

History is Gay Podcast
Episode 10: Thigh Fencing and the Saffron Massage

Leigh: Hello, and welcome to *History is Gay!* A podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ Intro Music ♪

Introduction

Leigh: Hey, folks. I'm Leigh.

Gretchen: And I'm Gretchen.

Leigh: And in this week we are talking about Arabic lesbians in medieval literature. [cheer together]

Gretchen: I'm so excited. Oh my gosh.

Leigh: This is really cool. We're going back... we're going back to the Middle Ages to talk about ladies boning...

Gretchen: Okay.

Leigh: And loving each other. Very titillating.

Gretchen: People talk about the Middle Ages, like they're the Dark Ages, but I feel like we're finding so many amazing queer things in the Middle Ages [laughter] that like...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: This is like the rainbow ages. [laughs]

Leigh: Oh my gosh. The rainbow ages! Yeah, no, we keep finding more and more things. And I mean it's... you know it, especially when you kind of go outside of like Christian tradition.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: There's a lot of wonderful things to be found here.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm

Leigh: So yeah. So we're gonna be talking about the... the Arabic erotic literature tradition.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: This... this time around. Which, much like we did when we were talking about China... We're pretty excited to get into all of these really cool stories.

Gretchen: Right? Yeah. Definitely. So we figure we should do as we always try and do and start with some content warnings. The first thing is that when we use the terms, male and female, or a man/woman, unfortunately, this does assume cisness. This is not something that we found a lot of information on trans experience in. So we just want to give people a heads up that we're going to be using... when we use male and female and man and woman, we are talking in the... under the cis umbrella.

Another thing to be aware of is that there are a lot of sources that seem to be using lesbian as a catch-all for like all woman-loving-woman or queer woman experience. Unfortunate... This is also really common in academic circles to use lesbian when they mean just women who have either erotic or, you know, romantic relationships with other women. So...

Leigh: Or even... even in like, you know, communities of women, it all comes from...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: from a scholar called Judith Bennett who talked about how, you know, if something isn't explicitly lesbian, there are a lot of cases for lesbian like behavior or communities within, especially in medieval periods.

Gretchen: Right, right. And while we can't speak to their intention... of the sources. I mean, I would assume they're probably not... it's probably not erasure. But we also want to make it clear that like, we don't mean that as an erasure. So if we use lesbian, understand that... that's probably... we're probably quoting from sources who are using it that way. And we are no way meaning to like erase bi, pan, or otherwise like, non mono-sexual queer women.

So we just want that to be clear that like...

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: In the sources that we're using lesbian seems to be being used as an umbrella term. And... and that's unfortunate. And we may have a conversation about that, especially the history of the evolution of the term lesbian, which is a really interesting thing to discuss. And we will probably discuss that further down the line. But for now, we just want people to know, we will try as much as we can to use queer or woman-loving-woman, but some of the sources we use may use lesbian as an umbrella term.

Leigh: Mm-hmm. And also one other thing to note is that, you know, since we're talking about queer women's sexuality in the Middle Ages, just like when we were in medieval Europe, there's gonna be some explicit sexual content.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: [cheering] Whoo!

Gretchen: Yeah. It's like some of it is... is kind of delightfully explicit. Like, it's kind of nice. [laughs]

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: That it is explicit because so often like, I mean, we'll find this out as we... as the episode goes on.

Leigh: [sarcastic] What do two women do?

Gretchen: Right? Like when we did our episode *Cloistered Queers*. The... the conversation from men was like, [imitating stuffy old men voice] 'What do women do? How can they have sex?

Leigh: [also imitating] They're doing that, but there's no penis involved. So therefore, it is not sex.' It is the sin without a name, oh!

Gretchen: [still imitating] We don't even know what they do much less talk about it.' So... and there is some of that...

Leigh: I like how I just turned into George Takei, right there for a second.

Gretchen: [laughs] I don't know.

Leigh: It was very strange.

Gretchen: [laughs] Oh, anyway, but yeah, there's explicit sexual content. Just be aware.

Leigh: Mm-hmm,

Gretchen: Yeah. And that...so this... we're getting back to our like concept focused episode. So we'll talk a little bit about social context, timeline, kind of our thesis statement. Then we'll move into some examples of specific people who might fit the general concept, then we will finish with takeaways, conclusions, final thoughts. And then our, as we end every episode, our How Gay were They? Which is our personal ranking about how likely it is that these people or this situation wasn't straight? Do we have any announcements?

Leigh: No, I don't... It's pretty quiet right now I think. But yeah, so... So with that, Gretchen, do you want to start in on our main topic, which we have entitled *Thigh Fencing and the Saffron Massage*?

Gretchen: Yes, yes. saffron massage is my new favorite euphemism.

Leigh: And we're going back to thigh fencing folks.

Gretchen: Yeah! Yes.

Leigh: This is where it all came from.

Gretchen: It did.

Leigh: That we give you that little teaser in *Cloistered Queers*.

Gretchen: [laughs] We did.

Leigh: We are diving back in.

Historical Context: Medieval Arabic Erotic Tradition More Generally

Gretchen: We are diving back in. So let's talk about the medieval Arabic erotic tradition. So in this episode, we're primarily going to be dealing with literary sources, rather than anecdotal stories about lesbian activity or queer woman activity from Western authors. Cause there are a lot of very colonialist Oriental perspectives...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: On what the Ottoman or you know, otherwise like Arabic, Islamic court life was like. And we've tried to avoid those, particularly because they have a very Western, colonialist, problematic lens. So we're...

Leigh: Very exoticizing.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Very like, "Ooh look at these exotic harems with Viziers and all of these, you know, women fawning over these... these men" and all of these

very colonialist male writers looking and being like “Look at the exotic East. Oh!”

Gretchen: Right, right. Like the... the discussions of especially harems from the Western perspective have a tendency to be very exoticizing and colonial as well as really like sexist and gross. So whether or not Vizier harems were hotbeds of what they call the sapphic vise, as one such Western writer says, is really not our focus this episode. We're far more interested in what the actual Arabic literary tradition of the medieval period has to say about itself, rather than, you know, filtering that through a Western lens.

So...a couple...there are some points where that may come up, but we're primarily focused specifically on like the original sources of what do people within the Arabio-Islamic tradition have to say about their own experiences or as close to it as... as we can get?

So historically, the Islamic tradition was much more open to frank and explicit discussions of sexuality. That is one thing that differs from, especially the Christian tradition during the medieval period. You have things like legal discussions regarding whether or not the *Quran* verse which is “*Your women are a year tith— Which is a term for a plot of land— go then into your tith any way you wish.*”

So there's this verse in the *Quran* that says that and there are actual, like legal discussions amongst Islamic scholars as to whether or not this allows for only like vaginal or anal sex or for a wide variety of sexual positions and entries. Like these are... these are things within their actual, like theological legal tradition that they're having conversations about, like, “Which positions are okay by the *Quran*?” [laughter]

And actually, that particular verse follows a story where one of the prophet's contemporaries named Umar ibn al-Khattab, apologized to the Prophet for being tired the next day because he'd spent the entire night before having sex with his wife from behind. [laughter] And so then came this verse of like, “Oh, it's okay, you can, you know, you can have sex really right from behind. That's cool, and a bunch of other positions.”

So these are... it's very different. I think especially from a Western Christian perspective, to have this be specifically a part of the, like the theological conversations that they're having.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: Female sexuality was recognized, which is another difference. Even exaggerated at some points. Some theologians in the Islamic tradition have historically argued that if female sexual desire is unregulated or unsatisfied, the whole social and political order could collapse.

So on the one hand, like, that's, you know, still has layers of like, patriarchal male perspective involved, but like, snaps for acknowledging female sexuality is something worth talking about and valuing...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: And like, make sure your wife is satisfied. I'd rather not go the length of like, "Or the whole social order will collapse," but like [laughs] I do appreciate like 'ladies have actual desire.'

Leigh: At least it exists.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: At least it exists. Yeah, well, I didn't you know, it kind of comes back to you know, what we talked about in China, right? Where it was like, "But these things are necessary for like, health and..."

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: From from both ends. There's a lot of... there's a lot discussion about like heat and energy.

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: In many, many cultures and how sexual activity deals with dissipating heat and transferring that heat. It's all very interesting. And we're gonna get super duper into that.

Gretchen: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It's fascinating.

Leigh: Oh, yeah. And... so like homosexuality was less harshly condemned in the *Quran* for males. And as in the *Torah* and *Bible*, female homosexuality isn't really mentioned...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: In the actual religious texts. And I thought it was interesting to note too, that in a lot of theological Islamic discourse at the time, in the *Quran*, and the *Sunnah*, which is early Islamic legal tradition, the most vehemently condemned sin, in both of those, was not homosexuality, as we've seen in you know, in some... some Western texts, but was adultery or *zina*.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: Which... and so they're one of our sources, Sahar Amer actually mentions that the interest and the attention on *zina* as the... as this... this huge sin, quote

"may have encouraged or at least partly the acceptance of liwat"

Which is the...the, you know. male homosexuality equivalent in Islamic societies. So much so that there was a 14th century author who suggested in a chapter of one of his books, which was *An Intelligent Man's Guide to the Art of Coition* that,

"know that lesbianism ensures against social disgrace while coition is forbidden except through marriage."

So again, we see the tradition of like women having sex with women doesn't involve penetration by a penis, therefore, it's kind of considered like, somewhat no big deal.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: But that's kind of all we get in religious texts. There really isn't a lot of mention.

Gretchen: Right. But what is also interesting to note is that during this medieval period, male homosexuality and homoeroticism was actually quite pervasive in the literary texts. You have erotic poetry and... and other things that we'll get into a little bit. And we will probably do an episode later on the male, you know, homosexual— homosexuality and homoeroticism in the Arab Islamic literature because that's, that's huge.

There's so much more on that. So we'll probably do it. We'll circle back around at some point and doing an episode on that. But for now, we do just want to mention the context because I think it does provide... it does provide a larger context for understanding how lesbianism or queered female activity was, you know, had more space within the society.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: So there were court officials who clearly had male-male preferences like... and there were there's a lot of homoerotic poetry from the Arabic *Radā'* tradition, a lot of homoerotic poetry. One of our authors actually argues that when you see homoeroticism in Western literature, they're probably drawing on Arabic sources for a lot of their euphemisms or even the reference to classical literature or classical poetry and that's where that comes from. But like I said, we can get into that further down the line.

