

# One against Seven

## Variations on the Misogynistic Nature of 'The Seven Sages' in Different Arabic Manuscript Copies (17th -18th Centuries)

### Contact

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**Abstract** Variants of ‘The Malice of Women and the Malice of Men’, known under the title of ‘The Seven Sages’, have circulated since the 9th century throughout the world and have been susceptible to various kinds of influence, be they religious, linguistic, or thematic. Moreover, the text functioned as a ‘mirror for princes’ and was entertaining for many readers, who were predominantly men. Comparing the existing Arabic manuscripts – Sprenger 1368 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), Glaser 166 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), and Paris arabe 3639 (Bibliothèque nationale de France) – this article aims to show variance among the Arabic versions of ‘The Seven Viziers’ and their implications for the theme of misogyny that runs through the book. The variance, this article argues, is one of degree and not kind. Special attention is given to certain structural (story corpus), linguistic, and thematic elements (associations to the story of Potiphar and his wife in the Qurʾān), all of which have implications for the theme of misogyny. Finally, the article looks into the reception of the text, especially by general readers, who used it to confirm their negative perception of women.

**Keywords** Seven Viziers; Manuscripts; Misogyny; Qurʾān; Variance

## 1 Introduction

Several wise men advise a king, whereas a concubine, owing to her “devious nature”, tricks the king into taking a wrongful decision. Taking aside the variance exhibited in the extant manuscripts, the following is a plot summary of the popular frame narrative known as ‘The Seven Viziers’ (*al-Wuzarā’ as-sab’a*).<sup>1</sup> The son of a king is told by his teacher, Sindbad, to remain silent for seven days to keep away misfortune. One day, the favourite concubine of the king sexually accosts the young prince. Trying to defend himself, he breaks his oath of silence and rejects her. Consequently, she is enraged and accuses him of attempted rape, telling the king so. Full of anger, the king decides to have his son executed. The seven viziers, knowing that the king will regret his decision, use their skills of storytelling, on the one hand, to gain time and, on the other, to convince him of the wickedness of women. The king’s favourite tries to reverse the effect of the viziers’ narrations by telling her own stories about the cunning of men. After the passage of the seven days, the prince is able to talk and defend himself. The king is convinced of his son’s innocence, and the concubine is punished with death.

‘The Seven Viziers’, also known in Arabic as as ‘The Malice of Women and the Malice of Men’, ‘The Seven Wise Masters’, or, as one Arabic manuscript has it, ‘The Wiles of Woman and the Wiles of Men’ (*Hātā dīwān hikāyā ‘an makr an-nisā’ wa-makr ar-riḡāl*),<sup>2</sup> is an extraordinary text because of its dissemination. Not only was it known in Persian and Arabic literature but it also gained worldwide fame, especially in Europe. It exists in many different languages as ‘The Seven Sages of Rome’, in Spanish as ‘El Libro de Sendebār’ and in Latin as the ‘Dolopatos’.<sup>3</sup> A more refined version of the Arabic text is the Persian version by Zāhirī as-Samarqandī, known under the title ‘Sindbadnāme’, which was compiled in 1160.<sup>4</sup> Various factors came together in the process of creating a work of popular literature. In the cycle of tales in ‘The Seven Viziers’, motifs from well-known tales or legends recur. Some of these tales have changed over centuries, and they can be viewed not only as new versions but as wholly new narratives. These changes, which take place in content and language, are the result of modifications that are introduced into an oral narrative that is subsequently written down. However,

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2 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Sprenger 1368.

3 See Leeuwen 2017, p. 25.

4 Ibid.

the oral transmission of the text continues to exist alongside it, and the shared narrative nucleus is hard to determine.<sup>5</sup>

Today, three different versions of ‘The Seven Viziers’ are extant in Arabic.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, misogynistic elements, be they in the text itself or in notes made by readers, are striking. More importantly, each of the three versions exhibits variations in this regard, which points to the differing agendas copyists might have had, as some of the editorial interventions may be regarded as more misogynistic than others. One indicator of this difference in degree is the distribution of embedded stories among the storytellers, which is disproportionate in the majority of cases. The story-corpus in the three Arabic versions differs, and, although the concubine tells almost the same number of stories as the men in Glaser 166, in the two other versions, the leading storytellers are indeed the men. As a result, the question of to what extent copyists or redactors decided on the distribution of the sub-stories arises. The variations of the story corpus, therefore, hold the clues to the misogynistic tendencies of the text. Across the three versions, the tales are rearranged, and the number of embedded tales and their length differs. In the frame story, seven male storytellers (the viziers), described as wise and intelligent, engage in a battle of narration against one woman, described as wicked and deceptive. Both parties compete by narrating tales that seek to convince the king to decide in their favour. Towards the end, the stories become protracted. On closer inspection of the story corpus, we can infer the intention of each storyteller: the concubine attempts to convince the king of her innocence through telling him stories about the malice of men; the viziers, in contrast, want to prevent the king from killing his son and convince him of the deceitful nature of his concubine by telling stories of wicked women.

