half of the Umayyad period. Sukayna bint al-Husayn (d. 738 CE), the great-granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, was famous for hosting such salons.¹³⁸ According to Samer M. Ali, a contemporary expert on the medieval Arabic literary salon, the concept of the intellectual *majlis* was introduced into Muslim elite circles by Nestorian Christian physicians from the Sassanian learning center of Gondishapur, located near present-day Dezful in Iranian Khuzestan.¹³⁹ Ihsan Abbas believed that the Barmakid gathering mentioned by Mas'udi was mainly devoted to Plato's *Symposium*. This is because nearly all of the references to the subject matter of the *majlis* in *Muruj al-dhahab* are paraphrases of Plato's text.¹⁴⁰

136 Ihsan Abbas, Introduction to Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi, *Tawq al-hamama fi-l-ulfa wa-l-alaf*, ed. Ihsan Abbas (Sousse, Tunisia: Dar al-Ma'arif li-l-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, reprint of 1980 first edition, n.d.), p. 9.

137 Ibid.

138 See Amira El Zein, "Love Discourse in Hijazi Society under the Umayyads: A Study in Class and Gender," in *Gulf Women*, ed. Sonbol, p. 117–19.

139 Samer M. Ali, "Literary Salons: From Ancient *Symposion* to Arabic *Mujalasat*," in idem, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), pp. 13–32.

140 Abbas, Introduction to Ibn Hazm, *Tawq al-hamama*, p. 11.

Whether or not Abbas was correct to conclude that the Barmakid *majlis* was based on Plato's *Symposium*, Mas'udi's discussion of this gathering refutes Gutas's contention that the philosopher Kindi first introduced the *Symposium* to the Muslim world. Since Kindi flourished more than a generation after this event took place, it is not likely that he composed the first Arabic paraphrase of the *Symposium*. One would have to believe that Mas'udi's account was completely false to reject his references to Plato's *Symposium*. No less than three direct references to the *Symposium* can be found in Mas'udi's description of the Barmakid *majlis*. The clearest example is a paraphrase of the discourse of Aristophanes:

One of [the guests] said: God created every soul round in the shape of a ball. Then He divided them into portions and made every body out of one half. Therefore, when a body encounters the body that was the half that was originally cut away from it, love-as-desire (*'ishq*) occurs by necessity between the two of them because of their primordial relationship.¹⁴¹

Mas'udi also reproduces a two-part statement that he attributes to Plato (*Aflatun*) by name: "I do not know what Love (*hawa*, another Arabic term for love-as-desire) is, other than an excess of passion. Also, Love is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy."¹⁴² This statement recalls Diotima's teaching to Socrates in the *Symposium*, in which she states that Love is a spirit that is neither fair nor foul.¹⁴³

The best evidence for the existence of a translation or major paraphrase of Plato's *Symposium* in Mas'udi's description of the Barmakid *majlis* is in the paragraph after the paraphrase of the statement of Aristophanes quoted above. The opening sentence of this paragraph states, "Those who are responsible for this discourse (*maqala*) have made other statements that expand on the subject we have just discussed."¹⁴⁴ Ihsan Abbas interprets this statement as alluding to the existence of a translation or at least an extensive paraphrase of the *Symposium*. Although Abbas sometimes seems to draw hasty conclusions

141 Abu al-Husayn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn b. 'Ali al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-dhahab wa ma'adin al-jawhar*, ed. Mufid Muhammad Qumayha (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1985), vol. 3, p. 457.

142 Ibid., p. 458; The Greek physician Hippocrates (*Buqrat*) is also quoted by Mas'udi as saying that Love is the mingling of two souls (p. 456).

143 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 498 (206b).

144 Mas'udi, *Muruj al-dhahab*, vol. 3, p. 457.

from the available evidence, this statement by Mas'udi seems to confirm that some of the topics covered in the *Symposium* were subjects of discussion and debate in the early Abbasid period. His work *Muruj al-dhahab* was published about fifty years before Abu Talib al-Makki, who also resided in Baghdad, expanded on the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover in *Qut al-qulub*. Thus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Makki, who was well acquainted with the literary arts of his day, would have had at least a second-hand knowledge of Plato's *Symposium*.

Many scholars, both inside and outside the Muslim world, have discussed the influence of Neo-Platonism on Sufi mysticism. It is not necessary to repeat these observations here. However, in light of the present discussion it is worth suggesting that this emphasis on Neo-Platonism may have obscured the influence of Plato's works on the Sufi tradition. Now that it can be argued that the contents of the *Symposium* were better known in the period after Rabi'ā's death than Gutas and other skeptics have assumed, it becomes possible to suggest parallels between Plato's depiction of Diotima and the depiction of Rabi'ā the Lover in Sufi literature. As we shall see below, the similarities between the literary depictions of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* and the depictions of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya in Makki's *Qut al-qulub* are significant enough to make their chance occurrence unlikely.¹⁴⁵

However, it must be conceded that the figure of "Rabi'ā the Muslim Diotima" is likely to always be an "incognito presence" in Sufi literature. Gutas's observation about the *Symposium* applies quite well in this latter case. Even if a medieval Arabic translation of Plato's *Symposium* were eventually to be found, we are still not likely to find explicit references to it or to Diotima in Sufi works. On the contrary, because Sufism has been criticized as heretical for so much of its history, Sufi authors have tended to downplay non-Muslim sources in their writings. Until now, no explicit reference to Diotima has been found in any Sufi text, nor is the modern researcher likely to find one. However, the parallels between Diotima and Rabi'ā as iconic women teachers

145 Traces of Plato's *Symposium* can be found in early Christian texts too. Elizabeth A. Clark has similarly identified traces of Diotima in two of Gregory of Nyssa's fourth-century CE works, *Life of Macrina* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 178–9. These works from the Capadocian tradition of Christian hagiography would also have been available in Iraq in the Abbasid period. If it turns out that Gutas is correct, and that no Arabic translation or major paraphrase of Plato's *Symposium* ever existed, then Christian works such as these might have provided the Diotima trope—"at six degrees of separation," so to speak—for medieval Sufi writers.

of men are too significant to overlook, and they have reappeared over and over again in Sufi depictions of Rabi'ā the Lover from the tenth century CE through modern times.

b. Rabi'ā the Lover in Abu Talib al-Makki's Qut al-Qulub

Given the importance of Makki's *Qut al-qulub* to the development of the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover, it should not be a surprise to find that several points of comparison can be found between Plato's portrayal of Diotima of Mantinea and Makki's portrayal of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. What is more surprising, however, given the importance of *Qut al-qulub* to Sufi theology, is the lack of significant modern studies devoted to this work. Most studies of Makki's book in European languages are article-length only and barely scratch the surface of its contents. Even the recent monograph on *Qut al-qulub* by the Japanese scholar Saeko Yazaki is a very thin volume. It consists of a short biography of Makki, a summary of the section of the book on the Sufi concept of the heart, and notes on later Muslim writers who were influenced by Makki.¹⁴⁶ This treatment does not give *Qut al-qulub* the attention it deserves as one of the most important early treatises on Sufism.

The main topics discussed in Makki's book are revealed in the title: *Qut al-qulub fi mu'amalat al-Mahbub wa wasf tariq al-murid ila maqam al-tawhid* (*The Nourishment of Hearts Through the Encounter with the Beloved and Description of the Way of the Seeker to the Station of Divine Unity*). We can see from the title that Makki intended the work to be a Sufi manual and that its principal aim was to show the seeker the way to the spiritual realization of divine unity. The narrative of the book focuses most of its attention on three subjects: the Sufi concept of the heart, the mystical experience of encounter with God the Beloved, and the theological concept of oneness or divine unity (*tawhid*). The key to the work as a whole is hidden in the middle of its title: "The Encounter with the Beloved." Makki's discussion of this experience is the *tertium quid* of his argument for knowledge of divine unity. Logically, it is the "third element" that connects the concept of the heart, which is known by most people only conventionally but not spiritually, with the concept of divine oneness, which is also known conventionally, through the exoteric

¹⁴⁶ Saeko Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abu Talib al-Makki: The Role of the Heart* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

doctrines of Islam.¹⁴⁷ The Sufi's mystical encounter with the Beloved on the path of Love awakens the heart of the seeker to the true inner meaning of the theological concept of divine oneness.