Shia Muslims would have circulated *sha 'bi* which are popular additions of much of the celebrated Arab erotica. One publisher based in London and Beirut, Riad El-Rayyes, has published three major works of Arab erotica [trying to pronounce it] *Al-RawdAl* sorry I'm far away from my computer so I'm trying to figure out how to read this... I do actually peripherally know Arabic better than I know like French. [laughter]

Al-RawdAl-'Atirfi Nuzhat Al-Khatir known in the West as *The Perfumed Garden*. So if you've heard of the Perfumed Garden, and *Nuzhat Al-Albab fima la Yujadfi Kitab*. These and they're... Oh, sorry, I missed one. There is

another one that was composed between 1410 and 1443, which is *TuhfatAl 'Arus was Mux'at An-Nufus*.

And these works contain collections of poetry and anecdotes by and about gay men and women. Their poetry is explicit and would be considered obscene by Christian moral standards. So the idea that there were no self declared lesbians or gay men is false.

Like these were poems written by and about queer experience at the time. What they would have understood of as queer experience. Commenting on the prevalence of gay men and lesbian women Muhammad... Muhammad bin Zakariyyah Ar-Razi said in one article,

"You might find males as women and females as men."

There were some who preached the virtues of homosexuality and were called *ghulat al latah* which is literally ultra homosexual, like super gay.

Leigh: I would... I would like to be an ultra homosexual.

Gretchen: Yes, yes, that's the goal.

Leigh: Ultra homosexuals club.

Gretchen: Ultra homosexuals club. UHC, [snorting laughter] the ultra homosexuals club.

Leigh: Let's make polos with that.

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: Just UHC in the corner.

Gretchen: UHC. Yeah! People can try and guess what they mean?

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah. University of, I can't think, UHC...

Leigh: Of... of hot crab cakes. [both laughing] I don't know why that's where my brain went.

Gretchen: Hot crab cakes. I have no idea.

Leigh: University of hot crab cakes.

Gretchen: I kinda, I kinda dig it. I mean crab. No, that's clams. Sorry. Anyway. [laughter] Back to homosexuality and homoeroticism.

Leigh: Yep.

Gretchen: Um, for example, when we're talking about male courtiers who had preferences for other men, so someone who is clearly not just, you know, situationally homosexual but who actually has a professed interest in men.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: The Abbasid Caliph Al-Wathiq, for example, devoted his life and poetry to his male lover Muhaj. The Caliph Al-Amin, according to As-Suyutiin TarikhAl-Khulafa simply, quote, "*rejected women and concubines*" unquote. He refused despite the strenuous efforts of his mother to have sex with women. I don't know how that would work, but sure. [laughter]

"To cure her son of his passion for eunuchs the mother of the Caliph Amin smuggled among them several slender, handsome, maids with short hair dressed up as boys in tight jackets and girdles."

But the thing is... is like this became a trend then.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Like court circles and common folk alike follow this fashion and similarly dressed up their slave girls and called them *Ghulamiyy*

Leigh: I was... I was reading this and it reminded me so much of Emperor Ai.

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: Because it just reminds me of that...that quote, that was just like

"Emperor Ai distinctly did not have a fondness for women."

Gretchen: Right!

Leigh: Right. And then, and then after he like cuts his sleeve, [laughs] because he doesn't want to wake Dong Xian, then everybody else is cutting their sleeves. I mean, it's okay.

Gretchen: Look, it's a thing now.

Leigh: And that was another society that all of this homo... homoeroticism was coming from this literature and these...and this poetry and it's such a wild parallel to me.

Gretchen: Yeah, you're right. No, that's like eerily similar.

Leigh: Like almost just word for word just like rejected women and concubines, you know, did not have a fondness for women. [laughter] Just ultra homosexual.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep, he definitely sounds like an ultra homosexual.

Leigh: Yeah, there's also another poet, one of the most prolific poets in this... in this time period too, Abu Nuwas. So he was one of the leading... leading poets in Arabic literature in the eighth and ninth century, when talking about homosexual identity actually said:

"Would I choose seas over land?"

And in his poetry, seas denoted love of women and lands, *barari*, denoted love of men. So he says:

"This is what the book of God commanded us, to favor males over females."

So you know, I just like that, like, "Do you really expect me to, you know" would I choose seas over land? Like it's the most easy question in the world.

Gretchen: Right

Leigh: Like come on.

Gretchen: The rhetorical like guys why?

Leigh: I mean this... this just reminds me of like every Tumblr lesbian that's like, "Okay, but like have you seen women?" [both laughing] Girls, though?

Gretchen: It's so true. It's just like the flip side of have you seen dudes though? Like I'm a dude and have you seen dudes why— why would I choose otherwise?

Leigh: Would I choose seas over land? I had to put that in there because like even though we're not getting into this side of that tradition

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: I just... I was like...

Gretchen: It's great..

Leigh: This is... buddy, active gay face.

Gretchen: This... this is why you just become a coastal bisexual and you get both.

Leigh: [laughs] Bi-coastal!

Gretchen: I'm gonna call myself bi-coastal. Bi-coastal! Oh my gosh I'm bi-coastal. I like the seas and the land. And everything else.

Leigh: [still laughing] Coastal bisexual is my new favorite.

Gretchen: I'm a coastal bisexual.

Leigh: All right folks, stay tuned for that merch. [both laugh] Beautiful.

Gretchen: Oh man.

Leigh: All right.

Gretchen: Yep. In the Arabic... medieval Arabic tradition, erotic material wasn't confined to one particular genre, or one particular form of sexual expression. So even though what we've mentioned so far has been poetry, it wasn't as if homoeroticism was limited to poetry.

Heterosexuality, homosexuality of both male and female kinds, adultery, prostitution, effeminacy, masturbation, anal intercourse, bestiality, like these are some of the typical examples of things that were all generally lumped together under one category of like sexuality, or even in terms of, you know, the language being used about them.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: There's an early book on metonymic expressions that will come up later and we can describe it then. But it focuses on metaphors and euphemisms for sexuality more generally, homosexuality in particular, and... and that idea of here is the language we use about sexuality, and that includes... and that, you know, larger umbrella of language we use for sexuality includes under it, homosexuality.

And so they had varied, you know, they were talking about what are the euphemisms we use to talk about that, which means that it's much more pervasive than just, you know, a one off thing. Like this is something that is being widely recognized and talked about in the literary tradition.

And there... the euphemisms being used are far more detailed, far more direct, far more explicit than the Western tradition, especially with regard to

women-loving-women activity, for which in the West, we don't have a lot, even from this time period.

Leigh: Yeah. No... no, no crime without a name here.

Gretchen: Right, exactly. So this technique of lumping kind of homosexuality under the broader category of just sexuality more generally, likely indicates that homosexuality in Arabic tradition was not viewed as anomalous, as it was at the time during Western European culture. But rather was one among several forms of sexual expression that one could, you know? One needed to be aware of and would talk about and it wasn't taboo in any sense.

The presence of it in other genres outside of just the poetic tradition, all... like also points to how such norms and language could have been disseminated into Western Europe beyond poetry. Because it was found in, you know, rhetorical pieces, legal pieces, medical, scientific works. So it wasn't as if the Western society could just be like, "Oh, we just won't read the Arabic Islamic poetry. We'll just avoid all that stuff" like this was... this was pretty widespread in terms of..

Leigh: Mm-hmm. Pervasive...

Gretchen: Right. It was in all sorts of their literature.

Leigh: Yeah, we also... we also see a fun trend that we see kind of everywhere else in the world that before Christianity and imperialism came to the Middle East, much like we saw in China right? We've talked about this, this culture, embracing sexuality openly and as healthy and necessary for life and then [noises] wahnwahn Here come the Christians. You know? Here comes imperialism.

And it was only and you know, there's this... this perception nowadays that like, "Oh, we can never change these ideas in the Middle East and they're so sexist and these, you know, women are so oppressed" and blah blah blah blah and all of that. And you know, it's... it's... it's really unfortunate because that's not the way it was.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: These are all Western imports.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: These are all Western ideals of thinking that have come into this society and have replaced this open frank discussion of sexuality and replaced it with Christian like conservatism.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So, you know, medieval Christianity came in and criticized Islam for its laxness and permissiveness, but now the opposite is true. Same as we saw in China.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: Same as we, you know, see in... in modern Egypt and you know, which is this... this same area. But you know, we need to start really be thinking about, globally, you know, such damning effects of Christianity...

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: On the way the world has thought about gender and sexuality experience

Gretchen: Right. And to my mind, especially because of my, you know, background both being raised in a very conservative Christian environment. And then my academic studies in, you know, church history and linguistics, specifically, ancient linguistics, like Hebrew and Greek and Latin and all of that, that this wasn't even an attitude that was pervasive of Christianity.

This idea that Christianity has always been really repressive, is... like there are roots of it, as we saw in our *Cloistered Queers* episodes like that has its roots closer to the... the 12th or 13th century, that prior to that time period, even Christianity itself had a much more open way of thinking about human

sexuality and...and that there are strains of that even within the Christian tradition.

So a huge part of something that... that I think about as we do this podcast is... is acknowledging the ways that like Christianity has been really, really detrimental around the world. Not just...and historically. And also how much that at some level feels like a betrayal.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: Of other aspects of Christianity and the historical roots of Christianity that were not quite so virulent and... and homophobic that they're even...even within the Christian tradition, there are things we can reclaim...

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: As positive historically, while also acknowledging like, "Yeah, it's done a lot of damage. It's done a shit ton of damage globally and historically," coming into these cultures and, and changing the way that they view themselves.

Leigh: Mm hmm.

Gretchen: To the point that like, as in modern China, and same in Islam, the belief that like, "Well, we've always been this way. We've always just been, you know, this is our tradition." Being homophobic and not believing and accepting other alternate forms of sexuality is just part of who we are, is like, well, but it wasn't always

Leigh: And not even in the Christian tradition.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: I think it's what happens when... I think it's what happens when power gets involved.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Right.