In what follows, I argue that ‘The Seven Viziers’, through the use of false analogy, is a misogynistic text and, furthermore, that the extant manuscripts differ in their degrees thereof. To this end, I analyse three different manuscript copies of ‘The Seven Viziers’ cycle, shedding light on variations in the book’s misogynistic tendencies, being primarily a negative, vilifying depiction of women in general. First, I will describe the selection of extant Arabic manuscripts, outlining their most essential codicological characteristics. Second, I will discuss structural and linguistic elements in the book. Regarding the former, I will compare the embedded narratives in each of the three versions; in the latter, I will discuss the repetitive

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5 See Lundt 2007, p. 654: “Angesichts der Breite und Vielfalt der Stoff- und Motivtraditionen mit ihren jeweiligen Besonderheiten ist es schwierig, einen für alle Varianten gültigen gemeinsamen Erzählkern herauszukristallisieren.”

6 The manuscripts are: Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Paris arabe 3936 (dated to the 17th c.), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Sprenger 1368 (1785 CE), and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Glaser 166 (dated 1688 CE).

use of specific phrases and words at the beginning and end of each tale. Both aspects, I argue, have implications for the degree to which each version of the text is misogynistic. For the purposes of this article, incidentally, I shall refer to the book by the title ‘The Malice of Women and the Malice of Men’, henceforth ‘MWMM’.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Arabic Manuscripts

Few copies of ‘MWMM’ survive; moreover, all were mainly produced in the 17th to 19th centuries. This indicates two things: first, that ‘MWMM’ was not as popular as ‘The Arabian Nights’; and second, due to a lack of evidence regarding an *original* text, most assessments of the origin of ‘MWMM’ are inevitably based on later sources. Generally speaking, many Arabic and Persian authors believe that ‘MWMM’ has either an Indian or Persian origin. The historians al-Ya‘qūbī (9th century) and al-Mas‘ūdī (10th century) speak of an Indian origin, while Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. 961) gives a Persian origin of the tale. Scholars’ disagreement regarding the provenance or origin of ‘MWMM’ is mentioned by Ibn an-Nadīm in his famous book catalogue ‘al-Fihrist’ (written c. 988), for he speaks of an Indian origin of the book. Ibn an-Nadīm also names a versified version of ‘MWMM’ by the Arabic poet Abān al-Lāḥiqī (d. 815). All of the above indicates that the text of ‘MWMM’ first gained prominence in Arabic literature in the 9th century.<sup>8</sup>

### MS Sprenger 1368 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)

Manuscript Sprenger 1368 is a paper manuscript held at the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. It is dated to circa 1785 CE, based on three readers’ notes that mention a date. It has twenty-four folios and is a relatively small, notebook-sized manuscript. The script is small but easy to read. There are many orthographic misspellings, Middle Arabic features, and instances where letters are switched in a word. In addition, Middle Arabic features, which can be defined as the language of a written orality that cannot be assigned to either Classical Arabic or dialect,<sup>9</sup> are found in the manuscripts. They further indicate the oral usage of the book. The page layout, moreover, highlights the structure of the narrative. That is to say, just by looking at the pages, the reader recognises where a new story begins and ends. A flipped-triangle text layout, similar to a colophon, signals the endings of the

<sup>7</sup> Following the Arabic title in MS Sprenger 1368.

<sup>8</sup> See Blecher 1987, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> See Blau 1988, p. 39.

stories. On the right-hand margin, the tale's narrator and the day on which it is told are recorded. These function as chapter headings or marginal titles, allowing for the immediate identification of whose turn it is to tell a tale.

### MS Glaser 166 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)

Manuscript Glaser 166 is a multiple-text manuscript, containing two different literary texts. The first part of the manuscript is the text of *Kitāb Nuzhat al-ašwāq fī aḥbār al-mutaiyamīn wa-l-‘uššāq* ('A Yearful Stroll in the Accounts of the Besotted and Beloved'), consisting of forty short tales. These are often interspersed with verse. The first text ends on folio 287v, and 'MWMM', here entitled *'Muḥāṭabat al-wuzarā' as-sab'a* ('The Address of the Seven Viziers'), begins on folio 288r. The title, however, is written on folio 289r, which was probably added later by another scribe. The second text ends on folio 339r. It was copied by the scribe Muḥammad b. 'Abd-ar-Raḥīm b. 'Abd-al-Bāqī b. 'Abd ar-Raḥīm b. 'Abd al-Bāqī b. al-Husayn b. Abī Bakr b. Ibrāhīm b. Dāwūd in the year 1107, Rabi' II al-Barā' (dated in the colophon to 1688 CE).<sup>10</sup> Here, we also have a case of highlighting the narrative structure. Large titles initiate each story, mentioning the narrators and the number of stories told by them. This legible layout enables the reader to have an easy overview of the manuscript's content.<sup>11</sup>