The importance of the heart in Makki's approach to Sufism is that it is the site of the soul's encounter with the Beloved. The intimate knowledge of God in His oneness is the fruit of this encounter. Because the Sufi seeks spiritual knowledge both outwardly and inwardly, Makki begins his book with a discussion of outward spiritual practices, such as prayer and invocation, and then moves on to more specialized forms of devotion, such as the practices associated with asceticism. The narrative then turns to the inner dimensions of Sufi practice and the spiritual and psychological states and stations through which the seeker must pass as she begins to encounter the Beloved in her heart. The discussion of the remaining outward practices of Islam are reserved for the final section of the book, for only when the seeker has developed herself spiritually can she understand the deeper meaning of required religious behaviors. Symbolically, the experience of reading *Qut al-qulub* as a Sufi text is designed to follow the ancient literary trope of the soul's quest or journey into itself in order to find enlightenment. The seeker's journey starts first in the outside world (the *via activa*); next it goes deep into the interior world in order to plumb the mine of secrets (the *via contemplativa*); finally, the seeker returns in a more enlightened state to the world of conventional reality. This trope has deep roots in Hellenistic antiquity, and can be found in Plato's Parable of the Cave, The Orphic Mysteries, and Hermetic texts like the Emerald Tablet. By implication, it would also have applied to Diotima's teaching of Socrates in the *Symposium*.

For Makki, the spiritual path that the seeker travels on her way to the encounter with the Beloved culminates in the Station of Certainty (*maqam al-yaqin*). To convey to the reader that this station is the final stage of the seeker's quest, he devotes nearly one-fourth of *Qut al-qulub* (253 pages in the latest edition) to its discussion. It is also significant that the discussion of this station is located in the middle of the text. In other words, it is the "heart" of the narrative, and just as the heart is situated in the middle of the human body, Makki's discussion of the Station of Certainty is situated in the middle of his "body of work." In rhetorical terms, the placement of this discussion

147 The Latin term *tertium quid* (Gr. *trítōn ti*, "third thing"), is a concept of logic whose textual origin can itself be found in the works of Plato. In the *Sophist* Plato states, "Being must therefore be a *tertium quid*, apart from motion and rest, not the sum total of those two items." See George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: John Murray, 1888), vol. 2, p. 418.

serves as another *tertium quid*. Located in the human heart (the center of the body), and also being the “heart” of Makki’s narrative, the Station of Certainty is the goal of the Sufi path and the site of the soul’s spiritual transformation through the encounter with God.

Because the narrative structure of *Qut al-qulub* follows the model of a spiritual journey or quest, the seeker cannot reach the Station of Certainty all at once, as in a flash of insight. Instead, she must progress through nine spiritual and psychological states (*ahwal*) on the way to the Beloved, until she finally reaches her goal. These states are likened to way stations or caravanserais on the *via contemplativa*, the inner part of the quest for the secret of Divine Unity. Each of these stations must be experienced separately and the wisdom found within them must be learned fully before certainty can be attained. Makki identifies these spiritual and psychological states as follows:

- (1) Repentance (*tawba*)
- (2) Patience (*sabr*)
- (3) Thankfulness (*shukr*)
- (4) Hope (*raja'*)
- (5) Fear (*khawf*)
- (6) Renunciation (*zuhd*)
- (7) Complete Trust in God (*tawakkul*)
- (8) Satisfaction with God’s Will (*rida'*)
- (9) Love (*mahabba*).

As the ninth and final state, Love is the “peak experience” of the self’s Encounter with God. Makki describes this as the most exalted state in the Station of Certainty, the most advanced way station on the journey to God, and the final stop on the Sufi Way. Here one experiences “the Love of the spiritual elites (*mahabbat al-khusus*) and the Love of the Beloved (*mahabbat al-mahbub*).”¹⁴⁸

Most of Makki’s references to Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya in *Qut al-qulub* are contained in his discussions of the states of Satisfaction (*rida'*) and Love (*mahabba*), the two highest states in the Station of Certainty. By situating his references to Rabi’ā the Lover at the end of his discussion of these stations, he indicates to the reader that she stands for or symbolizes the culmination of the Sufi way and is the personification of divine wisdom (*hikma*). He informs

¹⁴⁸ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 1, p. 317.

the reader that Rabi'ā earned God's special regard through her perfection of Love as a spiritual practice and her intimate knowledge of Divine Unity. When Makki first introduces Rabi'ā as "one of the lovers" (*wa kanat ihda al-muhibbin*), this is not an offhand or casual remark.¹⁴⁹ This description identifies her as a paragon of intimate knowledge of God. Like the priestess Diotima of Plato's *Symposium*, she is uniquely qualified through her combination of knowledge and experience to teach others about the spiritual practice of Love and the reality of the theological concept of Divine Unity.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima is similarly described as teaching the way of "True Love." Also like Rabi'ā, she is the teacher of the "True Order" of spiritual ascent that leads to the mystical vision of "true divine beauty. . . pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality."¹⁵⁰ Like Rabi'ā the Teacher, her lessons go directly to the heart of the matter by stripping away the veils of rhetoric that hide the truth and by revealing its inner meaning. In *Qut al-qulub*, Makki describes Rabi'ā as having "truly experienced the ecstasy of the lovers" (*wajd al-muhibbin al-muhiqqin*).¹⁵¹ By using the Arabic term *muhiqq* ("one who has fully actualized a teaching or a doctrine"), he informs the reader that Rabi'ā is a master practitioner of the Sufi doctrine of Love. Like Diotima for Plato, she is also the personification of divine wisdom (Ar. *hikma*, Gr. *Sophia*). As we shall see in Chapter 5, for the Persian Sufi Farid al-Din al-'Attar, whose treatment of Rabi'ā two centuries later was to turn Makki's trope of Rabi'ā the Lover into a literary icon, her wisdom even transcends the limitations of identity and gender: "In unity, how can your existence and mine remain, much less 'man' and 'woman'?"¹⁵²

In their study of the rhetoric of Plato's *Symposium*, Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan highlight the importance of dialectical cross-examination as Diotima's method of teaching.¹⁵³ Jahiz noted the same characteristic of Rabi'ā when he described her as a "Person of *Bayan*" in *Kitab al-bayan wa-l-tabayin*. For Jahiz, and for the Sufi Sulami, the use of this pedagogical method was a sign of the true teacher and sage. In the *Symposium*, Plato suggests that it was Diotima who taught Socrates the dialectical method of inquiry for which he became famous. In Sulami's Book of Sufi Women, Sufyan al-Thawri says about Rabi'ā to his companion, "Take me to my

149 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 94.

150 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 508 (211e).

151 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 95.

152 Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 155, and 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya'*, p. 41.