Gretchen: Power and control and...

Leigh: When you divorce the, you know, the ideals of Christianity in the early days from, you know, what then became like Crusading.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: And you know, and wrapped up in imperialism.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: They're two very different things. And I think that the... the queer community has such a complicated relationship with faith based on these things. And...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Just like Gretchen said, like, there are so many things for you to reclaim.

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: Even within that tradition.

Gretchen: Yep. Right, definitely.

Leigh: We'll... we'll hop off our soapboxes now [laughter]and continue telling you about poetry.

Gretchen: Yes, yes.

Leigh: But yeah, it's, you know, it's... it's gonna be a common theme.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Like, I don't think we're going to come across anywhere in our topics that this doesn't pop up at some point.

Historical Context: Arabic Literature and Western Courtly Love Poetry

Gretchen: Yep. Yep, Agreed. Agreed. So let's talk about courtly love poetry. We kind of... we kind of mentioned it briefly that...

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: And that was something that came up again in our *Cloistered Queers* episode, about the courtly love tradition in Western Europe. But unbeknownst to many, the medieval Western tradition of courtly love poetry actually owes a great deal to Arabic literature and Arabic erotic poetry specifically. So we'll come back to courtly love poetry later because Leigh has their old like paper on it [laughter] and there's some really delightful things in courtly love poetry...

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: That we will come back to. But for now, we're going to talk about the roots of it in the Arabic erotic tradition. So many Western scholars don't like to acknowledge Arabic influence, typically, because of the homoeroticism, [laughter] the fairly blatant homoeroticism of Arabic literature.

They... these such scholars will either reject it as the root because of its homoeroticism and claim that any homoeroticism in Western tradition is actually just homosocial bonding. They're just like gal pals or like comrades, they're just guys who are really good friends and they love each other and they're just like best bros.

Leigh: Super duper hetero bonding.

Gretchen: Yes, yes. It's not gay. They're just really good friends.

Leigh: [sings] It's two dudes sitting in a hot tub six feet apart.

Gretchen: [laughs] Hashtag #nohomo.

Leigh: Hashtag #nohomo.

Gretchen: Like, that's literally what they'll do.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Or they will allow for Arabic influence, but only after..[laughs] this is actually.. I kind of love this because it's so ridiculous. So they will allow for Arabic influence, but only after homoerotic poems or stories are recast as actually heterosexual allegories [laughs] or like literary cliches devoid of homoerotic substance. So, for example, John Jay Parry from an essay in 1941 says, quote:

"Among the Arabs, public opinion required that if the beloved was a woman, she must 'for decency's sake' be spoken of as a man and referred to by masculine pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs...this alleged Arabic convention of encoding a heterosexual poem as a homosexual poem...may account for the troubadour practice of the male poet addressing his lady as his lord."

Sure, Jan. Sure.

Leigh: Sure.

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah, that gay thing that's actually just... that's just an allegory for straight people.

Leigh: [sarcastic] I didn't know that homosexuals went to our school.

Gretchen: [snorting laughter] Just like, I love it. Like I really do just like find it delightfully ridiculous...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: That the answer is like, "Oh, no, no, no, they're not really gay. They're like...they just, it's... it's really straight. It's a metaphor for straight

people." These two dudes in love with each other is just a metaphor for straight people.

Leigh: Oh, yeah, yeah, this...this woman who's you know, who's... who's speaking about her... Her lover, you know, must be doing it from the perspective of a man. Right?

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: She's like, because this is the only way it can be. She has to bring this... this male perspective in.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: You know, right like we saw... we saw that in *Cloistered Queers* too.

Gretchen: Or like this, people try and make that same argument with Sappho is like "well, but literary convention at the time was for the male perspective. So if you have a female poet writing poems about ladies she's clearly just pretending she's a man, yo," [whispers] or she's a lady who likes ladies.

Leigh: Like really, you just, it's...it feels like doing [Gretchen giggles] cartwheels around the gate, right? Honestly, it reminds me of every episode of Xena where they really tried to like put as much gay shit in there as they can, but they can't because of censors. So they like have Xena be in Bruce Campbell's body and kiss Gabrielle.

Gretchen: Ooooh!

Leigh: Cause clearly, that's how it goes.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: Yeah, that's the thing that happened.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. Right or.. or like when in our Egypt episode when... when the archaeologists like find this tomb of like two, like two dudes in

positions that reflect like marital customs and they'll literally be like "They're conjoined twins."

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Just like, okay.

Leigh: You're trying so hard...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: You're trying so hard to come up with the most...

Gretchen: Anything that's not gay. Yeah.

Leigh: So hard to come up with the most... what? Oh God, what's the word like convoluted?

Gretchen: Yeah. Yes.

Leigh: There you go. Trying to come up with the most convoluted example just to avoid the homo.

Gretchen: Right. They will do anything to avoid the homo.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Including...including saying that... that homoeroticism is actually just encoded heterosexuality.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Which is bullshit. We'll just say that. That's bullshit. [snorting laughter]

Leigh: Yeah. [laughs]

Gretchen: But that I mean, that specifically was talking about male homosexuality. So what about queer female experience? So the author that I'm going to quote, they are someone that comes up again and again and again. They seem to be the most prolific author on ,you know, lesbianism and queer female experience in medieval Arab... Arabic literature. So if we don't specifically cite them, you can assume it's probably Sahar Amer, because she's everywhere.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: Um, all of the best stuff comes from her so she says,

"If this myth of Western heterosexuality has impeded since the 12th century, any clear understanding either of East-West relations in the Middle Ages, or of the literary expression of male homosexual desire in medieval French literature, it has completely erased the literary manifestation and literary lineage of lesbian sexuality."

So, what that means is, is that in the like Western... specifically, she's talking specifically French courtly love tradition, there are still... we can still see some of the male homoeroticism in that. The... just... it's just kind of... either encoded as heterosexuality or understood as being, you know, just incidental because these are just dudes who are really good friends.

But there's still a little bit of that left. But for her, almost everything of the queer female experience has been lost in the translation from even within the courtly love tradition, from the Arabo-Islamic tradition into the courtly love tradition. So she talks about levels of erasure.

The first level being the purposeful destruction of women loving women texts by their society. Which may or may not have happened, we just don't know. Like this... these are things that could have happened in history, if those things were destroyed, that would be a first level erasure, specifically destroying anything that reflects queer female experience.

The second level of erasure would be the lack of critical attention to any surviving texts given by modern scholarship, which is a problem. And it's a problem that will come up again and again, even in our own research. Like

when we were looking into the literary traditions in China, we found some stuff on queer female experience, and some of that is a lack of original sources, but some of it is also a lack of attention paid by modern scholarship to the sources that actually exist.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: There is a huge focus in academia when it comes to talking about queer historical experience on male homosexuality, and not a lot of attention given to female homosexuality. And again, some of that is lack of resources but some of it is also just, honestly? Most of the people in academia are dudes.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: And... and if they're interested in queer history at all...

Leigh: Dudes wanna hear about dudes.

Gretchen: They want to write about dudes. And you don't have a lot of scholarship focused on queer female experience. So that's second level of erasure. The third level of erasure that Amer talks about is the lack of scholarship addressing the cross-cultural context of the representation of gender and female sexuality. So, Arabic, Islamic women, specifically, women loving women, specifically have been elided, even more so than her Western counterpart.

So there's just this focus on like the Western experience of homosexuality. And even in the courtly love tradition itself, what we have surviving in Western literature is going to get focus from predominantly Western scholars, which means that they're not going to pay any attention to what may have been left out by the Western tradition when it's adapting or, you know, taking things from the Arabo-Islamic tradition Which means editing out queer female experience specifically.

So you have like these multiple levels of erasure going on, even in this like cross cultural influence from the Arabo-Islamic tradition into the courtly love tradition. That they're kind of trying to tone down a lot of the

homosexuality... like the homoeroticism from the male side, and basically almost entirely leaving out queer female experience.

Which means that we don't get access to you know, what... we just we lose sight of the Arabo-Islamic queer women, cause you know, Western, white males are going to be focusing on gay male experience in the Western tradition...

Leigh: Mm-hmm. Yep.

Gretchen: Rather than then, like the queer female experience in the Islamic tradition. So that's part of why we wanted to do this episode.

Leigh: Exactly. So, yeah, with that, you know, just a word of warning on the male gaze and perspective that we're going to experience in a lot of these writings. So like Gretchen was saying, most medieval Arabo-Islamic literature was surprise, surprise, written by men.

So it's important to remember that even if a character is female or an anecdote is written with a female narrator, or even came from a female quote "author," the cis male perspective kind of always dominates the text, including, you know, organization which can determine how like important the issue was perceived to be in society.

For example, most of... many of the literary works display... display a descending social hierarchy, actually in the text. So with more like socially important stories and issues in the front, and lesser toward the back. And a lot of things on women and children tend to be found towards the back.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So that's just, you know, disclaimer, we're going to be talking about all these things, but kind of hard to escape a male gaze.

Gretchen: Right. We can't...

Leigh: In the conversation. But we're taking it back.

Gretchen: Right? Yeah. Because even if we have more access to queer female experience in the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition than we have in the Western one, it's still filtered through a male gaze. So some of even the anecdotes are kind of like "eww".

Leigh: Look, *Tatu* may have been super duper fake lesbians from a male producer, but they were still valuable to me as a young queer.

Gretchen: [laughs] Right, right. Well, we just want to acknowledge that that is... that is the situation that we're dealing with here.

Fun Segment: Word of the Week

Leigh: Mm-hmm. But first, we want to bring up our bap-bap-ba-dah! Words of the week.

Gretchen: Wahoo! Words of the Week.

Leigh: Whoo! I'm gonna let Gretchen pronounce these, because she knows more Arabic than me, which is zero percent [laughter] that I know of Arabic. And I don't want to butcher things.

Gretchen: So the words of the week this week are *sihaq*, and *ziraf*.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So the Arabic term for male homosexuality is the *liwat* which Leigh brought up earlier, which comes from the verbal stem *lata*, which means to stick to something. But this is not used for women. This is not the word that is used for queer female experience. The verb... the verbal stem used for that is *suhaqqiyat* or, or one of its derivatives *sahq*, or *musahaqa*, for example.

