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Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ibn Battuta's *Travels*

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Abu ‘Abdallah ibn Battuta was a Muslim legal scholar from Tangiers, Morocco who traveled nearly 73,000 miles between 1325 and 1355.¹ In thirty years, he visited the territories of forty modern countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia and encountered a multitude of cultures.² One year after returning home, Ibn Battuta recounted his journey to a scribe, Ibn Juzayy, and together the two men composed a *rihla*, or travel diary, which narrated Ibn Battuta’s experiences for an educated Moroccan audience.³ In the *rihla*, Ibn Battuta emphasizes his noble birth, his piety, and his attention to the details of Sharia law to portray himself as an ideal Muslim gentleman. But, at the same time, he disregards the conventions of the *rihla*, which traditionally excludes material about the author’s private life, to discuss his marriages and sexual experiences. Discussion of these themes is virtually unseen in other contemporary *rihlas*, and thus seems not to fit with Ibn Battuta’s projection of himself as a traditional and conventional Muslim. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that Ibn Battuta uses these personal anecdotes of love, sex, and marriage to further that very image. It will then analyze Ibn Battuta’s presentation of his personal life, which offers a window into his and his audience’s cultural attitudes towards marriage, sexuality, and sexual slavery.

Typical fourteenth-century *rihlas* were public works, and their authors therefore avoided including information about their private lives. That does not mean that *rihla* authors did not include information about themselves, and it was common for an author to insert the occasional autobiographical remark or anecdote to illustrate his adherence to the values of his religion and class. But these interludes excluded especially personal subjects, such as any discussion of

¹ Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*, rev. (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005): 1, 3.

² Dunn, *Adventures*, 3.

³ Dunn, *Adventures*, 3-4.

sexuality or of the women in the author's life.⁴ The authors of medieval *rihlas* did not take issue with describing the women they encountered on their travels, as these descriptions directly advanced their accounts of foreign lands, but they considered the women in their family circle too private to write about. This was, at least in part, because the ideal medieval Muslim woman was secluded and thus, in the words of Islamic scholar Remke Kruk, "screened off from the public sphere to which literature by its very nature belongs."⁵ Kruk also posits that most authors of medieval *rihlas* did not describe unexotic women due to a "lack of interest in their affairs," just as they usually did not discuss the destitute or the enslaved.⁶ But whatever the authors' motives for omitting information about their wives, concubines, and sexual exploits from their travel diaries, the exclusion of such material was common practice by the fourteenth century.

In contrast, Ibn Battuta's *rihla* frequently passes into the private sphere to include detailed, personal information that his audience might have considered inappropriate for the genre. He shows none of the traditional reluctance to discuss one's family, referring to his mother, ten wives, five children, and countless concubines. He also takes an interest in their affairs which sometimes surpasses his interest in the travel narrative. This interest occasionally leads him to disrupt the narrative to include accounts of his wives and concubines, even though this chronicle is the *rihla*'s *raison d'être*. For instance, he halts the account of his travel from Bukhara to Samarkand to describe his concerns about a pregnant slave.⁷ He also pauses while recounting the dispute which forced him to leave the Maldives to record three marriages that do not advance the narrative and to remark upon which of these wives was his favorite.⁸ The private

⁴ Remke Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: Travel, Family Life, and Chronology," *Al-Qantara* 16, no. 2 (1995): 369.

⁵ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 370.

⁶ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 371.

⁷ Abu 'Abdallah Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, ed. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, trans. Hamilton Gibb and C.F. Beckingham (London: Picador, 2002), 141.

⁸ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 239.

details themselves defy the conventions of the *rihla*, but the anecdotes' irrelevancy to and disruption of the travel narrative are particularly unusual.

Even more remarkable is the *rihla*'s level of sexual detail. Erotic encounters strictly belonged to the private sphere, but Ibn Battuta does not shy away from relating them and using them as a tool with which to describe exotic places.⁹ In the Maldives, for instance, Ibn Battuta's account of the inhabitants' diet is centered around the aphrodisiac qualities of their food, which he supports by recounting his own experiences with his local wives.¹⁰ Similarly, his description of the women of Marhata includes a description of their sexual "deliciousness" and their "knowledge of erotic movements."¹¹ These anecdotes advance Ibn Battuta's description of unfamiliar people and thus serve the central purpose of the *rihla*, but their explicitness stands out among contemporary travel diaries.