### MS Arabe 3638 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Manuscript Paris arabe 3639 is a paper manuscript held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Paris. It is estimated to be from the 17th century but is not dated and lacks a colophon. Due to the missing title page, the BnF catalogued this manuscript under the title *'Histoire de Sindbād ou des Sept Viziers*' ('History of Sinbad or the Seven Viziers').<sup>12</sup> The manuscript contains 76 folios. The script is legible and relatively big, and each folio has, on average, eleven lines. On the side margins, the titles of the substories are noted. In what is probably red ink (since the available scans are monochrome), the current speaker is highlighted.

All three manuscripts visually highlight the frame structure. Words such as *qāla* ('he said'), written in a different colour of ink or otherwise highlighted, mark

<sup>10</sup> Ahlwardt 1896, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> See Gründler 2020, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> BnF Gallica, Paris arabe 3639, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b110031886/f1.item.r=arabe%203639> (accessed: 12/06/22).

passages and refer to an anonymous narrator. In addition, the word *qāla* recalls the author or redactor of a text, functioning as a marker separating frame story, narrative passages, and dialogue.<sup>13</sup> The repetitive use of specific phrases at the beginning and end of each tale structures the narrative and lets the listener or reader know the identity of a tale's speaker. Furthermore, the oral usage of the manuscript is also supported by its pocket-size, easy-to-transport format. 'MWMM' was a text for entertainment and was probably read at men's gatherings. Paris arabe 3639 shows few Middle Arabic features;<sup>14</sup> however, there is consistent use of Middle Arabic in direct speech, which points to a conscious aesthetic use of this register. These texts, in which the *rāwī* ("storyteller") features, were often read aloud, recited, or read quietly in private. In all cases, readers and listeners responded to the text in the form of written and oral comments, reflecting the text's popularity.<sup>15</sup> In Paris arabe 3639, there are a few Middle Arabic features; however, in this case, there is a system for using Middle Arabic, limiting it mainly to indirect speech.

### 3 The Function of the Story Corpus and Recurring Linguistic Elements

Across the three manuscripts, the selection of stories exhibits variance in terms of volume, distribution, and theme. The concubine's share of the story corpus is mostly less than that of the seven viziers. In Sprenger 1368 and Paris arabe 3638, the viziers tell more stories than she does; in Glaser 166, however, she tells more. The modular nature of frame narratives allows for such variety, and the main aim behind the tale-telling dictates the number of tales to be told and their subject matter. Mia GERHARDT defines the frame story as "a narrative whole composed of two distinct but connected parts: a story, or stories, told by a character or several characters in another story of lesser dimensions and subordinate interest, which thus encloses the former as a frame encloses a picture".<sup>16</sup> In other words, a frame narrative is a composite of stories whose relationship to one another is contingent upon the act of embedding some stories within others, which, in turn, frame them. There is no limit to the levels of framing, which can yield as many internal narratives as required.<sup>17</sup> In addition, GERHARDT distinguishes three different types of frame stories, defined in terms of the relationship between the frame

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13 See Gründler 2020, p. 24.

14 For elaboration on Middle Arabic, see Blau 1988, p. 39.

15 See Ott 2012, p. 451.

16 Gerhardt 1963, p. 395.

17 See Kanzog 1977, pp. 321 f.

story's function and its plot: the *entertaining frame*, the *time-gaining frame*, and the *ransom frame*.<sup>18</sup> Two characteristic motifs, namely, the delay and the release,<sup>19</sup> can be found both in 'The Arabian Nights' and 'MWMM', assigning our book, therefore, to the time-gaining frame story type. Frame narratives that belong to this type aim to put together as many stories as possible within one frame story to gain time, delaying, for example, an execution or some other catastrophic or threatening event. This narrative scheme was inspired by an Indian model, which is known, among other things, from the Sanskrit text 'Seventy Tales of a Parrot',<sup>20</sup> whose Sanskrit version is no longer extant.<sup>21</sup>