153 Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic at Play*, p. 108.

mentor. For when I am apart from her, I can find no solace.”¹⁵⁴ Socrates calls Diotima his “instructress” in the *Symposium*.¹⁵⁵ The Arabic term *mu’addiba*, which Thawri uses to describe Rabi’ā as his mentor, can also be translated as “instructress.” As discussed at length in Chapter 1, this term refers to *ta’dib*, a type of training that made use of both dialectical and aphoristic methods. Diotima’s method of teaching was based on the cultivation of knowledge through dialectical questioning. This process was meant to instill mystical knowledge, social virtues, righteousness, and wisdom. Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya also instilled these characteristics through her practice of *ta’dib*. According to Plato, such methods are important for training disciples in the spiritual life because they are the pedagogical methods used by Love itself.¹⁵⁶

Plato’s account of Socrates’ encounter with Diotima introduces the reader of the *Symposium* to a mystical doctrine of Love. This is contrasted with the other theories of Love that Plato presents in this work, which are mythological, medical, or ethical in nature.¹⁵⁷ Diotima speaks of Love as possessing lesser and greater mysteries, and, like Makki in *Qut al-qulub*, Plato provides a doctrinal ladder by which one can ascend conceptually to the higher states of the mysteries.¹⁵⁸ Makki’s discussion of Rabi’ā the Lover similarly stresses Rabi’ā’s role as a teacher who initiates her disciples into the mysteries of Love. Medieval Islamic works on Love borrowed thematic elements from Greek philosophical and medical texts as well as from the cultural traditions of the Arabs, and like Plato, discussed medical, ethical, and even mythological theories of Love.¹⁵⁹ Makki takes great pains to convince his readers that “the Love that comes from God” (*al-mahabba min Allah*) is not like other kinds of love. These other kinds of love arise from personal needs. Ordinary types of love, he states, arise from seven possible causes: (1) a natural inclination; (2) the desire for sexual procreation; (3) self-interest; (4) an inherited trait or tendency; (5) the instinct of lust; (6) the need for

154 R. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 76.

155 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 494 (201d).

156 On the “Science of Beauty,” see *ibid.*, pp. 502–3 (211b): “He who is under the influence of true love rising upward from these, begins to see that beauty is not far from the end.”

157 Corrigan and Corrigan, *Plato’s Dialectic*, p. 108. Unlike the Corrigans, Pierre Hadot sees no mysticism in Plato’s doctrine of Love (“Platonic love thus is not, properly speaking, a ‘mystical transport.’” Hadot, *Plotinus*, p. 54). In my opinion, Hadot overstates the irrational element in the concept of mysticism. This is the only way that one could fail to see Plato’s doctrine of higher love as mystical.

158 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, pp. 502–3 (211d).

159 For a discussion of medieval Islamic theories about what today might be called the “pathology” of love, see the chapter on “The Romantic Fool,” in Dols, *Majnun*, pp. 313–48.

compassion; (7) the emotional need to feel close to God.¹⁶⁰ By contrast, the higher Love of God is not sought on the basis of personal needs; instead, it depends on the transcendence of need. The path of self-transcendence starts with transcendence of the World through ascetic renunciation and leads to the transcendence of the more subtle aspects of the ego, as illustrated by the example of Rabi'a's actions and teachings. The selfless longing for God (*shawq*) that motivates the Sufi's search for the higher Love arises out of the renunciation of self-interest (*ithar*) and the desire of the soul for inner peace and tranquility (*sakina*).¹⁶¹

At the end of her part of the *Symposium*, Diotima speaks of the higher Love as a state of peaceful communion, where images of beauty are beheld in their full realities, and where the initiate into the mysteries subsists with Beauty as the "immortal friend of God."¹⁶² In his description of Rabi'a's Love mysticism in *Qut al-qulub*, Makki says much the same thing. Similarly to Plato, he mentions that the "friends of God" (*awliya' Allah*) and "God's intimates" (*al-muqarrabun*) are to be found in the Station of Certainty. He also describes their abode in the Gardens of the Righteous, where the fruits of Love's mysteries are brought together, just as knowledge and action are combined in the Qur'an and Sufi doctrine. Also like Plato in the *Symposium*, Makki describes the state of higher Love as a visionary experience (*ru'ya*), a view of Certainty which only those who have attained to divine intimacy can behold: "Only the intimates shall behold it" (*yashhaduhu al-muqarrabun*).¹⁶³

In the *Symposium*, Plato demonstrates that he conceives of Love as a way of knowledge by announcing at the beginning of the dialogue that Diotima will speak of "a *logos* pertaining to Love."¹⁶⁴ The Greek word *logos*, like the Arabic word *kalima*, can mean "word," "discourse," "reason," or "knowledge," depending on the context. In her discourse in the *Symposium*, Diotima addresses the subject of knowledge by asking Socrates to define the mean or middle point between ignorance and wisdom. The correct answer to this question, "right opinion" (*ortho-doxa*, conventional knowledge or religion), cannot be called true knowledge because it is based more on opinion than

160 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 86.

161 Ibid., p. 91.

162 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 503 (211c).

163 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, pp. 93–4; the original of this phrase is in Qur'an, 83:21.

164 Corrigan and Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic*, p. 114.

on reason. However, it is not complete ignorance either, because it contains part of the truth.¹⁶⁵

The tropes of Rabi'ā the Teacher and Rabi'ā the Lover similarly depend on the idea that true knowledge transcends both religious dogma and tradition. As a teacher of wisdom (*hikma*), Rabi'ā's knowledge, like Diotima's, must go beyond both ordinary belief or opinion (Ar. *zann*, Gr. *dogma*) and orthodox creed or belief (Ar. *'aqida*, Gr. *doxa*). For Plato, the key to achieving true knowledge through Love is the practice of remembrance, for as Diotima says, knowledge must be renewed periodically by remembrance or else it is lost.¹⁶⁶ The greatest mysteries of both Love and knowledge are attained through the practice of remembrance. A paradox of the contemplation of Absolute Beauty, which is the goal of the initiatory path for Plato, is that the knowledge of Beauty consists in the recollection of what one already knows. In Sufism as well, the practice of remembrance—both as a spiritual practice (*dhikr*) and as a form of recollection (*tadhakkur* or *tafakkur*)—is fundamental to the pursuit of knowledge. For Makki, Love and knowledge are two sides of the same coin. Because of this correspondence, just as the gnostics or “knowers” of God (*al-'arifin*) are ranked according to the extent of their knowledge, so too the Lovers of God (*al-muhibbin*) are ranked according to the extent of their knowledge. At the highest stage, the different approaches to knowledge merge into one. Makki describes the relationship between Love and knowledge in the following way: “The elite knowers of God (*khusus al-'arifin*) practice a special kind of Love (*khassat al-mahabba*), whereas the ordinary knowers of God practice an ordinary kind of love (*wali-'umumihim 'umum al-mahabba*).”¹⁶⁷ However, the seeker can only reach the Station of Certainty if her knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*) is confirmed by her knowledge of Love (*mahabba*).

Makki states that the knowledge embodied by Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya is based on the clarity of vision that Love provides through the “Eye of Certainty” (*mushahadat 'ayn al-yaqin*). He contrasts this with the conventional attainment of knowledge by means of “tradition or confirmed hearsay” (*khabar wa sam' tasdiq*). Switching from his own voice to that of Rabi'ā, he summarizes her encounter with the Beloved in the Station of Certainty in words that could just as well have been spoken by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*: “My love for you is through a vision that brought me closer to you, made

165 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 494 (201d).

