Wiles of Women and Performative Intertextuality "A'isha, the Hadith of the Slander and the Sura of Yusuf"

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Islamic tradition presents ‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr, one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad, as one of the most influential figures in early Islam. As Muhammad’s favored wife and the daughter of the prophet’s companion Abu Bakr, who would later become the first Caliph, ‘A’isha was at the center of the decisions and actions that formed the original Islamic community. As the original narrator of a vast number of hadiths, she was given the epithet “Mother of the Islamic Community” (Um al-Umma). She was also given a feminized version of the epithet given to her father, as well as to the Qur’anic figure of Yusuf (Joseph)—“the truthful,” as-Siddiqa. After the death of Muhammad, she played an important role in opposing the followers of Muhammad’s cousin ‘Ali in the struggle that set the stage for the split between Sunni and Shi’ite Islam.

In the “Hadith of the Slander” (hadith al-iṣf), ‘A’isha is the narrator and the main protagonist of the story of her near downfall and the near dissolution of the early Muslim community. The versions of the hadith from the canonical collection Sahih al-Bukhari offer a complex, embedded narration. Featuring ‘A’isha as narrator and as protagonist, the hadith presents a complex speech act that engages issues of gender, sexuality, danger, and religious authority.

1 See Muhammad ibn Sa’d, al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 1957-58), vol. 8:64-66. For the epithet in the Qur’an, as applied to Yusuf, see Q 12:46. While Ibrahim (19:41) and Idris (19:56) are called siddiq, only Yusuf was given the epithet (marked by the definite article) as-siddiq.


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The reading below makes no assumption about the authenticity of the words attributed to ‘A’ishah as narrator or the words attributed to her, as protagonist, in quotes embedded in the narration. Of concern here is ‘A’ishah as she is constructed in a text that is part of the canon of sound hadith. In referring to “‘A’ishah” in the context of the Hadith of the Slander (hereafter referred to simply as “the Hadith”), we will be referring to ‘A’ishah in literary terms—‘A’ishah as presented by and in the text. It is the interior literary workings of that text, its use of the Qur’anic Sura of Yusuf as a subtext, and its theological implications that are at the center of inquiry. In our analysis below, ‘A’ishah’s statements as narrator of the Hadith are phrased in terms of “‘A’ishah relates” or “‘A’ishah narrates,” while her statements as protagonist within the Hadith will be prefaced with verbs of saying, replying, stating, or declaring.

In the Hadith, ‘A’ishah relates how Muhammad’s army, on returning from an expedition, accidentally deserted her at a rest spot. ‘A’ishah waits there until a soldier, lagging behind the rest of the expedition, discovers her and leads her on his camel to rejoin the rest of the group. When ‘A’ishah is seen returning with her rescuer, rumors spread that she has committed adultery. ‘A’ishah’s response to the accusations, as presented in the Hadith, is a linguistic performance based, in large part, on allusion to the Qur’anic story of Joseph and the manipulation of the intertextual associations that such an allusion makes possible. These associations cluster around the concepts of kayd (a term that can be translated as deceiving, plotting, or stratagem) and şabr (patience).

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3 This statement concerns ‘A’ishah of the Hadith and of Islamic tradition. Whatever bearing that tradition has on the “historical ‘A’ishah” is no more relevant for our analysis here of the importance of ‘A’ishah as character in her own (reported) narrations than the historical Jesus would be to those evaluating the significance of the acts and speech reported of the Jesus of the Gospels on the history of the Christian tradition. While recognizing the validity of those who seek the historical personage behind the texts, the “‘A’ishah” we treat here is the ‘A’ishah defined and self-defined through the hadith and biographical tradition.