Generally speaking, most frame stories use the tale-telling device as a means to entertain, teach, or delay action. In many cases, the action to be delayed or avoided is execution, and in 'MWMM', warding off death is, indeed, the primary purpose of tale-telling. Compared to 'The Arabian Nights', however, where Sharazād is motivated by the desire to live and escape the gruesome fate that has plagued her sex, 'MWMM' exhibits some differences regarding the function of the tale-telling. That is, the majority of the storytellers (the seven viziers) are not in danger of dying themselves but want to save another person from that fate. Their tales, therefore, represent a well-thought-out collective endeavour whose aim is to convince the king of the innocence of the prince. The life of the concubine, on the other hand, is directly threatened, which renders her storytelling endeavour more consequential. As a general strategy, the viziers and the concubine adopt a similar approach, thematically speaking, stressing in their storytelling the wickedness of the other gender. The tales, therefore, are purposefully chosen and not spontaneous. The more tales are told, the further death will be put off and the more likely it is that the king will be convinced.

The accomplishment of the delay differs across the three Arabic manuscripts; two versions can be discerned. This I judge based on the selection of the story corpus, the order of the stories, and the storyteller assigned to each story. In Paris arabe 3639, the corpus of stories comprises twenty-four embedded tales. The seven viziers narrate fourteen tales, each vizier telling two per day; the king's concubine, his favourite, tells eight; and in the end, the king's son tells two, showcasing his intellectual prowess, at a point in the narrative that represents the first occasion he has to speak (after he had broken his vow once at the story's beginning) in front of the king and a large audience.<sup>22</sup> MS Berlin Sprenger 1368 contains a total

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18 Gerhardt 1963, p. 395.

19 See Kanzog 1977, p. 325.

20 'Das Papageienbuch' (*Tuti-Nameh*); see Kanzog 1977.

21 See Gerhardt 1963, p. 397.

22 The king's son takes the vow of silence before the concubine attempts to seduce him. At a critical juncture in the story, however, when he learns of her scheme to poison his father

of twenty sub-stories, nine of which are told by the king's favourite and eleven by the viziers. Here, the son does not tell any stories, remaining silent until the king pronounces his judgment over the concubine. As for MS Berlin Glaser 166, it exhibits slight differences compared to the previous two, predominantly at the beginning: the concubine initiates the tale-telling with the tales of 'The Drowning Fuller' and 'The Lion's Track'. Interestingly, moreover, she gets to tell more stories. The following table (Tab. 1) gives the titles<sup>23</sup> of the sub-stories and the order in which they appear in each manuscript. The similarities between Sprenger 1368 and Paris arabe 3639, as well as the extent to which Glaser 166 differs from the two, clearly appear. What look like discrepancies in the table are the result of missing folios from Sprenger 1368.

**Table 1 |** Embedded tales in 'MWMM' – two versions

Day	Narrator	Embedded Tales	Arabe 3639	Sprenger 1368	Glaser 166	
1	I. Vizier	'Ahmad and Hayāt an-Nufūs'	1	1	-	
		'Parrot'	2	2	-	
2	Concubine	'Drowning Fuller'	3	3	2	
		'Lion's Trace' [Also known as 'The King's Glove'. See Marzolph's article in this volume.]	4	4	1	
		II. Vizier	'Loaves of Bread'	5	5	3
		'Maid in the Pantry (Infidelity)'	6	6	-	
3	Concubine	'Prince and Ogress'	7	7	4	
		III. Vizier	'Honey'	8	8	5
	'Rice and Sugar'	9	9	6		
4	Concubine	'Gender-changing Spring'	10	10	7	
		'Jinn with Two Wings'	-	-	8	

to facilitate his ascension to the throne (with her at his side), he breaks his silence. Out of rage, he fails to keep his vow.

23 The titles of the embedded narratives are taken from Krönung 2016.

Table 1 | (continued)

Day	Narrator	Embedded Tales	Arabe 3639	Sprenger 1368	Glaser 166
	IV. Vizier	'Prince in Hammam (Bathman)'	11	- [missing folio]	9
		'Procuress and Dog'	12	11	-
5	Concubine	'Collar'	13	12	10
	V. Vizier	'Ten Sheikhs'	14	13	11
6	Concubine	'Wife of the Trader'	15	14	12
		'Language of Birds'	16	15	13
	VI. Vizier	'Five Lovers'	17	16	14
		'Three Wishes'	18	17	15
7	Concubine	'Chaste Woman'	19	18	16
		'Unbeatable Princess'	20	19	18
		'Pigeons (Kalila wa-Dimna)' <sup>24</sup>	-	-	17
	VII. Vizier	'Trader's Son'	21	20	19
		'Prince'	22	-	?
	King's son	'Woman and Yoghurt'	23	?	?
		'Blind Sheik'	24	?	?