166 Ibid., p. 500 (208a).

167 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 86.

me hurry toward you, preoccupied me with you, and cut me off from everything other than you. Before that, I had scattered passions, but when I truly witnessed you, all of my passions merged into one and you became the entirety of the heart and the totality of Love” (*fa-sirta anta kulliyata al-qalb wa jumlat al-mahabbat*).¹⁶⁸

IV. RABI‘A THE LOVE POET

The statement on Love that Makki attributes to Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya is reminiscent of the end of the section on Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, where she states: “What if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality, and all the colors and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty divine and simple, and bringing into being and educating true creations of virtue and not idols only?”¹⁶⁹ In this statement Diotima speaks of two loves—a passionate love that corresponds to the lesser mysteries of love, and a higher love of the remembrance and contemplation of divine beauty that corresponds to the “greater and more hidden mysteries.” The concept of two loves is a key part of Diotima’s teaching on Love in the *Symposium*. Although the lesser mysteries of Love are accessible to anyone with understanding, the bridge that leads to the greater mysteries of Love, “which are the crown of these,” is crossed by only a few. A similar concept of two loves is also central to Rabi‘a’s Love theory as portrayed in Sufi narratives from Makki’s time to the present. Theologically, this notion is linked to the famous verse of the Qur’an, which states, “God did not create two hearts for man in his breast” (Qur’an 33:4). As a literary trope, it most famously appears in the “Poem of the Two Loves,” which was first attributed to Rabi‘a by Abu Talib al-Makki.

a. *The Poem of the Two Loves*

Makki introduces the final section of his discussion of Love in *Qut al-qulub* with a poem that he claims was attributed to Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya “by the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁶⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 503 (211e).

people of Basra and others.”¹⁷⁰ This poem has become known over time as the “Poem of the Two Loves.” Among the sources for its attribution to Rabi’a, Makki cites four respected male ascetics, who have often been associated with Rabi’a in Sufi texts. These are Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778 CE), Hammad ibn Zayd (d. 793 CE), ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd (d. 793–4 CE), and Ja’far ibn Sulayman ad-Dab’i (d. 794–5 CE).¹⁷¹ As noted in Chapter 1, these figures lend credibility to Makki’s attribution of the poem to Rabi’a because all of them are associated with the city of Basra and all of them lived in Rabi’a’s time. However, no extant source prior to Makki mentions either Rabi’a or any of these individuals in connection with this poem. At the present time, it is impossible to determine who actually composed the Poem of the Two Loves. Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (d. 990 CE), writing a short time before Makki in the Central Asian city of Merv, reproduces a slightly different version of the poem in his treatise *al-Ta’arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf* (*Understanding the Doctrines of the Sufis*). Unlike Makki, however, he does not attribute the poem to Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya. He only states, “One of [the Sufis] recited [it].”¹⁷²

Because of the uncertainty about its origins, the Poem of the Two Loves cannot be attributed conclusively to Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya. The best one can say is that it belongs to the tradition of Sufism as a whole as much as to Rabi’a herself.¹⁷³ Makki’s attribution of this poem to Rabi’a and his commentary on it were largely responsible for the notoriety it was to attain as part of the Rabi’a myth. Today it is one of the most famous poems of the Sufi tradition. A Google search of the phrase, “The Poem of the Two Loves by Rabi’a,” yields 36,300 web entries. This is not far behind “Rumi’s *Masnawi*,” which yields 51,400 web entries. I have translated Makki’s version of the poem below, retaining as much of the literal sense of the Arabic text as possible.

I love you with two loves: a passionate love,
And a love of which only you are worthy.

170 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94.

171 Ibid.

172 See Kalabadhi, *al-Ta’arruf*, p. 80 and Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, p. 103.

173 G.J.H. van Gelder claims to have identified the source of the Poem of the Two Loves in a secular poem of the Abbasid period. See idem, “Rabi’a’s Poem of the Two Kinds of Love: A Mystification?,” in *Verse and the Fair Sex: A Collection of Papers Presented at the 15th Congress of the UAEI*, ed. Frederick de Jong (Utrecht, The Netherlands: 1993), pp. 66–76; cited in Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, p. 31 n. 74.

As for the passionate love,
It has preoccupied me with the remembrance of you beyond all else.

And as for the love of which only you are worthy,
Your parting of the veils allows me to see you.

No praise is mine for either one or the other,
But all praise is yours for this [love] and the other.¹⁷⁴

The Poem of the Two Loves has appeared in many different versions over the past millennium, with some versions differing significantly from others. The different versions of the poem go back to the very origins of its transmission. For example, in the earliest extant version, in Kalabadhi's *al-Ta'arruf*, the second line of the third verse reads, "I do not see the world of existence unless I see you" (*fa-lastu ara al-kawna hatta araka*). In Makki's version, the same line reads, "Your parting of the veils allows me to see you" (*fa-kashfuka li-l-hujubi hatta araka*). Although these two versions seem to convey a similar meaning, their theological implications are quite different.¹⁷⁵ Kalabadhi's, "I do not see the world of existence unless I see you," conveys a pantheistic theology because the poet sees God in the world of existence. The poet either sees the world through God or she sees God in everything. This perspective is problematical for orthodox Muslims, who prefer to keep God and the world ontologically separate. By contrast, Makki's version of the poem is more ambiguous and thus is theologically less problematical. "Your parting of the veils allows me to see you," may be interpreted to mean, "You have enabled me to see you as the cause of all things." This corresponds quite closely to the Qur'anic description of God as the Creator of All Things (Qur'an 13:16). The theological problem of Kalabadhi's pantheistic version of the poem has been a point of contention throughout Islamic history. As recently as 2005, it was discussed as the subject of a *fatwa* by the Qatar Mufti Yusuf al-Qaradawi.¹⁷⁶

Kalabadhi does not attribute the Poem of the Two Loves to Rabi'ah or to any other person, but instead quotes it anonymously. For the most part, he avoids the mention of women, whether Sufi or otherwise, in *Kitab al-ta'arruf*.

174 Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94.

175 See also my discussion of this issue in R. Cornell, "Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah," pp. 294–5.

176 For Qaradawi's *fatwa*, see <http://www.ghrib.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-12042.html> (*Islam Light*).

Rabi'ā is the only Sufi woman whom Kalabadhi mentions by name in his book. Unlike Makki, however, who depicts Rabi'ā as one of the key figures of Sufi Love mysticism, he gives the final word in his chapter on Love to a man, a certain Ibn 'Abd al-Samad, who is the author of two other poems about Love. Kalabadhi's placing of Ibn 'Abd al-Samad and his poems at the end of his chapter on Love lessens the rhetorical impact of the Poem of the Two Loves. To borrow the title of a famous movie by Alfred Hitchcock, one could say that in Kalabadhi's treatment of this poem, "the lady vanishes." Unlike Makki, he obscures the importance of the poem, as well as its attribution to Rabi'ā, within his narrative.

In the twentieth century, the Poem of the Two Loves became famous because of the prominent treatment that Margaret Smith gave to it in her book *Rabi'ā the Mystic*.¹⁷⁷ In 1935, some seven years after the publication of *Rabi'ā the Mystic*, the British Orientalist A.J. Arberry mentioned "Miss M. Smith's" book on Rabi'ā in connection with Kalabadhi's version of the Poem of the Two Loves in his English translation of *Kitab al-ta'arruf*.¹⁷⁸ Ironically, in this work Arberry obscures Smith's voice in a way that parallels Kalabadhi's failure to acknowledge Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya or any other Sufi woman as the author of the poem. For some unknown reason, Arberry chose not to translate the poem himself nor did he account for the textual difference between Kalabadhi's and Makki's versions. Instead, in a footnote, he criticizes Smith's "literal" translation of the poem and states that he will use the "excellent version" of his doctoral advisor, Reynold A. Nicholson. By using Nicholson's translation instead of Smith's, Arberry chose an interpretation of the Poem of the Two Loves that took major liberties with both Kalabadhi's and Makki's versions. Instead of following the Arabic text of either version of the poem closely, Nicholson chose to rhyme the poem in English and then shaped his translation to fit a stereotyped image of Victorian-era poetry. In Nicholson's awkward rendition of the Poem of the Two Loves, which appears in Arberry's translation of Kalabadhi's book, not one but two ladies now vanish. Both Rabi'ā as the possible author, and Margaret Smith, without whom the Poem of the Two Loves would not have been known in the West, are silenced and exiled to a footnote. This makes room for the discordant rhymes of R.A. Nicholson, who had the advantage of being Arberry's doctoral advisor and a famous male authority on Sufism. This example of academic favoritism makes the reference to "selfish love" in his translation particularly ironic.