4 Our primary sources for the affair of the lie are the Şahih (Soundly Verified) hadith collection of al-Bukhari (d. 870 CE). Al-Bukhari arranged the hadiths circulating orally at his time that he believed to be from reliable sources into chapters according to the content and theme of the hadiths. Two of the major accounts appear in the sixth volume, 60th book of Bukhari—Bukhari 6.60.(213).274, and 6.60.(218).281—in which the Qur’anic discussion of adultery and false charges of adultery in Sura 24 is the occasion of revelation under consideration. The other major account, very close to the accounts in volume six, occurs in volume five, book 59—Bukhari 5.59.(32).462—in a discussion of the virtues of great men and women. See Muhammad Muhsin Khan, ed., Şahih al-Bukhari The Translation of the Meanings of Şahih al-Bukhari Volumes V and VI (Chicago: Kazi, 1978). Translations from Bukhari and the Qur’an used below are by Michael Sells. All subsequent references will be by volume, book, and hadith number.

‘A’ishah figures prominently in the hadiths and the sira as both a source in the chains of transmission and as the subject of the narratives. Determining the gendered perspective of
‘A’isha In Islamic Tradition

The Qur’an does not mention the prophet Muhammad’s wives by name, but the hadiths make frequent reference to them as transmitters and as first narrators recounting Muhammad’s words and actions. The accounts attributed to the prophet’s wives, with intimate details of the Prophet’s life as well as his reactions to specific political and social events, can serve as precedent for legal decisions. In their acknowledged role as “Mothers of the Believers,” the wives of Muhammad nurture and guide a community that reaches through their words and examples far beyond their biological children. Yet, the hadiths do not always present them in a flattering light. They are exemplars of what women should be, but also examples of what they cannot help but be and what they should strive to overcome.5

In the hadith collection of al-Bukhari, a special section is devoted to the superiority (fadl) of ‘A’isha. One hadith begins by listing two women as perfected: “Only two women have reached perfection: Maryam the daughter of ‘Imran [and mother of Jesus in the Qur’an] and Asiya, the spouse of Pharaoh.” The hadith goes on to discuss ‘A’isha’s superiority by evoking a comparison between ‘A’isha and tharid, a dish consisting of bread and meat soaked in broth that was said to have been Muhammad’s favorite food: “the superiority [fadl] of ‘A’isha over other women is like the superiority of tharid to other meals.”6 The analogy draws attention to an affeciton by Muhammad based at least in part on sensual qualities. In addition, the word used to depict ‘A’isha’s merit, fadl, implies superiority based on favor and preference, in contrast to the merit of Maryam and Asiya who have “reached perfection” (kamāl). ‘A’isha’s superiority contrasts as well with the merit based on virtues (manāqib) of Khadija (the first wife of Muhammad), Fatima (the daughter of Muhammad and Khadija) and some male companions of the prophet.7

Although ‘A’isha’s merit is categorized differently from those of Muhammad’s other wives, her desirability is not put in opposition to spiritual and religious


6 Bukhari 5.57.113. The hadith that follows in Bukhari, 5.57.114, offers only the tharid comparison, without the references to Maryam and Asiya.

7 See for example Bukhari 5.57.110 on the manāqib of Fatima and 5.57.103 on the manāqib of ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud.

These texts is a problematic venture; while the hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha are narrated in a purportedly female voice, that voice is sifted through the male perspectives of subsequent transmitters.
success. Indeed, the preference shown to her is linked directly to religious inspiration. According to one hadith, when Muhammad’s wife Umm Salama complained to him about his favoritism for ‘A’isha, he replied: “Do not trouble me about ‘A’isha, for by God, divine inspiration never came to me when I was under the blanket of any of you other than her.” Yet ‘A’isha’s special place in the prophet’s affection does leave her vulnerable to slander by jealous relatives of his other wives and by others in the community.

‘A’isha’s beauty and favored status vis-à-vis Muhammad are not the only source of her prominence. Many of the statements of ‘A’isha’s nephew, ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, an authority on the early history of Islam, rely on ‘A’isha’s authority. ‘Urwa is reported to have testified “I did not see a greater scholar than ‘A’isha in the learning of the Qur’an, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful matters, poetry and literature, Arab history and genealogy,” and to have remarked that ‘A’isha could cite poetic verses for every occasion. She is said to have related 1210 hadiths.