The overall narrative structure does not change; rather, there are differences in the number of stories told, what is being told, and by whom. Comparing the distribution of the embedded narratives across the three manuscripts, we can identify two completely different versions of 'MWMM'. MS Paris arabe 3639 and Berlin

<sup>24</sup> This tale is only found in MS Glaser 166. It occurs as an embedded tale in 'Kalila wa-Dimna' in the 'The King and His Eight Dreams' chapter, and it is told by a vizier to a king to deter his anger and stop him from killing his beloved wife: a pigeon couple agree to save food for winter. They collect some wheat and cereal, which is wet and appears large in volume. The male tells his wife not to eat any of it and leaves. Summer comes, and the heap of wheat and cereal dries up, shrinking in volume. When he returns, he kills his wife, thinking that she has eaten their winter stock. When it rains again, the heap of wheat and cereal grows in volume again. Understanding the wrong he has done to his wife, he dies of grief. See Cheikho 1905.

Sprenger 1368 represent one version. More than half of the tales are told by the viziers, who initiate the storytelling in the majority of the cases. Moreover, they are seven tellers with a broader repertoire of stories, and some of their stories become progressively longer. For example, the tale of ‘The Trader’s Son’ in MS Paris arabe 3639 is twenty pages long, told by one of the viziers on the seventh day. One woman is made, therefore, to compete against seven men. We might conclude from this that the text *implicitly* portrays her as intelligent, capable of facing this disproportionate number of adversaries and that she is not to be underestimated. Glaser 166 represents the other version. The concubine tells eleven of the nineteen substories, whereas the viziers narrate only eight stories. On the seventh day, moreover, she tells three stories, which is remarkable, since no vizier tells more than two tales. This is a unique aspect of this manuscript, since, in other versions of ‘MWMM’, the concubine tells only one story per day.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the other two manuscripts, Glaser 166 *explicitly* shows her to be capable of keeping up with the seven wise men. Concerning her abilities of defence and argumentation, the presentation of the concubine in the ‘MWMM’ is, one may argue, a positive one, compared to the negative portrayal the viziers give her through their general depiction of women in their stories. Our female narrator, however, is the only one who tells stories about the cunning of men, making the thematic undertaking of the book skewed against her in particular and women in general. The viziers’ storytelling endeavour remains a privileged one, as they are predominantly the first to start and the last to finish, and, owing to their number, they can bolster their thematic undertaking (that women are cunning and mischievous by their very nature) by the sheer number of stories they are able to tell. The strategy they use is one of false analogy, which renders the text misogynistic.

Concluding his second story, the first vizier says:

Thus, O king, see what deceitfulness and treachery these women hide.  
So, by no means trust what they say, for you will see that their cunning  
is great.<sup>26</sup>

This echoes the general sentiment toward the character of women: they are malicious, insidious in their dealings, and even devilish. The concubine, given that she is a woman, has to be of a similar disposition, and the rape accusations that she has brought against the son of the king must be false, because her kind is prone to such behaviour. Yasmina FOEHR-JANSSENS describes the issue of misogyny, in its relation to rape, as follows:

<sup>25</sup> See Foehr-Janssens 2020, p. 169.

<sup>26</sup> MS Paris arabe 3639, fol. 8r.

[The misogynistic story] implies a deeply misogynistic argument for rape culture: every accusation of rape could be the result of a woman's invention, used to hide uncontrollable female lust. This way of reasoning can give substance to the opinion according to which all accusations of rape are fictitious or deserve to be treated as such.<sup>27</sup>

The statements of the viziers generally relate to the nature of women, which, in their view, have uncontrollable lust. The viziers did not witness the incident and, therefore, do not know who is in the wrong. Nevertheless, they presume the innocence of the king's son but not that of the concubine. Of course, the end result is true, but the means by which they reach it is false, for their approach is one of presuming the guilt of all women. They are typecast as talkative, unreliable, impulsive, lacking self-control, and other unflattering descriptions. The majority of the stories told, moreover, illustrate the unfaithfulness of a woman; and, since the concubine is naturally female, the false analogy dictates that she must possess those same attributes and follow in the unfaithful footsteps her sex has always exhibited and is therefore guilty. In the final analysis, she is individually guilty, but there is a foregone conclusion against all women in general, in which misogyny is pursued to excess.