¹⁷⁷ Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), pp. 126–33 and (Rainbow Bridge), pp. 102–10.

¹⁷⁸ Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, p. 103 n. 1.

Two ways I love Thee; selfishly,
And next, as worthy is of Thee.

'Tis selfish love that I do naught
Save think on Thee with every thought;

'Tis purest love when Thou dost raise
The veil to my adoring gaze.

Not mind the praise in that or this,
Thine is the praise in both, I wis.¹⁷⁹

The tendency to indulge in unethical conduct with regard to the Poem of the Two Loves was not unique to Arberry and Nicholson. Even Margaret Smith's treatment of the poem in *Rabi'a the Mystic* is marred by this problem. In her book, Smith imagines Rabi'a reciting the poem in a scenario that she attributes to Sulami's Book of Sufi Women. However, Sulami does not cite the Poem of the Two Loves in his Book of Sufi Women. Even more, although Smith speculates about its existence, she could not have seen an actual copy of Sulami's book because it was not discovered until after her death.¹⁸⁰ Under these circumstances, one can only conclude that her story of the poem's attribution to Rabi'a and the circumstances of its recitation are false. Smith is also wrong in claiming that Makki states in *Qut al-qulub* that the four male transmitters of the poem were its authors.¹⁸¹ Makki never makes such a claim in his book. Smith also misinterprets Makki's commentary on the poem by paraphrasing it in an anthropomorphic way that does not correspond to the actual Arabic text. As we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6, this use of poetic license to fill in empty spaces in the Rabi'a narrative is an aspect of her myth that has persisted from medieval times to the present. Although this phenomenon is interesting from a literary point of view, it seriously complicates the academic study of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya.

179 Ibid., p. 103.

180 Smith, *Rabi'a* (Oneworld), p. 125 and (Rainbow Bridge), p. 102. Smith assumed incorrectly that Sulami's Book of Sufi Women was a lost portion of his *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*. The Iraqi scholar Mahmud Muhammad al-Tanahi discovered Sulami's Book of Sufi Women in 1991 in the Muhammad ibn Saud University library in Saudi Arabia. It was first published in Arabic in 1993. See Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-Sufiyyat*, ed. Mahmud Muhammad al-Tanahi (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1993).

181 Smith, *Rabi'a* (Oneworld), pp. 125–6 and (Rainbow Bridge), p. 102.

One of the key interpreters of the Poem of the Two Loves in medieval Islam was the Sunni theologian and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). Ghazali drew much material from Makki's *Qut al-qulub* when writing his masterwork, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*). Following Makki, he attributes the Poem of the Two Loves to Rabi'ā in this work and uses it in his discussion of the Sufi's intimate knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*). This discussion appears in Book 36 of the *Ihya'*, "Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment." In this chapter, Ghazali does not use the usual Sufi term, "taste" (*dhawq*), to refer to mystical experience but instead uses the term "pleasure" (*ladhdha*), which is closer to Plato's *Symposium* than to most Sufi discourses.¹⁸² Also like Plato, he portrays the higher form of love—which the poem calls the "love of which only [God] is worthy"—as a peak aesthetic experience, and says that it reflects the divine attributes of Beauty (*jamal*) and Glory (*jadal*).¹⁸³ Ghazali's description of mystical union in this chapter as an act of communion with divine Beauty is also reminiscent of Plato's *Symposium*. It recalls the last part of Diotima's discourse, in which she says to Socrates, "Do you not see that in communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities? For he has hold not of an image, but of a reality; and bringing forth and educating true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may."¹⁸⁴ Although Ghazali would not call the fully realized "knower of God" immortal as Plato does, he would certainly agree with Plato in referring to him as a "friend of God" (Ar. *wali Allah*).

Sufi writers after Ghazali who attributed the Poem of the Two Loves to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya frequently reproduced his discussion of the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover in the *Ihya'*. This was also often the case for non-Sufi writers who were influenced by Ghazali. For example, the Andalusian vizier and essayist Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khatib (d. 1374 CE) paraphrases Ghazali's comments in Book 36 of the *Ihya'* in his treatise on Love, *Rawdat al-ta'rif bi-l-hubb al-sharif* (*The Garden of Knowledge of the Noble Love*). However, Ibn al-Khatib only reproduces the first verse of the Poem of the Two Loves, retaining the Platonic trope of two loves but rejecting its mystical theology.¹⁸⁵

182 See Eric Ormsby's translation in Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment*, pp. 51–5.

183 Ghazali, *Ihya'*, vol. 4, pp. 310–11 and Ghazali-Ormsby, *Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment*, p. 52.

184 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 503 (212c).

185 Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, *Rawdat al-ta'rif bi-l-hubb al-sharif*, ed. 'Abd al-Qadir Ahmad 'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, n. d.), p. 427.

By contrast, the full text of the poem, along with Ghazali's comments on it, were reproduced by the Yemeni Sufi Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi (d. 1790 CE) in his commentary on Ghazali's *Ihya'*.¹⁸⁶ In this work, Zabidi not only reproduces both Makki's and Ghazali's commentaries on the poem but also adds background narratives as well, such as the stories of marriage proposals to Rabi'a by 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd and the governor of Basra.

As we have already seen in the case of Kalabadhi's *Kitab al-ta'arruf*, a second Sufi tradition exists that does not attribute the Poem of the Two Loves to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Unlike the Ghazalian tradition, this alternate tradition does not seem to have a single origin. Although Kalabadhi's discussion of the Poem of the Two Loves is the earliest example of this tradition that currently exists, it is seldom cited in subsequent versions. For example, Muhammad al-Nisaburi, writing only a few decades after Kalabadhi, mentions the Poem of the Two Loves in *'Uqala' al-majanin*. In this work, he does not mention Kalabadhi but cites as his source for the poem the Sufi of Baghdad, Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (d. 910 CE). In what is presented as the verbatim account of an oral tradition, Junayd states that the poem was composed by a *shaykh* that he met in a hospital in Egypt. We are not told whether the term, *shaykh*, refers to an old man, a Sufi master, or a doctor. However, it is clear that the hospital is an asylum for the insane. In medieval Islam, passionate love, whether of the physical or the spiritual kind, was often associated with mental illness. Just as in Ghazali's later discussion of the poem, Nisaburi's account reveals the influence of Platonic Love theory, in that the more rational of the two loves is prompted by a vision of the Good:

I entered a hospital (*dar al-marda*) in Egypt and saw a *shaykh* who said to me, "What is your name?" "Junayd," I replied. "Are you Iraqi?" he asked. "Yes," I said. "Are you one of the Folk of Love (*min ahl al-mahabba*)?" he asked. "Yes," I said. "Then what is Love (*al-hubb*)?" he asked. "Preferring the Beloved over everything else (*ithar al-mahbub 'ala ma siwahu*)," I answered. He said, "Love is two loves; a love that has a cause and a love that has no cause. As for the love that has a cause, it is the vision of the Good (*ru'yat al-ihsan*). As for the love that has no cause, it is because it is worthy of being loved for itself (*fa-li-annahu ahlun li-an yuhabb*)." Then he recited:

186 See the selections from Zabidi, *Ithaf al-sadat al-muttaqin fi sharh Ihya' 'ulum al-din* in Badawi, *Shahidat al-'ishq al-ilahi*, pp. 119–21.

I love you with two loves, a passionate love
And a love of which only you are worthy.

As for the passionate love,
It is a love that preoccupies me with you beyond all else.