But although his sexual and marital emphases are unconventional, Ibn Battuta uses them to serve the traditional purpose of autobiographical material in a *rihla*: to project an image of himself as a pious and virtuous gentleman.¹² Although many of the stories he includes do not suggest piety to modern readers, they would have been interpreted differently by Ibn Battuta's fourteenth-century audience. For instance, the large number of marriages and extramarital relations that Ibn Battuta describes would not have made him appear lascivious. In fact, as G.H. Bousquet, a French jurist and Islamicist, notes, similar "exploits" are attributed to Muhammad himself and Muslim tradition includes hagiographies in which saints take extra wives to

⁹ Roxanne L. Euben, "Liars, Travelers, Theorists: Herodotus and Ibn Battuta," in *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2006): 81.

¹⁰ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 232.

¹¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 212.

¹² Dunn, *Adventures*, 312.

“dompter les aiguillons de la chair.”¹³ Ibn Battuta’s polygamy was therefore religiously acceptable and could even have made him appear more pious by connecting him to holy figures. Furthermore, Bousquet asserts that the marriages and relations with concubines that Ibn Battuta describes are “très exactement dans la ligne de l’orthodoxie musulmane” of his time.¹⁴ Ibn Battuta’s description of them thus displays his attention to the details of Islamic law in his private life. For instance, the four wives Ibn Battuta takes in the Maldives are exactly the maximum allowed under Sharia law and the ways in which he divorces each of his wives do not depart from Islamic tradition.¹⁵

Ibn Battuta further contributes to this image of himself as an attentively pious man in private with the most sexually explicit passage in the *rihla*. When in the Maldives, he describes how the dietary staples of coconuts and fish have “an unparalleled effect in sexual intercourse.”¹⁶ He supports this assertion with a personal anecdote:

I had there myself four wives, and concubines as well, and I used to visit all of them every day and pass the night with the wife whose turn it was, and this I continued to do the whole year and a half that I was there.¹⁷

Even this explicit reminiscence paints Ibn Battuta as an observant Muslim. Remke Kruk notes that although this passage appears at first to be “simple bragging about [Ibn Battuta’s] virility,” it could be intended to illustrate his “strict adherence to Muslim law,” which demands equal sexual attention to all wives in a polygamous marriage.¹⁸ Including this anecdote thus allows Ibn Battuta to give himself public credit for this behavior by presenting himself as a Muslim so

¹³ “master the goading of the flesh” (my translation). G.H. Bousquet, “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa et les Institutions Musulmanes,” *Studia Islamica* no. 24 (1966): 98, doi:10.2307/1595172.

¹⁴ “Exactly in line with the Muslim orthodoxy” (my translation). Bousquet, “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa,” 98.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Adventures*, 235.

¹⁶ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 232.

¹⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 232.

¹⁸ Kruk, “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa,” 377.

observant that he obeys the law even in private when it would not increase his reputation. Moreover, Ibn Battuta's remark about passing "the night with the wife whose turn it was" is a direct reference to Muhammad's own strategy for treating his wives equally, which increases the author's prestige by explicitly connecting him to the Prophet.¹⁹ It is nevertheless troubling that Ibn Battuta places information vital to his image in an unconventionally sexual passage that could have shocked his audience. But it is possible that Ibn Battuta intended the sexuality of the passage to draw attention to his pious actions. His readers or listeners would have been unlikely to forget such an episode and might therefore have better remembered the passage's religious references and description of Ibn Battuta's comportment.

Ibn Battuta further anecdotes to signal his virtues through his description of each of his divorces, which may be a means of displaying his mercy. Remke Kruk suggests that these divorces may have been what Ibn Battuta's wives preferred, since they spared the women an unpleasant, perilous journey and allowed them to remain with their families.²⁰ Ibn Battuta even relates how one of his wives in the Maldives begs to be left behind and even suffers serious, possibly psychosomatic, pains when he tries to remove her from the islands.²¹ His decision to return her is therefore a generous one that accords with her wishes. Choosing to leave his wives behind was also clearly inconvenient for Ibn Battuta, whose many concubines suggest that he preferred to travel with female companions and whose divorces severed the prestigious connections he had made through marriage. A divorce probably also demanded that he return his wife's dowry, so there was an additional, economic motivation against the separations. It is therefore possible that Ibn Battuta includes the accounts of his divorces to portray himself as a

¹⁹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 232. Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 378.