In certain places, the concubine undermines her own case by playing into the hands of the viziers. Although her strategy is to counter the claims of the viziers through her own general claims about men, her limited story repertoire is up against the broader one of the seven viziers, which undermines her position. As a result, the concubine errs in the selection of certain stories, such as in the 'Wife of the Trader', in which she tells the story of a woman who commits adultery during the absence of her husband from town.<sup>28</sup> The concubine seems to run out of stories by the sixth day, as the tale she chooses seemingly bolsters the misogynistic argument the viziers have been putting forth against women and threatens to bring her endeavour to a halt. Ending the tale, she says:

O King, men are indeed more cunning (*amkar*) than women, and by the cunning of the king's son and his deceit, this young woman was divorced.<sup>29</sup>

Even if this tale is not very convincing, it still is for the king, for after hearing it, he is convinced that men are cunning and orders his son to be executed. The next

<sup>27</sup> Foehr-Janssens 2020, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> MS Paris arabe 3639, fol. 38r–40r, 6th day, story by concubine.

<sup>29</sup> MS Sprenger 1368, fol. 14v.

vizier, however, tells the king the tale of ‘The Five Lovers’ and reconvinces the king of the evilness of women. ‘MWMM’ draws this false analogy from different traditions, such as the Greek tradition and, more importantly, the Qur’ān.

#### 4 The Potiphar’s Wife Motif and the Qur’ānic Context

Edwin B. PERRY considers the Greek ‘Book of Shimas’ (800 CE), which derives from the Latin legend of Secundus, the oldest source for the frame tale in ‘MWMM’.<sup>30</sup> There, the premise is one of absolute generalisation, whereby women are presented as being unfaithful by their very nature. However, the prevalent tradition ‘MWMM’ leans on is that of the Qur’ān and the authority that comes with it. ‘MWMM’ has been connected in scholarship to the story of ‘Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife’, in both the Biblical and the Qur’ānic traditions.<sup>31</sup> The specific links are the characters of Joseph/Yūsuf, the master, and his wife, Zulaikha.<sup>32</sup> Shared motifs between the story and ‘MWMM’ are the seduction of a young man by the master’s/king’s wife, who is (regarded as) a son to the king; the torn shirt; the false accusation of rape; and the revealing of the truth at the end.<sup>33</sup> Key formulations and lexical choices liken the situation of the king’s son in ‘MWMM’ to Yūsuf and the concubine to Zulaikha. Sūrah 12, verse 51 thematises the motif of revealing the truth:

*Qāla mā ḥaṭbukunna ’id rāwadtunna Yūsufa ’an nafsihī qulna ḥāša li-llāhi mā ’alimnā ’alaihi min sū’in qālat imra’atu l-’azīzi l-’āna ḥaṣḥaṣa l-ḥaqqu ’ana rāwadtuhū ’an nafsihī wa-’innahū la-mina ṣ-ṣādiqīna.*

When asked by the king, “What made you attempt to seduce Yusuf?” The women replied that, “We know no evil of him.” The wife of al-Azīz confessed, “Now the truth came to light [...] It was I who attempted to seduce him. He has told the truth.” (12:51)<sup>34</sup>

MS Glaser 166 adopts the phrase *al-’āna ḥaṣḥaṣa l-ḥaqqu ’ana rāwadtuhū ’an nafsihī*, which occurs at the end of the frame tale. Wordings similar to the Qur’ānic verses can be found throughout the manuscript. However, the resemblances are most obvious when we compare the narrative elements. Granted the different

<sup>30</sup> Perry 1963, pp. 93 f.

<sup>31</sup> Known in the Islamic tradition under *Yūsuf wa-Zulaiḥa*.

<sup>32</sup> See Goldman 1995, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> The master’s wife Zulaikha is at the end spared from punishment; see *ibid.*, pp. 42 f. Schmidt also discusses the Potiphar’s wife motif in her article in this volume.

<sup>34</sup> Translation from Merguerian and Najmabadi 1997, p. 489.

endings, insofar as the woman is spared from punishment in Sūrat Yūsuf, the connection between ‘MWMM’ and Sūrat Yūsuf is nevertheless unmistakable: the shared narrative elements, such as the seduction, the accusation of rape, and the confession, are pronounced. The passages below (Tab. 2) illustrate the similarities between the moment of the seduction in ‘MWMM’ and Sūrat Yūsuf.