And the verbal stem *shq* means to pound, bruise, efface, render something soft. It's often translated as rubbing and can refer to love between women or to solitary female masturbation. Specifically the context is talking about sexuality... sexual experiences between women, the best translation is

probably tribadism rather than you know something more generic that it was specifically attributed.

Leigh: Much— much like you know, mirror polishing gang in China and...

Gretchen: Right

Leigh: What's her name, Leila Rupp who writes *Sapphitries*.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which we brought up in the past, that most traditions if they're looking at like love between women focus on this tribadism, focus on this, this rubbing... to rub, to pound, various words...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: In various languages that all go upon this idea of, I guess, just scissoring through... scissoring through the centuries. [both laughing]

Gretchen: Okay, but like I want to write that book now: *Scissoring Through the Centuries*.

Leigh: Alright, so that's your NaNoWriMo book this year.

Gretchen: Yes. Scissoring through the centuries.

Leigh: So yeah, so according to one source, *suhaqqiyat* or *sahiqat* was a term for like a self declared lesbian or tribade. How do you pronounce this next one, this *Hkk*?

Gretchen: [corrects pronunciation] *Hkk*

Leigh: *Hkk*. Sometimes used, which you know means rubbing. So you'll hear us mention these a lot. And you'll see these all throughout our sources.

And then we have another one which is *ziraf*, which is... meaning someone who is witty, elegant, graceful, charming. This is a character archetype in the

abab genre, which we're gonna be talking about. And it's someone who is often then shown demonstrating wit and verbal skills, so... or as... as we've seen them referenced in... in other sources like courtly lady loving ladies, basically.

Gretchen: Mm hmm.

Leigh: So sophisticated queer ladies. So in poet, Shihab al-Din Ahmad al-Tifashi's, work, who will come back to a lot. He records that women who practice tribadism use this to refer to themselves. So, quote:

"If they say so and so is a zarifa, it is known among them that she is a tribade."

So

Gretchen: Okay, like, I... I really want it to be a cunnilingus joke. [laughter] because... cause... because *ziraf* is like a character archetype. That means, like the cunning... the witty, cunning smart person. Someone who's like cunning...

Leigh: The cunning linguist.

Gretchen: Right! Like, I know, it's not, but I really, really want it to be a cunnilingus joke because... because it's right there!

Leigh: We can... we can cross that bridge. We can make that.

Gretchen: I'm just gonna decide it is. Because...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: You know, I know that they're referring specifically to like tribadism. But I... but it's like, to me, I'm like, it's right there. The word means like, cunning!

Leigh: If early... look, if early Imperial China can bring us *dui shi* and they know about shared eating, you know, they're... you know, people knew what was going on here as well.

Gretchen: Right. So. So. Yeah. It's...it's a cunnilingus joke. I've decided, this is a cunnilingus joke about queer women. I've decided.

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: So, yeah, when al-Tifashi is using this word *zarifa*, it seems to be a specialized use of the term within a social group. But one with positive implications because this *zarif* was like cunning, sophisticated, graceful, charming. And he seems to be recording that this is their own term for themselves. This is what women are using to refer to themselves as and it's a positive thing.

So I think that's awesome. That we have here an example, even if it's from a male perspective, he's commenting on women use this word to refer to themselves if they are, you know, women loving women. They talk about themselves as being *zarifa*, which is like cunning and sophisticated and witty and smart. And I just think that's great. One that they chose that term that they're like "We're the sophisticated ladies [laughter] because we like other ladies," and that he was willing to record it. So, anyway, I think that's awesome.

Leigh: Yeah. So refined courtly ladies.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Who, you know, they apparently adorned their homes with like poetry which was sculpted on the doors and on the windows. Like, just write all your gay love poetry all over your house.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: It's fantastic. And they like, you know, they have clothing with poetic verses embroidered onto to them with gold and precious stones and so... You know just a big ol'...

Gretchen: They were like... flaming

Leigh: Big ol' gay commune of sophisticated ladies.

Gretchen: Yes. Sophist... I'm a sophisticated lady.

Leigh: I want to go to there.

Gretchen: Yes. And it may be that an observation from Sharif al-Idrisi, from... who lived from 1100 to 1166 C.E. is relevant in this case, and he says,

"There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so that they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and their voice. Such women would like to be the active partner, and they would like to be superior to the man who makes this possible for them. Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces whom she desires. If she has no inclination, he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men and brings her to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, the Qu'ran readers, and female scholars."

Leigh: She too smart to be straight.

Gretchen: [laughs] Basically, is what he's saying. [laughter] Smart ladies.

Leigh: You're too pretty to be a lesbian. Yeah, well, I'm also too smart to be straight.

Gretchen: Yes! Too smart to be straight. Oh, I like that.

Tribadism and Queer Lady Love in Arabo-Islamic Writing

Leigh: So yeah, so going into this knowing that you know, mostly what we're going to be talking about is tribadism. And, you know, going into queer lady love in Arabo-Islamic writing.

Gretchen: Yeah!

Leigh: So as with the Judeo-Christian tradition, like we mentioned, before women loving women activity is not spoken of in the *Quran*. Likely due to the patriarchal norms where women were perceived as not having sexual agency, even if their sexual urges were acknowledged.

Right. So they're like, you just heard that quote, they're passive partners in sex, and therefore the idea of them having agency with each other didn't make sense because they couldn't take the active role. But we find it very, very prevalent in the wider textual universe.

So we mentioned al-Tifashi. And one of his most prominent works is translated as *The Delights of the Hearts by What is Not to be Found in Any Book* or in one of my sources I also saw it as *The Promenade of Hearts of What is Not to be Found in Any Book*. So I kind of... I like both of those. If you want to... if you want to say the Arabic Gretchen you can go ahead.

Gretchen: It's Nuzhat al-Albab fima la Yujad fi Kitab. And that is...

Leigh: There you go.

Gretchen: And that is from 1253 C.E.

Leigh: So al-Tifashi was the son of a law expert, and he was one himself. And I think he was born in Tunisia.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: He traveled extensively, like other Muslim scholars at the time and authored a lot of books, including ones on geography, precious stones and medicine. And so *Delights of the Hearts* isn't an erotic manual, which is a genre that flourished in medieval Muslim literature, but it's more a collection of like entertaining stories, some on sexuality and sexual practices.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So the whole... the genre is called *abab* which is designed to be edifying as well as entertaining. So it mixed Quranic verses with poetry,

Hadith which are sayings of the Prophet plus philological and other materials, so kind of an inter textual exercise in mastery of both oral and written tradition. So mixing all of these things together.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm. Right

Leigh: So Tifashi's book is an *abab* on sexuality and sexual deviance. He has a... a fairly robust section at the end, like we said at the end about tribadism, preceded by anal sex with women and followed by effeminate men.

Gretchen: I guess that's how the ranking goes.

Leigh: I guess so.

Gretchen: Sorry... sorry effeminate men.

Leigh: Yeah [Peanuts noise] wah-wah

Gretchen: We still value you. [snorts]

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So yeah, and it has this like, praise/blame structure, which is very common to *abab* materials and I thought was really interesting. We don't have to go into it in detail, but I was fascinated reading about it. Which... so this was just like a general structure that was used in this particular genre... genre as you would say, like in praise of this particular thing, and in blame of it. Kind of pros and cons, but without firmly coming down as either you know, condemnatory or saying, this is something you have to do. It's... it really is more like a pro and con way of dealing with it.

But by placing queer female experience within that structure, it normalizes and even mainstreams female homo... homosexuality into the larger literary tradition of the *abab* genre, because this is something that would have been presented as like, "Here are the pros and cons of ladies love and ladies." Rather than saying like, "This is evil, this is wrong. This is bad. Don't do it. It's gross." It's just like one thing we can have a conversation about, you know, the pros and cons of this.

So I thought it was important to situate that so we understand even in some of his more like, less positive associations he's not condemning female homosexuality. He's just talking about it. Yeah. And he mixes like medical lore with like anecdotes and poetry. Though, again, there's kind of heterosexist vision about this. He's a presumably, you know, he's not a queer woman when he's talking about this. So let's get into some anecdotes. I think these are fun. [laughs]

Leigh: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah. So an important man said one day to an impudent one, when the topic of tribadism came up, quote:

"By God, I want to know how women practice sex between them." The impudent man replied: "If you would like to know that, enter your house a bit at a time."

Gretchen: [snorting laughter] So, so things to know about this, linguistically, the word for want when when the important man says I want to know, is *ashtahi*, which is desire or craving. It's like a carnal appetite, a kind of like voyeuristic lust. Like he's saying, like, [in a drawn out voice] "Dude I wanna to know what they're doing."

Leigh: I like your horny dude voice.

Gretchen: Yeah, he's a horny dude. He wants to know what ladies do when they're on their own. The word for like, practice sex between them is *tatasahaq*, which, as you might recognize the *sihaq* root in that, which connotes mutuality. So he's not talking about masturbation. He's not saying "I want to know what a lady does when her husband's not home." It's "I want to know what ladies do together."

Suggesting like a mutual sexual partnership between the women that he's talking about. But my... my... like the implication is that the man's wife is having sex with other women. And all the husband has to do is just like, go into the house, [laughter] slowly and catch her unawares. [laughs]

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Oh, I just love this.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So according to one author who was talking about this anecdote:

"Lurking behind the anecdote is the possibility that all women are enjoying female same-sex activity in the privacy of their quarters. The curious husband need only observe the woman most easily accessible to him, his wife."

Leigh: Mm-hmm. [laughter] So the idea that you know, like the wife is... is an object for male voyeurism, but at the same time, it's a commentary on like, well, "heterosexuality is kind of boring." like when the husband's gone, the wife is gonna find somebody else to diddle and that's going to be another lady.

Gretchen: Ladies.

Leigh: So, one man was told that his wife was having sex with other women and he responded,

"As long as she frees me from any sexual obligation towards her, let her do what she wants."