While ‘A’isha’s role as source of hadiths earned her the epithet “Mother of the Islamic Community,” her place in Muhammad’s affection earned her the epithet “the beloved of the beloved of God” (ḥabībat ḥabīb allāh). ‘A’isha’s beauty and attractiveness both heighten her prominence and bring her into trouble. In the Hadith of the Slander, her learning and literary prowess help her achieve a role that has been difficult in all the major religious traditions: a woman who can control and master language and signs in the religious sphere and at the same time be a fully sexual being.

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8 Muhammad’s preference for ‘A’isha wins her a place in heaven. The hadiths state that she is Muhammad’s wife “in this world and the next” and say that he chose to die in her house as opposed to the houses of any of his other wives.

9 Bukhari 5.57.119.

10 At the very end of the Hadith of the Slander, ‘A’isha narrates, “Of the wives of the Prophet, [Zaynab] was my rival but God protected her through moral vigilance. Her sister Hamma started to struggle on her behalf and perished with those who perished among the others involved in the slander.” Toward the beginning of the story, when ‘A’isha heard about the slander and sought solace with her mother, ‘A’isha’s mother reassures her: “Be calm, daughter, there is hardly a woman who is held high in the affection of her husband and who has fellow wives that they [the other wives] would not cast aspersions upon her.” Both statements are translated from 6.60.274. Cf. the nearly identical accounts in 5.59.462 and 6.60.281.


The Slander as an Occasion of Revelation

The Hadith of the Slander falls in the category of asbâb an-nuzûl (occasions for revelation). Asbâb an-nuzûl explain frequently elliptic Qur’anic verses by referring them to the biographical and historical reconstruction of the life of the prophet and the early Islamic community. The story of the Slander presents itself as elucidating the occasion for the Qur’anic denunciation of false accusations of adultery.

‘A’îsha narrates that after she learned of the gossip concerning her, she continued to weep until Muhammad approached her and said, “If you are innocent, then soon Allah will reveal your innocence. If you are guilty, repent before Allah.” Muhammad had previously defended his wife against the accusations of adultery, but his defense had led to an outbreak of tribal tensions within the community, leaving both her and her husband in a dangerous situation. When her servant, Barira, was interrogated, Barira stated that ‘A’îsha’s only fault was that she tended to leave “the dough of her family out for the goats.”

‘A’îsha narrates that when Muhammad finished speaking, her tears ceased, and her state changed from grief and despair to resolution. ‘A’îsha then narrates that she refused to address her husband directly, but ordered her father to reply to Muhammad on her behalf. When Abu Bakr protested that he did not know what to say to Muhammad, ‘A’îsha commanded her mother to reply to Muhammad on her behalf. ‘A’îsha’s mother also protested that she did not know what to say to Muhammad. Then, as ‘A’îsha narrates:

In spite of the fact that I was a young girl and had little knowledge of the Qur’an, I said, “By God, no doubt you [pl.] have heard this slanderous speech so that it has been planted in your hearts and you have taken it as truth. Now if I tell you that I am innocent, you will not believe me, but if I confess to you about it—God knows I am innocent—you will surely believe me. By God I know no example for myself except for that of Yusuf’s father when he said ‘You yourselves have concocted something. Beautiful patience! I will seek help in God regarding what you describe’ (Q 12:18).” Then I turned to the other side and lay on my bed; and God knowing that I was innocent and [in the assurance that] God would prove my innocence,

‘A’îsha took as her own the words of Yusuf’s father Ya’qub (Jacob)—“You yourselves have concocted this story. Beautiful patience” (sabrun jamil) (12:18).