²⁰ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 376.

²¹ Dunn, *Adventures*, 237.

selfless and merciful man. It was, after all, crucial for a man of his standing to have a reputation for virtue.

Thus, Ibn Battuta paradoxically breaks tradition to tell stories that signal how conventional he is. And because Ibn Battuta uses the personal content in his *rihla* to paint himself as a model Muslim, an analysis of Ibn Battuta's presentation of this material offers insight into the author's own attitudes towards love, sex, and marriage and into what he thought his audience would expect of an ideal Muslim gentleman's private life.

For instance, from Ibn Battuta's accounts of his many wives, we can ascertain what he and his fourteenth century Moroccan audience expected of marriage. Ibn Battuta's weddings are largely contractual, and he describes them in a casual tone, as one might a business dealing. Each woman's dowry, as Bousquet notes, "fait l'objet d'un contrat" by which Ibn Battuta also gains his wife and her social standing.²² A wife's social position could be a boon to her husband's, which Ibn Battuta discovers when his four Maldivian wives provide him with family connections that bring him power, respect, and the influential, judicial office of *qadi*.²³ But Ibn Battuta also learns that a marital connection could decrease a man's social standing when he takes a wife in Delhi whose father and brother have rebelled against the sultan.²⁴ Ross E. Dunn suggests that these family ties may have brought Ibn Battuta under suspicion and contributed to his eventual flight from the sultan's court.²⁵ The *rihla* also reveals that Ibn Battuta would dissolve a disadvantageous marriage like any other unfavorable business dealing. He enters into a "contract of marriage at Safaquis with the daughter of" a Tunisian nobleman, but a dispute with her father

²² "makes the object of a contract" (my translation). Bousquet, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 95.

²³ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 377, Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 238-9.

²⁴ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 243.

²⁵ Dunn, *Adventures*, 207.

makes it “necessary” for him to divorce her.²⁶ This marriage, which is explicitly described as a “contract,” is annulled when its two business partners, Ibn Battuta and his father-in-law, have a falling out. The woman is thus returned to her father to terminate the contract just as she was given to her husband to seal it. The matter-of-fact tone with which Ibn Battuta recounts this episode also suggests that such a separation was not extraordinary. The *rihla* thus expresses a very economic understanding of marriage as a means of self-advancement and does not suggest that Ibn Battuta or his audience viewed matrimony as sacred or eternal.

But Ibn Battuta also brings up the question of love in marriage. He explicitly and repeatedly expresses love for one of his four Maldivian wives and describes another as his “favorite” of the four.²⁷ This indicates that marital love was not unheard of in Ibn Battuta’s time and culture. However, he does not indicate that he cares for any of his other eight brides, which implies that doing so would not have increased his reputation. Moreover, Ibn Battuta’s tone in describing his departure from the Maldives reinforces this impression of fourteenth-century Moroccan society as one that did not expect affection in marriage. He simply declares: “Having divorced my wives I set sail.”²⁸ Here, despite his assurances that he genuinely loves one of the women he is deserting, he expresses no regret at leaving them behind. This either indicates that conveying sorrow would not have advanced Ibn Battuta’s image or that abandoning his family caused him no grief. But either way, it characterizes his culture as one that did not view love, or even emotional attachment, as an essential component of marriage.

The *rihla* also provides evidence that a wife had a lower value and fewer rights than her husband in medieval Muslim society. Ibn Battuta breaks from tradition once more by referring to

²⁶ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 6.

²⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 239. Kruk, “Ibn Baṭṭūta,” 378.

²⁸ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 240.

both of his parents in the opening of his travel diary, a practice which Kruk asserts is extremely unusual.²⁹ This implies that most *rihla* authors did not consider that references to their mothers or to their mothers' lineages would advance their reputations, but Ibn Battuta's departure from this custom suggests that he held his mother in unusually high regard. Another of Ibn Battuta's unusual anecdotes sheds light on a mother's rights to her children compared to a father's. Some time after his departure from the Maldives, Ibn Battuta describes his return to claim the son he left behind. Although the mother "bitterly" protests, the authorities choose to remain uninvolved because Ibn Battuta has every legal right to claim his son.³⁰ This reveals that a wife in the Maldives had no legal ownership of her children, and Ibn Battuta's expectation that he should be allowed to claim his child in a place so far from Tangiers suggests that this legal custom was widespread. However, Ibn Battuta ultimately decides to leave his child behind with its mother, which could suggest that his former wife's pleas discouraged him from exercising his legal right.³¹ The *rihla* illustrates how a wife could have more influence in practice over her husband than she was legally accorded.