I mean, I feel like... I feel like he's got some other stuff going on too. Like, I don't know, as long as I had to do anything. You know, let her have her fun.

Gretchen: I just love that that's his response. It's like "dude, as long as I don't have to be involved, as long as she doesn't need anything from me, like fine, let her.. let her have all the ladies she wants." What a good husband.

Leigh: What a... what a good husband.

Gretchen: He supports her.

Leigh: One... one... one poetess actually declared:

*"I drank wine for love of flirting
and I shifted toward shq for fear of pregnancy."*

[snorting laughter] All right. I mean...

Gretchen: Cool.

Leigh: Decent motivation.

Gretchen: Right? Like I don't want to get pregnant. So I'll just... I'll just be with our ladies. I mean that... that is a... that is a benefit if you don't want children. You don't have to worry about that. If you... if you're a cis woman with other cis women you don't have to worry about getting pregnant.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Another anecdote. The final one for now. A certain Mazid was told:

"Your wife practices tribadism." He replied: "Yes, I ordered her to do that." He was then asked: "But why?" He replied: "Because it is softer on her labia, purer for the opening of her vulva, and more worth when the penis approaches her that she know its superiority."

Okay, So

Leigh: Arf.

Gretchen: Oh, on the one hand, like there's some... it's not all bad. Like he acknowledges that tribadism, whether it's masturbation in this context or sex with other women. He acknowledges that it is gentler and more comfortable for women. Like...

Leigh: Good looking out.

Gretchen: Good. Right. That's... that's good to acknowledge that. It's also kinda gross.

Leigh: Also kinda gross. Yeah. Yeah, the... that, you know, that same thing that we discovered in medieval in the Middle Ages in Europe that we talked about. The idea of female homosexuality being a prelude to heterosexuality.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: That they were practicing for the men.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So it's not an isolated incident.

Gretchen: Right. Yep.

Leigh: So, yeah.

Gretchen: Which I mean, this was reinforced by another anecdote where a tribade responds to a question after her wedding about how her wedding night went with:

"I have been yearning for meat for twenty years and was only satisfied with it yesterday."

So it's... Yeah, it's just like the centrality of the phallus.

Leigh: Really only needs a dick.

Gretchen: Yeah, and the male gaze. Yep. There's also a story of another woman when confronted with a large... like the text literally says "a man large of penis." Like the only thing that matters is he's got a big dick and she thinks to herself.

Leigh: Katherina Hetzeldorfer's dildo is bigger.

Gretchen: Yeah, probably. Was it as big as... was it as big as his arm? So she responds with

"how is it with the likes of this pestle in the world have I been beating my own clothing with my hands."

So she gets married. Like, okay, man, I've been masturbating. But what I really want is that dick. So yeah, there's... there's some good stuff. And there's also some like, I mean, it's still phallogentric.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: Male phallogentric and but not in like the... I don't know. No, I liked it. I like the euphemism of beating my clothing with my own hands. I also enjoy doing that. [laughter] But that's neither here nor there.

Leigh: Elsewhere, though, al-Tifashi seems to imply that tribades are more than a passing phase into heterosexuality.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: In the introduction to this section of his work, he mentions that they love each other like men do or more. They spend a great deal of money on each other, like a man on his female beloved. He also, you know, he writes about how women loving women are, according to Amer:

“said to have formed groups, to have held meetings, and to have led schools in which they taught other lesbians how best to achieve pleasure”

So again, talking about those, the *zarif*. And I you know, I just like this... this quote from there's like a... like a Western writer who had like what he was doing a survey of sexual customs in the Middle East, but he specifically reports that like there was a woman who was teaching every girl in the Sapphic sciences, which is Orientalist and gross but I also want to use Sapphic sciences from now on, so I'm taking that back.

Gretchen: Yes. Yeah, we can reclaim that, Sapphic sciences.

Leigh: We can reclaim that. We can do that.

Gretchen: Do you have a... are you a master of the Sapphic sciences?

Leigh: [laughs] [in a snooty voice] I have a Doctorate in the Sapphic sciences.

Gretchen: [in a snooty voice] In the Sapphic sciences.

Leigh: But yeah. Al-Tifashi even... even discusses... discusses sexual positions and the entire act itself. And Gretchen is going to read a full wonderful quote that we found in Amar's writing, quoting al-Tifashi.

Gretchen: Right, and this is where we get part of the title of our episode.

“The tradition between women in the game of love necessitates that the lover places herself above and the beloved underneath, unless the former is too light or the second too developed, and in this case, the lighter one places herself underneath and the heavier one on top because her weight will facilitate the rubbing, and will allow the friction to be more effective. This is how they proceed. The one that must stay underneath lies on her back, stretches out one leg and bends the other while leaning slightly to the side, therefore offering her opening (her vagina) wide open.

Meanwhile, the other lodges her bent leg on her groin, puts the lips of her vagina between the lips that are offered for her, and begins to rub the vagina of her companion in an up and down and down and up movement that jerks the whole body. This operation is dubbed the ‘saffron massage’ because this is precisely how one grinds saffron on the cloth when dyeing it. The operation must focus each time on one lip in particular; the right one for example, and then the other.

The woman will then slightly change position in order to apply better friction to the left lip and she does not stop acting in this manner until her desires and those of her partner are fulfilled. I assure you that it is absolutely useless to try to press the two lips together at the same time because the area from which pleasure comes would then not be exposed. Finally, let us note that in this game the two partners may be aided by a little willow oil scented with musk.

Leigh: Don't forget lube.

Gretchen: Yah, don't forget your lube.

Leigh: It's so technical.

Gretchen: I know! Like...

Leigh: What?!

Gretchen: It's kind of voyeuristic, but also like...

Leigh: It's better than the manual, I guess.

Gretchen: Weird shrugging of like "I don't know what women can do. Can they even have sex?"
Like...

Leigh: Here is exactly how, you should have sex.

Gretchen: As a woman.

Leigh: Yeah. He doesn't include moral condemnations.

Gretchen: No.

Leigh: The—the blame is more of an impracticality or negative aspect than religious condemnation. So like, you know, it's [laughs] I don't know.

Gretchen: Like when you... When you... in his blame section I mean, I included that in that line because like in his blame section, it's not like "This is morally wrong". It's more just like "This is impractical." And maybe women actually secretly do just want dick. Rather than like, "This is morally wrong and gross." It's like "Well, maybe... maybe they just do it because they don't know that penises are better."

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: I don't really... like I read that whole passage and was like I don't know what to do with this. [laughter] Like, one, I really love saffron massage.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Like I just... I really enjoy that as a euphemism. [laughs] But also like, how does he know and that's so specific and...

Leigh: And is there a spices emoji? We're taking that now.

Gretchen: Sure. Is there? Yeah, maybe? I don't know. But we can take one. And just like... his whole like, "I assure you it is absolutely useless to try and press the two lips together at the same time."

Leigh: Like, like okay, buddy.

Gretchen: Like dude, how do you know? [laughter]You can't... you can't absolutely assure me that it's useless cause... cause you're not a... you don't have a vagina. Don't tell me if that's useful or not.

Leigh: So yeah. We also go into a bunch of martial metaphors for women and women activity.

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: So back to thigh fencing.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: So the... the primary sources for this discussion are Jawami' al-lazza, is that it?

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Which is the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* by Abdul Hasan 'Ali Ibn Nasr Al-Katib, who's considered the earliest example... which is considered the earliest example of homoerotic compilations. There's also *The Book of Metonymic Expressions of the Litterateurs and Allusive Phrases of the Eloquent* by Iraqi religious judge, Abul-'Abbas Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Al-Jurjani. Both of these are from the 10th to 12th centuries where they were composed.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: And we have examples like the shield... a shield as the vulva. So from the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*:

"Your vulva became like a shield."

The penis was referred to as both lance and sword. We've seen that even... even as late as Magnus Hirschfeld.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Joust, you know, therefore, functions is a metaphor for lovemaking, continuing with that... that lance. In *The Book of Metonymic Expressions*, quote:

"They manifest a war in which there is no spear-thrusting, but only fending off a shield with a shield."

There's that shield banging.

Gretchen: There's that shield banging.

Leigh: Whoo!

Gretchen: Yep. Or also from *The Book of Metonymic Expressions*,

"They invented a tournament in which there is no use of lance hitting only with great noise one shield against the other!"

Or no, that's from al-Tifashi's book.

Leigh: Yeah, that's from the al-Tifashi, so...

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: So yeah, it's... it's wild. And then we get into like, then we get into our discussion about weird heat stuff.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: This... this is very strange.

Gretchen: [laughing] A medical definition.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Oh my god.

Leigh: God medieval. I'd... like no matter where you go, medieval discussions on medical treatises are just wack. Like, I don't know what the fuck doctors were going on about in the Middle Ages about medicine, but it's weird. So there's... there's this medical definition of women loving women activity quoted in the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* by a famous ninth century Muslim philosopher, Al-Kindi. Which, Gretchen, would you like to say this quote?

Gretchen: Sure.

“Lesbianism is due to a vapor which, condensed, generates in the labia heat and an itch which only dissolve and become cold through friction and orgasm. When friction and orgasm take place, the heat turns into coldness because the liquid that a woman ejaculates in lesbian intercourse is cold whereas the same liquid that results from sexual union with men is hot. Heat, however, cannot be extinguished by heat; rather, it will increase since it needs to be treated by its opposite. As coldness is repelled by heat, so heat is repelled by coldness.”

So, basically, ladies who have sex with ladies have this burning itch in their labia that can only be like cooled by having sex with other women. Cause, like, if they have sex with someone who has a penis, then, it's only gonna make it worse.

Leigh: It's too hot!

Gretchen: It's too hot for them.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: It's too hot for their lady genitals.

Leigh: It's so weird. And then there's also like... there's also... these... these anecdotes from these physicians in the ninth century who thought that lesbianism was an inborn state, that was actually caused by the mother consuming certain foods and then passing it through the breast milk.

Gretchen: Oh.

Leigh: So this ninth century physician Yuhanna ibn Masawayh. Yes?

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Says quote,

“lesbianism results when a nursing woman eats celery, rocket, melilot leaves and the flowers of a bitter orange tree. When she eats these plants and suckles her child, they will affect the labia of her suckling and generate an itch which the suckling will carry through her future life.”