**Table 2** | The connection to Sūrat Yūsuf

Sprenger 1368	Paris arabe 3639	Glaser 166
<p>فلما رأته حسنه وجماله افتتننت به فبادرت إليه وأخذته إلى قصرها وأنتت به إلى حجرتها وجعلت تلاعبه وقد أذهلها حسنة وجماله فراودته عن نفسها وترامت عليه وضمته إلى صدرها وجعلت تقبله وهو يمتنع منها وهي تقول له يا ابن الملك مكتني من نفسك واقضي غرضي وأنا أسقي أبوك سقية يموت فيها وتقعد أنت في الملك من بعده</p>	<p>فلما رأته الغلام ورأت حسنة وجماله بهتت فيه وطار عقلها ولثها وتحيرت في أمرها وأخذته في حضنها وأطلعته في قصرها وقالت له مكتني من نفسك واقضي لي مرادي وأنا أسقي أبوك السم يموت وتحضي بي وبالملك وأنا أجعلك مكانه</p>	<p>فأرأت حسنه وجماله وكماله وبهائه فافتتننت به وقالت أنا أخذه عندي فبادرت إليه وأخذته إلى حجرتها وجعلت تداعبه وتلاعبه وتضمته إلى صدرها وتعصه وتشمه وتقول له يا ابن الملك مكتني من نفسك وأنا بعد أجعلك في مكان أبوك وأسقيه سقيه من السم وتنتفع بملكه من بعده</p>
<p>Then one of the concubines looked at the boy, and when she saw his grace and beauty, she was enchanted. She rushed to him and took him to her room in the castle. She played with him, and his grace and beauty fascinated her anew. So, she seduced him and threw herself on him, hugging him to her chest and kissing him while he tried to tear himself away from her. She said, “Grant me your body and let me fulfil my desire. In return, I will make your father drink a [poisonous] drink. After which, he will die and you shall take his place after him.”</p>	<p>And when she noticed the boy’s beauty, she was mesmerised and lost her mind. She was overwhelmed. She took him, brought him to her castle and said, “Grant me your body and let me fulfil my want. Then I will make your father drink poison. He will die [...] and you shall have me and his rule. I will make you in his place.”</p>	<p>She saw his beauty, perfection, and magnificence and was enchanted. And so she said: “I will take him to my [place].” She went to him and took him to her room. She snuggled up to him, playing with him and hugging him to her chest as she sniffed him. She then said, “Grant me your body, and I promise to make you in his place. I will make him drink poison and you shall benefit from his position after him.”</p>
(fol. 2r)	(fol. 3r)	(fol. 290r)

The scene in 'MWMM' is presented with varying degrees of dramatisation. In Sprenger 1368 and Glaser 166, where the formulation is very similar, the moment of the seduction is described in detail, and the reaction of the prince (while trying to break away from her) is mentioned as well. In Paris arabe 3639, however, the reaction is absent, and the seduction is described rather briefly, rendering the reader unable to perceive or understand the what and why of the concubine's actions and the feelings of the king's son at that moment. The passage from Sprenger 1368, moreover, illustrates lexical similarities with Sūrat Yūsuf, notably the use of the verb *rāwada* ("to try to seduce someone"), in the expression *wa-laqaḍ rāwadatuhū 'an nafsihī* ("she seduces him despite his will"). Interestingly, the concubine uses it herself when she admits wrongdoing, echoing the confession of Potiphar's wife and admitting to the truth after seven days of denial. Another example is the use of the word *kayd* in 'MWMM', which can be understood as "malice" or "cunning". In Sūrat Yūsuf, verse 28, the word is used as follows: "This is of your women's guile; surely your guile is great." (*innahū min kaidikunna inna kaidakunna 'aẓīmun*).<sup>35</sup> In Glaser 166, the viziers use the word *kayd* to describe the evil, wicked nature of women so that they may convince the king of his son's innocence, quoting in the process the authoritative word of God: *wa-qāla ta'āla 'innahū min kaidikunna 'inna kaidakunna 'aẓīmun* ("God said, this is of your women's guile; surely your guile is great"); and in Paris arabe 3639 we read, *Fa-nzur ayyuhā al-maliku 'ilā kaydi an-nisā'i wa-makrihim* ("Behold, O king, the cunning and wickedness of women").

The religious associations invoked by the introduction of elements from the story of Yūsuf function (1) as a tool of persuasion and (2) as an attempt to legitimise the general negative sentiments expressed towards women, given that the focus of the different narratives that are told in the 'MWMM' is the craftiness of and their deceitfulness. Women are evil, and God has said as much; the concubine, therefore, is evil, too. The use of motif from the famous story of Joseph in the house of Potiphar leads the reader in a certain direction, for by virtue of this very association, the interpretation of the frame narrative, if not predetermined, becomes guided. As such, the false analogy that is the premise of the viziers' argument against the concubine is bolstered by invoking the authoritative language of the Qur'an. All of the above, and especially the last, has implications for the reception of the book, be it by copyists, who sometimes act as redactors, or readers, who engage with the text through annotations and commentary.

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35 See Goldman 1995, p. XXVII.