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13 Barira’s statement, if read metaphorically, may be interpreted that ‘A’îsha was vulnerable to scandal, but the Hadith offers no specific clue on whether the statement was indeed taken metaphorically. According to two versions of the Hadith, it was ‘Ali who suggested Barira be interrogated, after having suggested that Muhammad could simply divorce and renounce ‘A’îsha and find another wife: 5.59.462 and 6.60.274.

14 Bukhari 5.59.462, with almost identical texts in Bukhari 6.60.274 and 6.60.281.
The phrase *sabrun jamil*, spoken by ‘A’isha at this critical point, is distinctive, not only because it is associated with one of the most well-known stories in the Qur’an, but also because of a grammatical anomaly within the Arabic that makes it a noun adjective phrase, an incomplete sentence. Indeed, the phrase has become one of the most frequently used allusions to the Qur’an in everyday Arabic speech. As she concedes that the truth as she knows it is of no use in proclaiming her innocence, ‘A’isha as protagonist appears at first to be defeated, without personal defense or recourse; however, by evoking the situation of Ya’qub and, indirectly, of Yusuf, she places her patience (*sabr*) within a theologically significant story involving Qur’anic prophets in similar situations of false accusation or false testimony and who similarly exercised *sabr*. As will be shown below, ‘A’isha as narrator exploits most fully for her own vindication this original evocation of Ya’qub and Yusuf by ‘A’isha the protagonist.

‘A’isha has refused to approach Muhammad, but instead, after citing Ya’qub, she states: “Now if I tell you that I am innocent, you will not believe me, but if I confess to you about it—God knows I am innocent—you will surely believe me.” The “you” in the above statement is directed to Muhammad in response to ‘A’isha’s mother’s protest that she did not know what to say to Muhammad. However, by refusing to approach Muhammad and speak the words herself and by putting them in the plural throughout her statement, ‘A’isha also opens the reference to her parents and to the community at large. In using the plural, she also elides the plural of her statement with the plural of Ya’qub’s statement, turning the accusation against that expandable and undefined plural “you” to a possible implied analogy between those she is addressing and Yusuf’s brothers.

Despite her protestation of lack of importance and lack of familiarity with the Qur’an, ‘A’isha has appealed to an implicit alliance with the Qur’anic Ya’qub in a manner whose significance our essay will attempt to trace. ‘A’isha then goes on to make a crucial theological distinction in the most dramatic possible way. Shortly after ‘A’isha alluded to the Sura of Yusuf, Muhammad received a revelation proclaiming her innocent of adultery and reported back, “‘A’isha! God has declared your innocence!” ‘A’isha’s mother told her to rise and approach the Prophet, but just as she had done before

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15 We have deliberately left the phrase ungrammatical rather than attempting to interpolate into it a grammatical translation. It is in its strangeness and ungrammatical character that it achieves its distinctive effect. Although the phrase *sabrun jamil* (or with full vocalization, *sabrun jamilun*) is sometimes translated as “patience is best,” “patience is beautiful” or “patience is becoming,” the phrase that would normally signify such a meaning in Arabic would be *as-sabr jamil* (or with full vocalization, *as-sabr jamilun*). The Qur’anic phrase puts the first word as indefinite rather than definite, a construction that literally would be a noun adjective phrase: “best patience” or “becoming patience.”
her vindication, ‘A’isha refused once again to approach him. Instead, she responded: “By God, I will not get up and go to him or praise anyone but God Almighty” (wa llâhi lâ aqîmu ilayhi wa lâ ahmadu illâ allâha ‘azza wa jalla); or, according to another hadith, even more sharply: “Praise be to God. No praise to any human and no praise to you [Muhammad]” (bi ḥamdi llâhi lâ bi ḥamdi ahadin wa lâ bi ḥamdika).16 ‘A’isha’s response recognizes the divine author of the message, not the human messenger, as her vindication.