So aka the idea of female homosexuality is thought of... as depicted as innate and lifelong, but also just like, crotch itch? So like yay, lesbianism is...

Gretchen: Innate.

Leigh: Something that you're born with. And it's innate and you have, you know, it's something that is happening throughout the rest of your life. But also that it's created through like being, like “Your mama ate some celery and now your crotch itches.” [laughter] And now you gay, like what's happening?

Gretchen: [laughs] I'm so sorry.

Leigh: Like, it brings me back to the whole like, lettuce, celery thing and eat like I don't know.

Gretchen: Just, why these particular foods? I'm super curious about that.

Leigh: I don't know.

Gretchen: Celery?

Leigh: I mean, celery kind of oozes when you cut it, right? It could be back like that... like that variant of lettuce in Egypt.

Gretchen: Like rocket is kind of... is like a lettuce? I assume melilot, I don't know what melilot leaves are but like...

Leigh: Neither do I.

Gretchen: Bitter orange flower. I don't know. I just like... it makes me think of that SNL sketch about cowbell. It said it's like “I got a fever and the only solution is more cowbell.” Is like, I gotta itch and the only solution [laughing]

Leigh: Is lesbianism.

Gretchen: Is lesbianism

Leigh: [still laughing] Oh god.

Gretchen: That's great.

Leigh: There's also, al-Tifashi, also talks about the necessity of breath and moaning. So like sex between women regularly paid attention to quote,

“this music of love that the breath produces as it escapes the throat and passes through the nostrils.”

Gretchen: These some noisy bitches.

Leigh: Yeah. [snorts] He cites advice from a lesbian mother to her daughter,

“Make sure to always accompany the back and forth movements which you know well with the sweet music of breath you exhale from your nostrils.”

He also said something about like this... this woman telling her daughter to make sure that she wiggles lasciviously.

Gretchen: Ooh.

Leigh: Which okay.

Gretchen: Sure.

Leigh: Also speaks of:

“wheezing, panting, purring, murmurs, heartbreaking sighs.”

Which I thought was nice and less gross.

Gretchen: Aww. Like..I guess if you're gonna have... if you're a lady and you're having sex with a lady it's gotta be noisy?

Leigh: Yeah, I guess so.

Gretchen: I mean, it probably means you're enjoying yourself, so...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Cool, cool beans. But the interesting is that all of... all of these texts that we're talking about here likely influenced Etienne de Fourgere's *Livre des Manieres*, which is a French text from which we get some of our favorite metaphors for queer lady sex that Leigh mentioned in our earlier episode, like joining shield to shield without a lance. You can see how that, you know, would have been pretty much lifted directly from the Arabo-Islamic tradition.

"they don't play at jousting,"

"they do not need a tongue in their balancing act,"

And,

"they go at the game of thigh-fencing one person at a time"

Leigh: So we'll save... we'll save, you know, more of that for when we do a courtly love episode. But it's worth noting that all of this martial language came... you know, it's unusual for French literature.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: And scholars have mused over it for some time going like "Where's this coming from? This is not..."

Gretchen: The French tradition.

Leigh: Really fitting with the tradition."

Gretchen: Mm-mm.

Leigh: But it's very common in Arabic... Arabic... homoerotic literature. So it's, you know, clearly folks are just kind of lifting from one area to another.

Tales of Cross Dressing and Same-Sex Marriage

Gretchen: Right. Right. So another thing we wanted to talk about was stories about cross-dressing and same sex marriage. Which come up in not the erotic poetry but more in kind of the storytelling or literature tradition.

So women disguised as men is a pretty common literary trope, both in France and other European countries and in Arabic literature in the Middle Ages. Just think of, you know, Jean d'Arc where you have a woman dressing up as a knight and saving people. It's... it's a fairly common trope.

Arabic literature has several of its own real and fictional warrior women that are you know, along the lines of Joan of Arc, you have Princess 'Ain al-Hayat, Queen al-Rabab, al-Gayda', Gamra and Nitra, Aluf, the Princess Turban and the female community in a story called *Romance of Sayf*.

And there's an entire 18th century poetry genre where the beloved dresses as a man and then you know, meets a man and falls in love and it's got these you know, homoerotic undertones of like a dude who meets a dude who's actually a woman and falls in... I mean, it's like Mulan, like there's this whole poetry genre that has that as a trope.

But in... in these, in most of those stories, homosexuality typically functions kind of in the second degree, as it's never really actualized or even addressed directly, either as you know, male loving male or women loving women because, you know, in stories where the woman dresses up as a man, and then meets a man, and he falls in love with her, it's not actually like, there's homoerotic undertones, but that's never actually actualized because it's like, "Oh, wait, she's a woman. Now it makes sense. Why I was in love with them."

Actually one of my favorite books when I was a child has that story involved in it. It's called *Seven Daughters and Seven Sons*.

Leigh: Oh yeah.

Gretchen: And it's like an Arabic... like it's taken from Arabic folklore. So that's from this tradition. But there actually is a genre of stories that combine crossdressing women with same sex marriage. And these are really interesting, especially for talking about the relationship between like the French versions and the Arabic versions.

So the French tale *Yde et Olive*, is a mid-13th century continuation of an earlier epic poem called *Huon de Bordeaux*. And it is very likely that this French tale draws on the Arabic story of Qamar al-Zaman and Princess Budur from *The Thousand and One Nights*.

So... and it's interesting to compare them because we see how much more permissive and subversive the Arabic stories are than the French one. So in the *Yde et Olive* story, you have... you know, an infertile queen and a king pray to Mary, then they have a daughter named Yde. And when the queen dies, and Yde grows up, the king decides to marry her because she looks like his dead wife. I don't know why that's a trope in fairy tales. It's so weird to me.

Leigh: It's... it's very Freudian.

Gretchen: Yeah, it's... it's just super weird. He's like, "My wife is dead. And my daughter like my biological daughter looks exactly like my wife. So I should marry my biological daughter." Like, why? Who thinks that? Gross. But anyway, that's the background for the story.

So Yde flees cause you should. She dresses as a knight and via various exploits ends up winning the favor of the King of Constantinople, who rewards her by marrying Yde to his daughter Olive. Because he doesn't know that Yde is actually a woman.

So after the wedding Yde, like feign sickness on the wedding night so that they don't have sex, but eventually tells her wife that she's a woman. Now this is overheard, and Yde is sentenced to a public ritual bath to prove her gender. Cause, sure. God, of course, miraculously changes her into a man and an angel announces the imminent conception of Yde and Olive's child now that Yde is a man. So...

Leigh: Okey dokey.

Gretchen: Right. Like, on the one hand, like this story creates like an interesting space to critique social norms of gender and sexuality and social standing. Yde is dressing... is cross dressing and that's playing with gender as well as giving up her status as you know, she's a princess, so she's royal. So she's giving up her status as well as, you know, living as a man.

But all of these, all this space for question is, you know, eventually just, resolved, in favor of heteronormativity and social status. Because Yde is once again restored to her status as being royal but this time as a man.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: And, you know, at the time it may have been a subversive story within its literary tradition and culture. Like we're not going to say that it's not subversive just because it resolves in a heteronormative way. Like at the time, this may have been a subversive story because you're... cause you're allowing space for women to have a lot of agency. Even if the woman transitions and becomes a man. But what's really interesting is that the story it was likely based on [dramatic voice] very different and much more positive for queer ladies.

So this is the story of Qamar al-Zaman and Princess Budur. And it's... there's a long story beforehand but here's the part of the story that... that's interesting for the Yde and Olive story. So after great resistance to marriage, Qamar and Budur eventually married through the intervention of magic and djinn's being involved. And then, they're immediately separated.

So Budur takes on the name of her lost husband, Qamar, and is successful disguising herself as her lost husband in part because she looks a lot like him, physically. So she arrives at the Isle of Ebony and the king there forces her to marry his daughter, Hayat al-Nufus, who is quote, "*the most virgin of the island.*" So this, pure virginal woman

And eventually, Budur's true gender is revealed and the story ends with her reunited with her husband Qamar, giving him Hayat as a second wife, and

the three of them live happily ever after. Doesn't sound that much more subversive but then you get into the details. [laughter]

Alright, so first thing to notice is that the cross-dressing element is very different. In the Arabic tale it doesn't include a loss of social status, because Budur is disguised as her husband, who was also of royal lineage. She's not like pretending to be someone of lower social class.

So she doesn't need to like perform these extraordinary feats to regain the lost status that she, you know, the status she lost by fleeing. So this allows focus to shift entirely to like, the erotic and sexual ambiguities that the cross-dressing heroine elicits in this marriage to another woman.

It's also much more sexually explicit, Like the French tale, like goes out of its way to avoid any suggestion that the women made love. Yde like pretends to be sick, to avoid having sex with her wife. Like, in this version, they have sex. Here's a quote from the story,

"[The servants] made Hayat enter into the room where Budur, daughter of King Ghouyour, was sitting, and they closed the door on them. They lit candles and lights for them and spread their bed with silk [sheets]. [Then] Budur entered into Hayat."

Leigh: Yay. [laughter] That sounds like such a nice romantic night.

Gretchen: I know!

Leigh: With the candles, and the lights, and their silk sheets.

Gretchen: Yes! Like the servants went out of their way to make it really romantic and sweet. And they have sex! And then they spend the next two nights kissing, including kissing between the eyes and caressing. According to the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, that we mentioned earlier quote,

"Kissing is the means by which sexual desire is aroused...kissing becomes more effective when it is accompanied by biting, pinching, sucking, sighing, and hugging. It is then that both the man and the

woman burn with sexual desire simultaneously...Kissing is the penis' messenger to the vulva.

[laughs] Sorry I just.

Leigh: Oh god.

Gretchen: I find that amusing.

It is also said that kissing is an essential part of sexual union...kissing, like lubrication, facilitates sexual union...Coition without kissing is imperfect."

Also note that like kissing between the eyes as an Arabic strategy for speeding up a women's orgasm. Like this is something we get in other like sexual manuals. So...

Leigh: Don't forget foreplay, folks.