But as for the love of which only you are worthy,
I do not see life (*fa-lastu ara al-'aysh*) unless I see you.

Despite that without which there is no life for me,
All praise is yours in both the one and the other.¹⁸⁷

Besides the attribution to Junayd, Nisaburi's story of the Poem of the Two Loves differs from other versions because the non-rational form of Love described in the poem has more to do with the literary trope of "the romantic fool" than with Sufi doctrine. Although spiritual love is not ruled out in Nisaburi's version, in general the story conforms to Arabic and Persian literary traditions about profane forms of romantic love. This can be seen in the third verse of the poem, which reads, "I do not see life unless I see you." A similar statement is made in the fourth verse, "Despite that without which there is no life for me/ All praise is yours in both the one and the other." The metaphor of both finding and losing one's life in Love's passion recalls the romance of *Layla and Majnun*, the classic story of the romantic fool in Arabic literature. Although the story of Majnun's "mad" love for Layla was used by Sufis to refer metaphorically to the mystic's love of God, it was popular in non-mystical and secular literature as well.

In the posthumously published study, *Majnun: the Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*, Michael Dols traces the trope of the romantic fool in Islamic literature as far back as the ninth century CE. He explains that this trope drew from a combination of Arab cultural notions of passionate love and the writings of Greek authorities on Love theory, such as Plato, Ptolemy, and Galen.¹⁸⁸ The influence of Plato on Nisaburi's account is apparent in the shaykh's explanation that the love that has a cause is stimulated by the vision of the Good. This is similar to Socrates' description of Love in the *Symposium* as "the love of the everlasting possession of the Good."¹⁸⁹ For Plato as well as

187 Nisaburi, *Uqala' al-majanin*, p. 173.

188 Dols, *Majnun*, pp. 313–19.

189 Plato, *Symposium*, in Jowett, vol. 1, p. 498 (206a).

for the Egyptian protagonist of this story, love of the Good is a lesser form of Love; the greatest Love leads to the vision of Pure Beauty. This must be so because Pure Beauty is the archetype of which the Good is only a reflection. Although Nisaburi attributes his story of the Poem of the Two Loves to the Iraqi Sufi Junayd, there is nothing particularly “Sufi” about the meaning of the poem in this story. Rather, it is more reminiscent of secular discussions of Love in the medieval period and thus belongs to a different genre of Arab–Islamic literature.

Another interesting version of the Poem of the Two Loves also provides a background story that is traced to Egypt but draws on tropes that are found in Christian hagiographies. This version appears in *Masari' al-'ushshaq* (*Battlefields of the Lovers*), by Ja'far ibn Ahmad al-Sarraj of Baghdad (d. 1106 CE).¹⁹⁰ This collection of anecdotes about passionate love combines elements from both religious and non-religious types of literature. For this reason, it has been compared to Ibn al-Khatib's *Rawdat al-ta'rif*, which also discusses both sacred and profane views of Love.¹⁹¹ In his book, Sarraj traces the origin of the Poem of the Two Loves to another famous Sufi, Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (“The Egyptian,” d. 859 CE). The figure of Dhu'l-Nun is well known in Sufi literature, both for his mystical teachings and for his encounters with Sufi women.¹⁹² However, most of the women that he meets in these stories are not named, and thus must be seen as literary tropes. Such is also the case for the unnamed woman ascetic that Dhu'l-Nun meets on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Sarraj's story.

[Dhu'l-Nun said:] One day I was walking along the edge of the sea when I saw a slave woman (*jariya*) wearing garments of hair; she was emaciated and had a withered appearance. I drew close to her to hear what she was saying and saw that she was overcome with sadness and grief. Suddenly, a wind blew up and roiled the waves, so that some fish appeared. The woman screamed and fell to the ground. When

190 See the reference to this work in Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam*, pp. 9–10. See also, Mustafa 'Abd al-Wahid, *Dirasat al-hubb fi-l-adab al-'arabi* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 311–408.

191 While Bell (*ibid.*) recognizes the influence of *Masari' al-'ushshaq* on Hanbali writers such as Ibn al-Jawzi, he considers it haphazardly organized and ignores both its Sufi content and Sarraj's use of chains of transmission for its anecdotes. While some of these chains of transmission may be spurious, the possibility remains that they could provide important new information on a number of Sufi traditions.

192 See, for example, R. Cornell's Introduction to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 15–16, and Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 39–42.

she awoke, she cried out weeping and said: "My Lord! Through you the Near Ones attain intimacy in their places of retreat. For the sake of your greatness the fish swim in the swelling sea. For the sake of the glory of your holiness the pounding waves crash on the shore. You are the one before whom the dark of night, the light of day, the encircling sphere, the swelling sea, the shining moon, and the glistening stars all prostrate themselves. Everything has its appointed measure, because you are the Most High, the All-Conquering!"¹⁹³

After saying these words, the woman on the beach next recites two poems about Love. The second poem is the Poem of the Two Loves. Sarraj's version of this poem is much the same as Makki's, except that the phrase "passionate love" (*hubb al-hawa*) in Makki's version is replaced by "affectionate love" (*hubb al-widad*) in the later version. Both versions, however, teach the same lesson: this is to differentiate a greater form of love from a lesser form of love. Sarraj's account ends with the statement that after reciting the poem, the woman "gasped and then left the world" (*thuma shahiqat shahqatan fa-idha hiya faraqat al-dunya*). While Dhu'l-Nun stands in surprise over the woman's body, a group of women suddenly appear and prepare her for burial. At the end of the story, Dhu'l-Nun leads the women in a funeral prayer for the deceased ascetic on the beach.¹⁹⁴

The hagiographical tropes in this account from *Masari' al-'ushshaq* are reminiscent of the "fools for Christ" stories of early Christianity. When a woman appears in these Christian stories, she is most often an ascetic and a penitent, a former sinner who has renounced the World for the love of God. A number of such stories appeared in the seventh century CE and became widely popular in the Middle East.¹⁹⁵ One of the most famous of these stories is the legend of Pelagia of Antioch. The description of the woman ascetic's hair shirt and emaciated body in Sarraj's account recalls a passage in the *Life of Pelagia* where James the Deacon describes Pelagia in the following way: "The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation brought on by ascetic practices. Indeed the whole

193 al-Sarraj, *Masari' al-'ushshaq*, vol. 1, p. 274.

194 Ibid., p. 275.

195 Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," in Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller, *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 88; the *vitae* of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch were translated into several languages and were well known in the early Islamic Middle East.

complexion of her body was coarse and dark like sackcloth, as the result of her strenuous penance.”¹⁹⁶ The all-consuming love of God of the woman on the beach also brings to mind other Christian women ascetics such as Shirin of Iraq. It was said of Shirin: “Despising the whole world out of love for God and considering it as mere refuse, in order to gain Christ she rejected and pushed aside everything else, attaching herself totally to him with a love that was without any guile as she lived out the perfect life of asceticism in all its rigor.”¹⁹⁷

The depiction of the woman ascetic on the beach as a female slave is also a trope that appears in Christian writings on asceticism. As Dale B. Martin notes in his book *Slavery as Salvation*, the trope of slavery conveys a dual meaning. First, it symbolizes the ascetic's former enslavement to worldly passions. Second, the ascetic transforms her passions through acts of self-denial into a new form of “liberated” slavery in the service of God.¹⁹⁸ Once the female fool for Christ is “discovered” by a male observer, she dies and is prepared for burial. This too happens in Sarraj's account when a group of women appear in order to bury their holy sister.¹⁹⁹

A revised version of this story would appear a century later in *al-Kawkab al-durri fi manaqib Dhi'l-Nun al-Misri* (*The Glistening Sphere in the Exploits of Dhu'l-Nun the Egyptian*) by the famous Andalusian Sufi Muhammad (Muhyiddin) Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240 CE). This little-known work of hagiography, which was translated into French by Roger Deladrière in 1988, was written by Ibn 'Arabi as a testimonial to Dhu'l-Nun, whom he viewed as one of the founders of his approach to Sufism. In Ibn 'Arabi's version of the story, Dhu'l-Nun and a male companion meet what they believe to be a male ascetic in the “desert of the Israelites” (*tih Bani Isra'il*). After discovering that the ascetic is in fact a woman, a lively exchange ensues, at the end of which the woman explains her doctrine of Love in the following way:

196 Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (eds and trans.), *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987), p. 60.