## 5 Misogyny at Reception

Various factors influence the dissemination of a specific work. The context of a written text is of great relevance. The language and religion of the audience are also fundamental. Nevertheless, speaking of manuscripts, we have a few more factors that affect the final form of the text. Since ‘MWMM’ is a work of popular literature, copyists were able to take liberties, incorporating their style and adding different details, such as changing wordings and adding new thematic elements. The table below (Tab. 3), for example, shows the same passage in the three manuscripts. The vizier is talking to the king, trying to convince him not to rush his judgement.

**Table 3** | An example of misogyny

Sprenger 1368	Paris arabe 3639	Glaser 166
وأنت من شأن جارية فاحشة عاهرة تريد أن تهلك ولدك وتسمع من كلامها	وليس العجلة محمودة أيها الملك	فلا تعجل أيها الملك فإن العجلة تورث الندم
And you, for the sake of a shameless prostitute, want to kill your son and take her at her word.	Haste is no good, O king.	Hurry not, O king, for after haste comes regret.
(fol. 7v)	(fol. 37v)	(fol. 292v)

In Sprenger 1368, which is known for vulgar language usage, the concubine is insulted, and the focus is on her unworthiness of being vindicated. In contrast, in the remaining manuscripts, the concern is more about rushed judgement being an inappropriate course of action. The three manuscripts, therefore, exhibit variation in terms of the degree to which their respective texts are misogynistic toward women. In addition to using the epithet *‘āhira* (“prostitute”), Sprenger 1368 has a negative overall approach to the characterisation of women. The text characterises women as small-minded, incredulous, shameless, cunning, and scheming beings.

This variation on the theme of misogyny extends to the macro-structure of ‘MWMM’ as well. At times, copyists add whole new tales to the story-corpus that render one given version of the book more misogynistic than the other: the tales, whether told by the viziers or the concubine, mostly show the unfaithfulness, wickedness, and evil of women, and more often than not, they are about women who betray their husbands. One of the reasons for this is that the compilers of these kinds of tales, their copyists or redactors, were usually male, and their interventions affected in turn the readers of the book. In the case of ‘MWMM’, we have

evidence that it acted for some as a sort of proof by which men could find their bias against women confirmed, including the stereotypes associated therewith. Readers' comments testify to this. In Sprenger 1368, readers' notes, most likely by men, illustrate their engaged and emphatic response to the text. The following note by a certain Ibrāhīm Harārī reflects this. He approves of the misogynist way of portraying women, and in commenting on the text, he says:

Read it and ponder its meaning and the example of women and their schemes, because they were born for us as devils, may Allāh give us refuge from devils. Ibrāhīm Harārī, who acknowledges his sin.<sup>36</sup>

The strategy of false analogy, therefore, succeeds at bolstering the negative opinions male readers had of women, creating a feedback loop whereby 'MWMM' promoted and perpetuated a false analogy.

## 6 Conclusion

The pre-modern process of manuscript copying was affected by many factors, resulting in variations. These might be either minor or major, as is the case in 'MWMM'. As this paper has shown, each of the three manuscripts of 'MWMM' exhibit variations, with Sprenger 1368 and Paris arabe 3639 representing one version and Glaser 166 representing another. In the above, I have argued that 'MWMM' is generally misogynistic but that three extant manuscripts of the text (which constitute the two versions) exhibit variations in terms of degree. For my analysis, I have leaned on structural and linguistic aspects as well as thematic ones (the story of Potiphar) to distinguish the variations on the theme of misogyny across the three manuscripts. Table 1 has illustrated the differences in the number and order of tales, even though the three manuscripts were copied around the same century. Some tales are entirely missing, which probably happened at some point in a *Vorlage*, if not directly in the copying process. Nevertheless, the findings are inconclusive in this regard, as sufficient textual evidence is lacking, making more research on the Arabic 'MWMM' collection desirable.

The reception of the text by male readers is striking, as it reveals the manner in which 'MWMM' perpetuated certain beliefs. This shows that redactors exerted an influence upon the readership for which they engaged in the transmission of texts. The readers' notes in Sprenger 1368, a manuscript that shows extensive traces of use, reveal the misogynistic views of these readers and how they chose

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<sup>36</sup> MS Sprenger 1368, fol. 3v.

to interpret 'MWMM'. That view is sanctioned in Glaser 166 by corroborating it with religious discourse, making it an interesting example of religious intertextuality used in a negative sense, where phrasings of the Qur'an were taken over verbatim at several points, connecting the frame tale in 'MWMM' to the story of Potiphar's wife, based on the similarities between the two narratives. The word of God is made to support the claims of the male narrators. In this and other aspects of the book, the male narrators of 'MWMM' go about their endeavour using the wrong justifications, which results in a misogynistic text. The author of the text, and later its redactors, commit the same mistake, and the text, ultimately, perpetuates the fallacy.

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