Gretchen: Right, like, so when you have in the text that they spent the next two nights like kissing, and kissing between the eyes, and caressing, like, they having sex. You're not just gonna have foreplay, like why else would you have foreplay? So they've got like three nights of Budur making love to her wife, apparently her wife not knowing that she's actually a woman. Because only on the third night does Budur reveal her gender.

I don't know how this works, but it happens in the story. That, like, only on... that, like Hayat doesn't find out that her... that her spouse is a woman until the third night. So, maybe they used a dildo. I don't know, doesn't say.

So, and she... Budur reveals this by speaking in her natural feminine voice and showing her wife first her vulva and then her breasts. In the... in the Yde and Olive story, like, Yde bares her breasts, not her vulva. She just bares her breasts and is like "look, I'm a lady." Budur is like, "hey look at my vulva. Oh, also, I have breasts."

Leigh: [laughs] Like, okay.

Gretchen: So... but not only does Hayat not object, or react with the panic, like Olive does, she's actually, quote, "pleased" with what she sees. And keeps the secret to herself for like most of the rest of the story. She doesn't tell anybody that her wife is actually... that her spouse is actually a woman. And this is followed by a description of their mutual laughter, their fellowship, their sexual play.

Like they've after this, they enter into this like same... you know, this... like, partnership and intimacy together. And even to the point that like to assuage her father's fear in her continued, you know, virginity. Hayat actually stages a scene where she covers herself with chicken blood, screams then hides the chicken and calls her family into quote, "witness her defloration."

Leigh: Oh my god, like she's amazing.

Gretchen: She fakes getting deflowered to hide her wife's identity.
[laughter] According to Amer,

"Ironically, the very moment that the two lovers are portrayed as maintaining heteronormativity is also the very space where binary sexual relations are exposed and where the very notion of stable identities is challenged...in the Arabic tale, the exhibition of the bloody cloth in the context of a homosexual marriage reveals that heterosexuality is critiqued, denaturalized, [and] animalized. After all, marriage is legitimized here not by the virginal blood of a bride but that of a lowly farm animal, the chicken. Meanwhile, Budur and Hayat are allowed to continue their intimate life together, inadvertently blessed this time by the entire social system."

Leigh: Wow.

Gretchen: [laughing] I love this story so much.

Leigh: Oh my god that's amazing.

Gretchen: I don't know whether I like Budur or Hayat better. I want... I want to marry both of them even though they're fictional characters. Can I just be their third wife?

Leigh: They're... they're a unit.

Gretchen: I'm gonna be their third wife.

Leigh: There you go.

Gretchen: So even though the seemingly patriarchal, polygamous ending has ambiguities. So in the Yde and Olive tale, like Yde is transformed into a man and now it's... now it's sanctioned. because if you have a man and a woman together. Rather than staying in separate households, it was common in... if you had polygamy, if a man had multiple wives in the Arabo-Islamic culture, typically the different wives would live in different households. But rather than stay in separate households, Budur insists on sharing a household and one of Budur's lines which is,

"one night for her, one night for me."

While it, on the surface, implies the sharing of you know, their mutual husband now, Qamar, is like "She gets one night with him. I get one night with him." It also implies a sharing of each other. So this may actually be a story about polyamory, rather than polygamy.

Where the French Yde is forced back into the heterosexual framework via transformation into a man, Budur is allowed to retain her homosexual intimacy with Hayat even despite the imposition of a heterosexual and polygamous marriage. And like that just... I love that story so much and now I want to read it, because it's like delightful.

Leigh: Yeah. That's pretty great.

Gretchen: I feel like that story is ripe for like, adaptation into a... like a genre novel.

Leigh: Maybe that's your NaNoWriMo.

Gretchen: Someone could like... Yeah, make that into like, like re-tell that story. Someone needs to re-tell that story. I don't know whether I'm the

right person to retell that story, because I'm not Islamic, nor am I Middle Eastern. So I think that story would probably be better coming from someone in that cultural tradition but I mean...

Leigh: Somebody do it, please.

Gretchen: Someone please do it because I want a modern adaptation of Budur and Hayat, and Qamar I guess, he can come too. But mostly just Budur and Hayat. [snorting laughter] So finally, before... before we end off, we want to talk about some people examples.

Leigh: Yeah!

Gretchen: So, Leigh, do you want to talk us about the first lesbian couple?

People Examples

Leigh: Yes, yeah. The quote first lesbian couple, the story of Hind and al-Zarqa'. So according to many anecdotes in the Arab literary tradition, the origin of lesbianism is actually often traced back 40 years before the emergence of male homosexuality, to the story of an interfaith love affair between an Arab woman and a Christian woman in pre-Islamic Iraq.

So the story is told in the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, like the others, and so it features two women. It's Hind Bint al-Nu 'man, the Christian daughter of the last Lakhmin king of Hira in the seventh century. And Hind Bint al-Khuss al-Iyadiyyah, who's known as al-Zarqa', from Yamama in Arabia, and is known as the first lesbian in Arab history.

So it's quoted in the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* she, Hind, was so loyal to al-Zarqa' that when the latter died, she cropped her hair, wore black clothes, rejected worldly pleasures, vowed to God that she would lead an ascetic life until she passed away. And as a result, she built a monastery, which was named after her on the outskirts of Kufa.

When she died, she was buried at the monastery gate. Her loyalty was then an example for poets to write about. There are also other women who continued to shed tears on their loved... ON their beloved ones graves until they passed away.

Gretchen: Aww. Wow.

Leigh: So like these, these stories give reason to believe that *sahq* and *sahiqat* were thought to be more than just a medical condition and a sexual practice. Right? These stories of *sahiqat*, lesbians were considered as evidence of greater love and loyalty and devotion of women loving women, compared to men's attachment to women.

Gretchen: We saw that... we saw that in our China episode as well.

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: When we talked about like the... like the dancer who was like in love with you know her, you know, fellow actor, like and how...

Leigh: Like I can do this better than you.

Gretchen: Right? We're like held up as the examples of like, "This is how you do love folks."

Leigh: Yeah. And like Ibn Nasr even cites the following verses that were written from an unnamed poet talking about Hind's love for al-Zarqa' as being,

*"O Hind, you are truer to your word than men.
Oh, the difference between your loyalty and theirs!"*

Who runs the world? Girls.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh.

Leigh: Like, I just... Yeah, this is how you do love. Look at this example. It's ah! Just I mean, like, it's such a short anecdote and there's even like, in that same text, there's like 12 or 13 other listings of like these lesbian couples that are like, and they... I couldn't find a lot of details of them, but they have really amazing names. We don't have time to go into them. So we'll include them in our show notes. But just... I love... like this, just this being the "Alright, this is the first example of this great, great love between women"

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: Hind and al-Zarqa'.

Gretchen: I love it.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: It's beautiful.

Leigh: And then, lastly...

Gretchen: Yeah. Lastly, we just wanted to talk a little bit about Walladah bint al-Mustafki, who is... mostly because they might come up if you're researching. You know, if you're looking into queer female experience in... in medieval Islam, you might come across them, because they're sometimes called the Arab Sappho

Leigh: Or the Sappho of Spain too.

Gretchen: Yeah, the Sappho of Spain. So Walladah lived from 994 to 1091, was the daughter of Muhammad III of Cordoba, the last of the Umayyad Cordoban caliphs. Her father was assassinated in 1026. And she inherited his properties and used them to open a literary hall and palace in Cordoba, where she offered classes in poetry and the arts of love to women of all social classes.

She was intelligent, cultured, one of the few women of the time to participate in poetry battles. Where poet's would compete to like finish an incomplete poem. So she was very, very smart, very intelligent, wealthy. She sometimes...

Leigh: She was considered one of those *zarifs*.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah. So she met a man named Ibn Zaydun at one such poetry competition. He was a poet and nobleman from a rival clan to hers, so they had to keep the relationship a secret. Eight of the nine poems that we have preserved from her are about her relationship with him. He apparently also had male lovers and they eventually split after his relationship with a Black lover.

It's kind of unclear whether or not that was, whether or not that meant a slave girl or if this was just like a literary trope of the time. It is kind of a trope, that you would have like the Black lover and it would cause problems. And... so it's kind of unclear exactly what happened but they split and after splitting Walladah had a relationship with the Vizier Ibn Abdus, who's one... who was one of Zaydun's rivals, who then had him imprisoned and all of his wealth seized. So you know.

Leigh: Petty, petty, petty.

Gretchen: Petty, petty, petty. Yep. Walladah never married Abdus but he did protect her until his death. So the reason why she is called you know, the Sappho of Spain or the Arab Sappho is,

there... one of her students, a woman named Muhya bint Al-Tayyani, who is the daughter of a merchant, wrote these kind of tongue in cheek, positive, like satirical poems about Walladah. And so many Western scholars and at least one Arab scholar, have argued that Muhya and Walladah were actually lovers...

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: But that Walladah's love poems about her students were repressed. Ibn Bassam cites one line of poetry by Walladah in his classic *Adh-Dhakhirah Fi Mahasin Ahi Al-Jazirah* and the lines are,

*"I give my cheek to whoever loves me
and I give my kiss to anybody who desires it."*

And this, you know, Ibn Bassam actually then uses this line to like, criticize Walladah for like flaunting her pleasures and that you know, that she was open about you know...

Leigh: Well, and speaking of the idea that she's "flaunting her pleasures", that... that line and apparently another one, the God... "*by God, I am fit for greatness and stride along with great pride.*" These two were actually apparently she had them... like we... like we mentioned with the *zarifs* had them embroidered in gold thread on her coat.

Gretchen: Ooooh.

Leigh: Yeah. So, mmhm.

Gretchen: So, this theory that she had a relationship with her student and that these lines about giving my cheek to whoever loves me and my kiss to anybody who desires it, that these are like subtle clues to her sexuality. That is the source of the moniker the Arab Sappho. But I mean, it has to be said that we... if she had love poems written to women, we have none of them. Like we have no actual sources that can either confirm or fully deny her sexuality in any particular way.

