

*The allegation struck. Six centuries later, the English Persianist E. G. Broune said that misers in Persia were said proverbially to be "as mean as the merchants of Isfahan, who put their cheese in a bottle and rub their bread on the outside to give it a flavor."*

It has been said that the people of Isfahan are characterized by stinginess.... The story is told of a visitor to the city who gave a loaf of bread as alms to a blind man. On receiving it, the blind man exclaimed, "May God make your stay in Isfahan a happy one!" Hearing this, the visitor said, "How do you know I'm not a local?" And the blind man said, "Because I've been sitting here for 30 years and not a single Isfahani has ever given me a whole loaf of bread!"

But when the caricature is by a native of the place, we might be more inclined to take it at face value.

Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani wasn't afraid to be blunt about his fellow-townsmen:

*Badi' al-Zaman, "the Wonder of the Age," earned his nickname from his brilliant Maqamat-tales in rhyming prose about a fictional vagabond and master of disguise, Abu'l-Fath of Alexandria.*

*Al-Khansa flourished in the last decades before the Islamic era.*

Hamadhan's my hometown and of all towns it's the best; In some ways though, I have to say, it's worse than all the rest: In looks, its youngsters seem like wizened oldsters and, in truth, Its older generation is as brainless as its youth.

Returning from mass observation to individuals, some of the earliest Arabic literature focuses on people. In the following verses, the woman poet al-Khansa mourns her brother Sakhr, killed in

inter-tribal fighting. Such an elegy was for public recitation—but, powered by the intensity of love and loss, no less personal for that:

*Another more recent echo—this time from Laurence Binjori's 1914 poem "For the Fallen":*

*"At the going down of the sun and in the morning/We will remember them." Grief crosses centuries; so does poetry.*

Sakhr it was who led when they rode out,  
Sakhr it was who when they hungered was their remedy,  
Sakhr it was from whom the other leaders took their lead,  
As if he were a beacon-fire upon a mountain-top.  
Patient under pressure, handsome, self-controlled, a perfect man—  
And when the day of battle dawned, a brand ablaze with war!

*Sakhr embodies here all the components of muru'ah—the manly virtue of the ancient Arabs. Such dirges by women poets have a long history in many cultures. The late Patrick Leigh Fermor quoted a Greek example, "unspeakably sad and beautiful," extemporized at the burial of an English airman shot down in the 1940s: "He shone among thousands," it begins, "like the sun...."*

Several of al-Khansa's elegies to Sakhr have survived, at least in part. Here, from another, are probably her most famous lines,

beautiful in their spareness:

*Al-Mujahid had fallen out with the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and was, effectively, kidnapped by them while in Makkah and taken to Cairo for this period.*

The rising of the sun brings Sakhr to mind,  
And I remember him with every setting sun.

Indirectly, al-Khansa reveals much of herself in her elegies. But Arabic literature is also rich in "full-face" images of women. The

more formal ones tend to be of the great and good, like this portrait of Jihat Salah, mother of a 14th-century sultan:

*The finest odes by seven celebrated pre-Islamic poets were given this title, supposedly because they were inscribed and hung up in the sacred enclosure at Makkah. (Sad to say, this may be a later legend.) Imru' al-Qays's ode is the oldest of the seven. A son of the king of the Arabian confederation of Kindah, he led a mobile and eventful life, and died of poison at Ankara in about 540.*

She was a happy woman, intelligent, right-guided, resolute, forbearing, bountiful, generous, blessed with political acumen and the qualities of leadership, noble of soul and lofty of mind. During the absence in Egypt for 14 months of her son, Sultan al-Malik al-Mujahid, when she acted as regent in the land, she kept the country in order and united the soldiery. And never in all that goodly age did the land enjoy greater fertility, security, equity and general beneficence than it did in that year. She left behind works that benefited religion, and was fond of religious scholars and pious people, conferring favors on them and showing them great honor. She would also do the rounds of the people's houses, inquiring into their conditions and liberally distributing gifts.

*From al-Khazraji's Pearl-Strings, a history of the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen. "Jihat Salah," literally "the direction of Salah"—Salah being the high-ranking eunuch in charge of the lady's household—is a polite way of referring to her without mentioning her name.*

Seldom does history produce a woman like her, or one more worthy of the lines of Abu 'l-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi:

*"Sun," shams, and "moon," here hital, are in Arabic grammar respectively feminine and masculine—the opposites of their genders in many other languages.*

If all the women in the world were like her, then In excellence, for sure, they'd far surpass the men. The fact that "sun" is feminine is not a slight, Nor does the gender of the moon add to his light.

*These included a number of schools and mosques, built and endowed at her expense.*

Of course, the most intimate portraits of women are to be found not in court panegyrics, but in the odes of love-struck poets. One of the oldest pieces of Arabic we have, Imru' al-Qays's "Suspended Ode," contains a description of the poet-prince's beloved from which the lines below are taken.

*The great 10th-century poet. The lines come from an elegy on the mother of his friend and patron Sayf al-Dawlah, ruler of Aleppo.*

No translation, it has to be said, could ever catch the wild and thrilling strangeness of this poem; any attempt is like trying to tie down "the weaving of the winds," as a phrase near the beginning of the ode puts it. Many Arab poetry-lovers would say it has never been bettered. They may be right.