197 Ibid., p. 179.

198 See Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1990). See also, R. Cornell's Introduction to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 54–8. In this work, I discuss the “theology of servitude,” a concept which was shared alike by early Christian lovers of Christ and Muslim lovers of Allah.

199 This trope can be seen in several of the *vitae* recounted in Brock and Harvey, *Women of the Syrian Orient*. In the story of Mary of Egypt, a lion appears to help the monk Zosimas bury the saint. See also Miller, “Is There a Harlot in This Text?,” p. 89.

“For me, Love is a beginning and an attainment. Its beginning is when the heart is fervently given over to the remembrance of the Beloved; it consists of a constant sadness and an ardent desire without end. When [the lovers] attain the summit of Love, and are put to the test in their solitude, they are released from most acts of obedience.”²⁰⁰ Just as in the version of the story from *Masari‘ al-‘ushshaq*, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s version the woman collapses and dies after reciting the Poem of the Two Loves. However, the version of the Poem of the Two Loves that is reproduced in Ibn ‘Arabi’s story is not that of Sarraj, but of Makki.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s rendition of the story of Dhu’l-Nun and the woman on the beach appeared once again in the fourteenth century CE in the hagiographical anthology *al-Rawd al-fa‘iq* (*The Excellent Garden*) by the Egyptian prosopographer Sa‘id al-Hurayfish.²⁰¹ Hurayfish’s version of the story is identical to Ibn ‘Arabi’s up to the point where the woman ascetic explains her doctrine of Love to Dhu’l-Nun. This part of the story, which is central to Ibn ‘Arabi’s version, is left out by Hurayfish, probably because of the suggestion in the original that the enraptured lovers of God can ignore the Law (“they are released from most acts of obedience”). Another difference between these versions is in the Poem of the Two Loves itself. For some unknown reason, Hurayfish eliminates the reference to two loves in the first verse while retaining the suggestion of two loves in the remainder of the poem.

Hurayfish’s version of the Poem of the Two Loves also differs from other versions in that he rearranges the verses in a way that transgresses the original poem’s poetic style. He changes the first verse of the poem to read, “Your love is the Beloved of the Folk of Passion/ and a love for which only you are worthy.” He also changes the middle of the poem to describe the lesser form of Love as a form of remembrance that preoccupies the lover with the Beloved to the exclusion of everything else. This creates some confusion as to the poem’s ultimate meaning. Remembrance (*dhikr*), which Plato associates with the higher form of Love, now seems to be associated with the lower form of love, whereas passion is associated with the higher form of love. Finally, at the end of the poem Hurayfish adds two additional verses, most likely of his own composition: “Oh Beloved of the Heart, I have nothing without you/ So

200 Ibn ‘Arabi, *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhu-l-Nun l’Égyptien*, trans. Roger Deladrière (Paris: Éditions Sindbad, 1988), pp. 256–8; Ibn ‘Arabi seems to indicate in a note that follows this story that the anecdote originated with Ibn al-Jawzi. However, it is not contained in *Sifat al-safwa*, Ibn al-Jawzi’s major work on hagiography. Whether or not it can be found in another of his works, I cannot say with certainty.

201 Hurayfish, *al-Rawd al-fa‘iq*, p. 183.

have mercy today on the sinner who comes to you. Oh my hope, my solace, and my happiness/ My heart has refused everything but you.” Although Hurayfish does not say explicitly that Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya composed the Poem of the Two Loves, this is strongly implied by its inclusion in the section on Rabi'a in *al-Rawd al-fa'iq* and by the fact that the woman who is depicted as composing the poem does not die after she recites it to Dhu'l-Nun.

b. The Poem of the Intimate Gift

The second famous poem on Love that has been attributed to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was originally attributed to Rabi'a bint Isma'il of Damascus, the wife of the Sufi Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari.²⁰² Ibn Abi al-Hawari was a disciple of Abu Sulayman al-Darani (d. 830 CE), a famous early Sufi who was originally from Basra but later moved to Daraya, a village near Damascus.²⁰³ Ibn Abi al-Hawari was also from Basra and moved to Syria with his teacher. After their arrival in Syria, Darani, a celibate ascetic who normally forbade his disciples from marrying, allowed Ibn Abi al-Hawari to marry Rabi'a bint Isma'il, a rich widow who was the disciple of a woman ascetic named Hukayma. Hukayma was Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya's contemporary and seems to have played a similar role as a teacher in Damascus to that of Rabi'a in Basra. According to the short notice on her in Sulami's Book of Sufi Women, she taught a path of asceticism, celibacy and devotion to God that was very similar to Rabi'a's. Sulami refers to her as *ustadh*, the masculine Arabic term for “teacher.” This unusual term, which may imply that she had a school of disciples, is equivalent in many ways to the term *mu'addiba*, by which Sulami refers to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya.²⁰⁴

Because of the similarity of their names, accounts of Rabi'a bint Isma'il of Syria are often mistaken for accounts of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. In fact, in some accounts Rabi'a of Basra's name is given as “Rabi'a bint Isma'il.”²⁰⁵

202 Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari was known for transmitting traditions about Christian ascetics. See Sulami, *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*, pp. 98–102; Isfahani, *Hilya'* vol. 10, pp. 5–33; Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa*, vol. 2, pp. 836–7, and Massignon, *Essay*, pp. 152–8.

203 For information on Abu Sulayman al-Darani, see Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, pp. 76–7; Massignon, *Essay*, pp. 152–4; Sulami, *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*, pp. 75–82; Isfahani, *Hilya'*, vol. 9, pp. 254–80, and Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa*, vol. 2, pp. 828–34.

204 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 126–7. The fact that the term *ustadh* appears in the masculine form indicates that Hukayma attained the status of a “man” in her wisdom.

205 Ibn al-Jawzi claims that Sulami said that the fathers of both Rabi'a's were named Isma'il. However, this claim seems to be false because it does not appear in Sulami's Book

Abu Talib al-Makki drew attention to the separate existence of the two Rabi'as in *Qut al-qulub*, saying of Rabi'a bint Isma'il, "Her excellence among the people of Syria is comparable to that of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya among the people of Basra."²⁰⁶ Rabi'a bint Isma'il's first marriage may have been the source of mistaken reports about Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya's marriage and widowhood, as claimed by Hurayfish and others. Makki describes Rabi'a bint Isma'il as a widow and says that she donated her inheritance of 300,000 gold dinars to Abu Sulayman al-Darani and his disciples.²⁰⁷ Ibn al-Jawzi, who relied on an earlier source for his information, puts Rabi'a bint Isma'il's inheritance at the lower but still significant figure of 7,000 silver dirhams.²⁰⁸ As noted earlier in this chapter, one of the most significant features of Rabi'a bint Isma'il's asceticism was her adherence to the Syrian Christian practice of pseudo-marriage, in which she and Ibn Abi al-Hawari lived not as husband and wife, but as "brother" and "sister." This practice is reported by Ibn al-Jawzi in *Sifat al-safwa*. An important early source for the information transmitted by Ibn al-Jawzi on Rabi'a bint Isma'il was the traditionist Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 894 CE). It is from Ibn Abi al-Dunya that we learn via Ibn al-Jawzi that Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and Rabi'a bint Isma'il may have been confused with each other as early as the second half of the ninth century CE.²⁰⁹

After the Poem of the Two Loves, the "Poem of the Intimate Gift" is the most famous poem attributed to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Unlike the Poem of the Two Loves, whose text varies from version to version, the Poem of the Intimate Gift has been transmitted in a standardized version that hardly ever varies. This may indicate that it originally came from a written source. For example, in the recently published *Diwan Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya* by the Syrian Muwaffaq Fawzi al-Jabr (1999), as well as in the popular biography *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya* by the Egyptian Muhammad 'Atiyya Khamis (1955), one finds the same version of the poem that appears in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safwa* from twelfth-century Baghdad.

of Sufi Women. See R. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 138–41 and Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix, pp. 314–15.