We know she had two relationships with men. We don't know exactly how deep the nature of those relationships were. We do know one of her female students wrote these kind of tongue in cheek satirical poems for her which Walladah had actually done the same for her first lover. So there's, you know, potential there for that being kind of a tongue in cheek way to flirt, I guess. [snorting laughter]

Like, "I'm a poet. I write satirical poems about the people that I'm with." But we don't know either way. But we also just thought it worth bringing up because given that she does also have

like these... does *zarifa* kind of style embroidering on her clothing and that was known for, you know, for queer women that it's possible. She could be. We're not saying yes or no, we just... we're just saying we don't know. There's some intriguing clues and it would be cool.

Leigh: The idea of medieval Islamic... Islamic world courtliness and like courtly... courtly love were not expressly heterosexual practices.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So the very fact that she is in this world says something that may indicate there's something less than entirely heterosexual going on.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: It's when we get into conversations about *vaqueros*. And you know, we talked about pirates like maybe situational gayness sort of thing. It's like, "Hey, you're in this community. You're doing these things." "I guess. Why not?"

Gretchen: I'm here. I'm queer. Why not?

Leigh: Yeah. Which is a joke that we know and you guys don't know yet because that's for a future episode.

Gretchen: It's for a future episode. So.

Takeaways

Leigh: So, yeah, final takeaways.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: As we wrap up here.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm.

Leigh: Arabic literature had some pretty badass euphemisms for gay lady love.

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah

Leigh: And just love in general. Pretty awesome.

Gretchen: Yep. And like, as with the Chinese literary tradition, there's so much we're missing in a Western context. And you know, the Islamic cultures themselves because, they... they're not aware of their own history, like so much has been erased. Which to me one of the biggest takeaways from this discussion, other than just like “This is super interesting, and I love it. And now I want Hayat and Budur and I want a modern adaptation of Hayat and Budur,” is this question of erasure. And really what... what summarized it for me was again from Amer, and she says,

“Despite the access of the West to Arabic homoerotic literature, there has been, because of the subject matter, a process of selective borrowing, or perhaps even at times of outright violent silencing, in the material that was available. Those aspects of love and desire that dealt with male, but even more so female, homosexuality, were more readily rejected, especially from the twelfth century on, with the increasing tendency toward heteronormativity.

Literary devices, metaphors, and images describing male homosexuality were integrated more readily than those dealing with lesbianism, even though the latter material was as available to the Western public as the former. One might say that some form of censorship took place at some level, though it is hard to pinpoint at which one---at the level of the translators, of the poets themselves, or of the scribes. What is evident, however, is the erasure of lesbian Arabic homoerotic desire from the Western love tradition, traceable in so many other ways to various Arabic and Andalusian sources.

In a period as preoccupied as was late-twelfth-century France with the elaboration of regimes of sexual repression, social order, and heteronormativity, despite the prevalence of descriptions of lesbian love in the Arabic tradition, and despite the assimilation of various aspects of Arabic homoeroticism in Western descriptions of love, French authors and poets still chose to follow the lines of heterosexual desire, and phallogentric sexuality more generally, when speaking of female erotic encounters.”

So just like... what I really walk away thinking about is just how many layers of erasure.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: Especially as women, and then as queer women, as queer, non-white women, as queer, not white women who are also Islamic, like there are just so many layers of erasure that go on and that's awful.

Leigh: And it's physically almost impossible to get a hold of these texts.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Sahar Amer talks about how you know, like, the only place that you can actually get these texts is in... in... in any sort of fragmentation seems to be in the West.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Because they've been physically destroyed by, you know, by more modern folks in the Middle East. And so she even in one of her articles goes... goes on to talk about how her sister is an artist who did a piece called *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure* in 2001. Where she did it's... this embroidered sculpture installation, where she actually took language from the *Encyclopedia* and embroidered them on these boxes and created this like this structure because it's she's... she's trying to... trying to make it be the... the most complete thing that can be preserved. She says:

“In 2001 the Egyptian artists Ghada Amer, who is my sister created a sculpture inspired from the medieval Arabic text and entitled it the Encyclopedia of Pleasure. This sculpture is the first and only work in any media as far as I know, devoted exclusively to this groundbreaking Arabic text. Her sculpture is an unprecedented and perhaps subversive gesture by an Arab woman to save from oblivion, this essential text and in broader terms, to break the silence imposed upon female eroticism in the Arab world, and to resurrect a frank and non-judgmental discussion around women's sexuality that until today continues to be absent in the east.”

So it's... it's really, really difficult for people to obtain access to medieval Arabic writings on alternative sexualities in the Middle East.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which again, like we saw in China is so devastating that like there's this rich history, and the people who would benefit from it the most are the people who cannot access it.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So.

Gretchen: Yeah. It's tragic

Leigh: I don't know. That's something to end on.

Gretchen: And it... like sucks to end there, but as we saw with the Chinese tradition, like that's...

Leigh: That's where we're at.

Gretchen: Right. That's where we're at. Is just the the erasure and silencing of our stories from history, by those who are... who benefit from our silencing.

Leigh: So...

Gretchen: And that's shitty. And that's part of why we do what we do. Like the hopeful note is that like, we hope in our work doing this, to... if at some level, we can give just a little bit back of what this story is to the people who need it most like we've done our job.

Leigh: Mm-hmm.

Gretchen: We want to give our history back to ourselves. And the history of that other people are literally blocked access from, you know. Like maybe they can access this podcast but not those texts. And then they can know that like, this is true. Their history that their... their own history is bigger than than they've been told and more accepting in some level than they've been told.

Leigh: Absolutely.

How Gay were They?

So, so on a lighter note, Gretchen. Let's end our show,

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: With our How Gay Were They? Ratings.

Gretchen: How Gay Were They? Oh, I mean, if we're talking specifically about like Walladah, I put her at like, a five. There's some evidence but like, literally anything else is like super gay. [laughter] 10 out of 10 for very literally everything else in this episode is like "Well, that's gay."

Leigh: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

Gretchen: Saffron massage super gay.

Leigh: Oh, boy. super gay. Yeah. For me, yeah, definitely when like talking about Walladah, it takes me back to like Judith Bennett's scholarship on like lesbian-like women, and assigning certain behaviors and values to you know, like, same sex communities. And that's kind of where I placed Walladah. I don't know about it, but there's, you know, interesting things there.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: But I mean, like, if you're gonna say that, you know, Hind and al-Zarqa' are like the prime example of love between women. I'm gonna give you a 10 out of 10.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Maybe... maybe like a 9.5. Just like point five taken off for the fact that all of these things are like coming from dudes being like haheh lesbians. [laughter] But, you know... we, I mean, we gotta take what we can get from millennia of history being written by men. So there you go.

Gretchen: Right. Right. And they're... while there's some voyeurism. I do think there's at least a... there are at least situations where they don't need to physically insert themselves in the same way... like, yeah, there's the like, "Well lesbianism is just a prelude to heterosexuality and that's gross." But then there's also the like, willingness to understand that there may be women who prefer other women, and they don't necessarily need to insert themselves into that situation.

So yeah, but yeah, maybe lose a couple points for the male gaze, but... or like half a point for the male gaze, but at least at least it's been it's a lot more than we've seen in other like, it's a lot more than we got even in the medieval cloisters from a male perspective.

Leigh: Mm-hmm. Who were just so scandalized and be like, "I don't know what's happening."

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: "This seems sort of like sex but there's no penis so it can't be sex but it still seems really bad. So and I'm not going to talk about it in case somebody wants to do more of it."

Gretchen: Right. Also, if you go to a nunnery, just don't bang the ladies. Just don't do it guys.

Leigh: Yeah. Yeah.

Gretchen: Yeah. There's at least is... that there's a much more positive I think understanding of it and then we get some lovely metaphors and some beautiful stories out of it.

Leigh: Mm-hmm, Absolutely.

Gretchen: Someone should expand the story of Hindi and al-Zarqa' too. Somebody needs to make that into it.

Leigh: Yes. I would like that.

Gretchen: Write me an epic sad love story because I love suffering. [laughter] Give me some the angst. give me a like...yeah.

Leigh: Yeah.

Closing and Where to Find Us Online

Gretchen: Yes. Anyway, anyway. Where can... where can they find us online? If people want to connect with us individually, or as a show. Leigh, where can they find you?

Leigh: You can... you can find me online, talking about... talking about comics, queer TV, continuing to talk about old timey queer folks over at [@aparadoxinflux](#) on Twitter and Gretchen, what about you?

Gretchen: When I am not talking about saffron massages and thigh fencing, I am writing nerdy media analysis and fangirling over my favorite shows and books over at the [Fundamentals.com](#) or my personal website [gnellis.com](#) And people can also find me on Tumblr and Twitter as at @gnelliswriter all one word.

Leigh: *History is Gay* podcast can be found on Tumblr at [@historyisgaypodcast](#). Twitter at [@historyisgaypod](#). And you can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, fun, fun things you found this week in the world of queer history, telling us happy Pride. Yay.

Gretchen: Yay. Happy Pride, everybody.

Leigh: Happy Pride. So that email is historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com

Gretchen: Oh, yeah. Whoa, shout out. We need to give a... shout out one of the emails that we got. It was so sweet.

Leigh: Oh, yeah.

Gretchen: From Hannah. Hi, Hannah

Leigh: Hi, Hannah.

Gretchen: We think you're lovely and Hannah sent us an email asking they wanted to do a persuasive speech for their university and wanted to talk about like, erasure and queer history. So good for you, Hannah. Good for you.

Leigh: We hope that your project goes well.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Spread, spread it, spread it far and wide.

Gretchen: Yep and we also heard from Jennifer Shaw who wrote that book that we referenced a lot in the discussion of Claude Cahun. So...

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: So send us emails. We really, really enjoy getting them.

Gretchen: We do love emails.

Leigh: We really love it when people say hi.

Gretchen: if you're enjoying the show, remember to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcast. It helps more people find us and we can expand our awesome community. Interact with us on Twitter. That is one thing we're trying to do a bit better at, being more pointed interacting on Twitter so, we love it when you guys do that, too.

Leigh: Yes. So that's it for *History is Gay* until next time.

Gretchen: Stay queer...

Leigh: And stay curious.

♪ [Outre Music Plays]♪