However, most of Ibn Battuta's female companions in the *rihla* are his concubines, not his wives. He refers to these slaves throughout his travel diary and the tone of these accounts reveals his and his audience's attitudes towards them. Ibn Battuta never travels without several slave girls and openly admits to sleeping with them.³² He refers casually to a slave carrying his child and later just as nonchalantly mentions keeping several concubines while married to four women.³³ His unembarrassed, matter-of-fact tone reveals that marriage was not required for his

²⁹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 3. Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 373.

³⁰ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 380.

³¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 252. Barbara Metcalf, "Ibn Battuta as a Qadi in the Maldives," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 276.

³² Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūṭa," 376.

³³ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 141, 232.

audience to accept a sexual relationship and also suggests that he did not believe his extramarital relations to be shameful. Judging from the number of Ibn Battuta's concubines and his ease in acquiring them, sexual slavery was a widespread and normalized practice throughout the medieval Muslim world. In the *rihla*, Ibn Battuta purchases several slaves himself and receives many as gifts from rulers he encounters on his travels. He also refers to these acquisitions in an indifferent tone, once casually relating his exchange of a woman who has been given to him as a gift for another he "prefer[s]."³⁴ This nonchalance reveals that he did not consider sexual slavery to be shocking or shameful, which in turn suggests that it was an ordinary and accepted practice in the eyes of both Ibn Battuta and his audience.

Ibn Battuta also suggests that he became attached to several of his concubines but that he still considered them lesser than his wives.³⁵ He evinces this attachment through his concern for the pregnant slave he describes on his journey from Bukhara to Samarkand. That he recounts his worries about her wellbeing and his search for a tent for her to give birth in indicates that it was not "beneath [Ibn Battuta's] dignity" either to care about his concubine or to admit to worrying about her in his *rihla*.³⁶ However, if we accept Kruk's hypothesis that Ibn Battuta left his wives behind to spare them the dangers of his journey, his decision to take his concubines with him suggests that he was less concerned for their wellbeing. Ibn Battuta certainly subjected his concubines to perilous situations, and several of them perished or nearly died throughout the course of his journey. For instance, Ibn Battuta recounts how one of his slave girls nearly drowns while crossing a river and reports that his pregnant concubine has died in a shipwreck.³⁷ There is also one instance in which Ibn Battuta personally steps in to rescue two concubines from a

³⁴ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 238.

³⁵ Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūta," 381.

³⁶ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 141-2. Kruk, "Ibn Baṭṭūta," 375.

³⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 117 228.

sinking boat, but he only allows “the one that [he] love[s]” to ride in the raft and forces the other girl to remain in the water and be towed behind with a rope.³⁸ This inequity reveals that Ibn Battuta could openly show favoritism among his concubines without damaging his image. It also illustrates how blasé he is about the comfort and safety of the concubines he does not prefer, which indicates that he considered at least some of them to be disposable.

Ibn Battuta thus reveals many of his culture’s expectations of love, sex, and marriage in the personal anecdotes he scatters throughout his *rihla*. However, he displays these traditional expectations and emphasizes his proper behavior by breaking custom to include such private stories. We can only speculate as to why Ibn Battuta departed from tradition in this way, but his choice to do so resulted in one of the most “complex,” and certainly one of the most personal, medieval *rihlas*.³⁹ Unlike most medieval travel authors, Ibn Battuta’s character is three-dimensional in large part thanks to the personal episodes he recounts. By the end of the *rihla*, readers are well-acquainted with his family, his piety, and his attitudes towards marriage and sexuality. Ibn Battuta’s readers therefore experience his journey alongside him and come to know him thanks to the uniquely vibrant image he projects of his personality. Perhaps this personal connection between Ibn Battuta and his audience has contributed to this work’s popularity and longevity, which are unmatched by any other medieval Islamic travel account.

³⁸ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 248.

³⁹ Dunn, *Adventures*, 4.

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