²⁰⁶ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 413.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 316–17.

²⁰⁹ This can be inferred from Ibn Abi al-Dunya's careful specification of their names. See the comment in Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa*, Appendix to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 314–15.

I have made you the one who speaks to me in the depths of my soul,
But I made my body lawful for the one who desires to be with me.

My body is my intimate gift to my worldly companion,
But my heart's beloved is my true intimate in the depths of my soul.²¹⁰

The main difference between the modern versions of the Poem of the Intimate Gift and that of Ibn al-Jawzi is that most modern accounts attribute the poem to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya of Basra whereas Ibn al-Jawzi attributes the poem to Rabi'a bint Isma'il of Damascus. Although we cannot be certain without further textual evidence, Ibn al-Jawzi may have derived this attribution from Ibn Abi al-Dunya. However, if the Poem of the Intimate Gift was attributed to Rabi'a bint Isma'il at such an early date, why have so many writers attributed it to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya? What might have been the source for the attribution of this poem to the wrong Rabi'a? Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami mentions both Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and Rabi'a bint Isma'il in his Book of Sufi Women but attributes no poetry to either of them. However, a possible source for the confusion between the two Rabi'as can be found in a work that was contemporaneous with Sulami's Book of Sufi Women and was written in the same city of Nishapur. This work is *Tahdhib al-asrar* (*The Primer of Secrets*) by 'Abd al-Malik al-Khargushi (d. 1016 CE). Khargushi was an important Sufi of Nishapur who appears to have been a rival of Sulami.²¹¹ *Tahdhib al-asrar* is currently the earliest extant source for the Poem of the Intimate Gift because it predates Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safiya* by nearly two centuries. In his chapter on the Sufi doctrine of Intimacy (*uns*), Khargushi states: "Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari said: Rabi'a used to experience many spiritual states (*ahwal*). Sometimes Love (*hubb*) overcame her; sometimes Intimacy (*uns*) overcame her; sometimes Fear (*khawf*) overcame her." The reader is not told which Rabi'a is meant in this passage. The report then goes on to cite three poems by Rabi'a, one for each of the three spiritual states

210 Appendix to Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 316–17 and Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safiya*, vol. 2, pp. 871–2; see also, Muwaffaq Fawzi al-Jabr, *Diwan Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya wa akhbaruha* (Damascus: Dar Ma'add and Dar al-Namir, 1999), pp. 57, 78–9, and Muhammad 'Atiyya Khamis, *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya* (Cairo: Dar Karam, 1955), p. 62.

211 The rivalry between Khargushi and Sulami can be inferred from the similarity of their teachings and their use of the same sources, as well as by the fact that only Sulami's father but not Sulami himself is mentioned in *Tahdhib al-asrar*.

mentioned by Ibn Abi al-Hawari. The Poem of the Intimate Gift is Rabi'a's poem for the state of Intimacy.²¹²

It is easy to imagine how a reader who was unfamiliar with Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari and Rabi'a bint Isma'il might mistake Khargushi's account of an unspecified Rabi'a as referring to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. In fact, it has long been common for Sufi authors to attribute any unspecified reference to a Sufi woman named Rabi'a to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. A similar attribution of the Poem of the Intimate Gift to an unspecified Rabi'a appears in the treatise *'Awarif al-ma'arif* (*The Ways of Discernment*) by Abu Hafs 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234 CE).²¹³ Suhrawardi was head of the Sufis of Baghdad and was an ambassador and advisor for the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir (d. 1225 CE).²¹⁴ Because of his influence on the development of orthodox mystical doctrines in Islam, *'Awarif al-ma'arif* was often attached as an appendix to Ghazali's *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*. Like Khargushi, Suhrawardi gives no indication that the Rabi'a who composed the Poem of the Intimate Gift was anyone other than Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Thus, the uninformed reader is led to assume that Rabi'a of Basra wrote the poem. Because of the wide popularity of *'Awarif al-ma'arif* throughout the Islamic world, it is reasonable to suppose that this work may have been another source for the misattribution of the Poem of the Intimate Gift to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya.

However, the misattribution of this poem to the wrong Rabi'a reveals more than just a case of mistaken identity. It also illustrates the uncritical attitude toward tradition that has characterized Sufi literature for centuries. Upon careful consideration of the text of the Poem of the Intimate Gift, it makes little sense to attribute it to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. The second line of the poem, "I made my body lawful for the one who desires to be with me," alludes to a sexual experience and possible marriage that would be alien to the celibate Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya as she appears in early Sufi literature. We have already seen in this chapter how the earliest accounts of Rabi'a agree that she was celibate and that she practiced an ascetic form of devotion that left no room for anyone but God. The third line of the poem, "My body is my intimate gift to my worldly companion," confirms that the author of the

212 Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 80.

213 See, for example, Abu Hafs 'Umar al-Suhrawardi, *'Awarif al-ma'arif*, appended to various editions of Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*. The attribution of The Poem of the Intimate Gift to an unspecified "Rabi'a" appears in Chapter 61, *Dhikr al-ahwal wa sharhiha* (*Mention of the Spiritual States and Their Explanation*).

214 On Abu Hafs 'Umar al-Suhrawardi and his influence on Sufi doctrine, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 244–7.

poem most likely had a worldly companion and that she was intimate with him. By contrast, early Sufi traditions concur that Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was celibate and that her male students such as Sufyan al-Thawri were not intimate with her in this way.

Clearly, the only Rabi'a whose life story provides a fitting background for the Poem of the Intimate Gift is Rabi'a bint Isma'il of Damascus. If Makki and Ibn al-Jawzi are correct, the Syrian Rabi'a did in fact have a male companion for whom she made her body lawful. This was her first husband, whose inheritance she gave to Abu Sulayman al-Darani and his disciples. Significantly, Darani's disciple Ibn Abi al-Hawari is the source for the account about the Poem of the Intimate Gift in Khargushi's *Tahdhib al-asrar*. The later account by Ibn al-Jawzi depicts Rabi'a bint Isma'il as unsure about how to balance her obligations to her husband and her obligations to God. She tries to resolve this conflict by encouraging her second husband to take another wife so that she can maintain their spiritual pseudo-marriage without compromising herself sexually. A similar sense of conflict is expressed in the Poem of the Intimate Gift. The author of the poem allows her body to be possessed by her worldly companion; however, only God, her "true intimate," has the right to possess her heart. The appeal of this poem for many generations of Sufis, both male and female, is that it eloquently expresses the dilemma of the devotee who struggles to give the proper measure of devotion both to God and to a worldly partner at the same time. How is a Sufi woman to give herself completely to both God and her husband without the dilemma of what the Qur'an refers to as "two hearts in one body"?

RABI‘A FROM NARRATIVE TO MYTH

THE MANY FACES OF ISLAM’S
MOST FAMOUS WOMAN SAINT,
RABI‘A AL-‘ADAWIYYA

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