‘A’isha’s position that the deity, not Muhammad, is her vindicator is central to ‘A’isha’s narration. ‘A’isha first described Muhammad as he went into his prophetic trance and then, after the trance passed, as he smiled and said to her “O ‘A’isha, Allah Almighty has declared your innocence” (ammâ llâhu ‘azza wa jalla fâ qad barra’ākî). ‘A’isha then related:

My mother said to me, “Get up and go to him.” I said, “By Allah I will not get up and go to him and I will not praise anybody but Allah Almighty.” So Allah revealed: “Those who brought the slander (ifk) were a gang (‘ușba) among you, do not think that it . . .” and the ten verses in their entirety (24.11-20).

The sequence of events here is significant: 1) Muhammad goes into a prophetic trance; 2) he declares that God has declared ‘A’isha innocent; 3) ‘A’isha’s mother demands that ‘A’isha approach Muhammad; 4) ‘A’isha refuses and states that she will “not praise anyone but God,” and 5) Allah reveals the verses against false accusation, the first of which is cited verbatim in the hadith, followed by the assertion that nine verses followed (24:11-20). The key verse (24:11) begins: “Those who brought the slander (ifk) were a gang (‘ușba) from among you, do not think that it [is an evil for you] . . .” (inna l-ladhînâ jâ’û bi l-ifkî ‘ușbatun minkum lâ taḥsabûhu [sharran lakum]).

Significantly, the verse fragment cited verbatim in the Hadith and the nine verses that follow it in Q 24 do not mention the specific incident of the slander or even ‘A’isha’s name. The fact that Muhammad’s declaration of divine vindication for ‘A’isha is followed by Muhammad’s recitation of the verses condemning false accusations suggests, of course, that the new revelation is specifically a vindication of ‘A’isha. But ‘A’isha’s actions in the story imply that the vindication is not so easy and cannot depend on Muhammad himself.17 There is a tension between ‘A’isha’s parents, who see Muhammad as

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16 Bukhari 5.59.464. In this hadith, ‘A’isha refers directly to both Yusuf and Ya’qub in citing the phrase sabrun jamil.
17 In the sequence of the narration, this proclamation that she has only God to thank occurs between Muhammad’s announcement that she has been vindicated and Muhammad’s
her vindicator, and ‘A’isha, who goes out of her way—in a manner that defied both her parents and her husband as authority figures—to refuse to praise Muhammad and to insist on praising only God. A clue to this mor-dant position of ‘A’isha might be found in the one verse of the Qur’an (out of ten) that she actually cites in the Hadith, Q 24:11, referring to the gang (‘usba) of those who spread the slander (ifk).

When ‘A’isha originally appealed to the story of Yusuf by citing Ya’qub’s words sabrun jamil, she did not at that time go on to cite the specific language in the Sura referring to Yusuf’s conspiring brothers as an ‘usba. Nevertheless, by citing the sabrun jamil passage she put into intertextual play the context of that passage, with its underlying accusation against the brothers of Yusuf as a conspiring gang.

The word ‘usba serves in the Hadith as the one specific intertextual hinge between ‘A’isha’s evocation of the Sura of Yusuf and the subsequent revelation of her vindication. The word is effective as an intertextual hinge in part because it is so rare in the Qur’an; indeed, it is used only one other time outside of the passages in the Sura of Yusuf and the criticism of false accusations of adultery in 24:11. Thus there would have been no doubt in the listener’s mind about the primary intertextual allusion. The allusion to an ‘usba is the only specific textual evidence in her narration that the Qur’anic revelation was a vindication of ‘A’isha in particular and it is also the specific tie to the term ifk (slander) that appears in the same Qur’anic verse. ‘A’isha’s use of the term ‘usba as the intertextual link between two Qur’anic passages, the conspiracy of Yusuf’s brothers and the condemnation of false accusations of adultery (Q 24:12-20) serves to confirm that her vindication was indeed the occasion for the latter revelation.

With this consideration in mind, we note an anomaly in the traditional explanation of the Hadith of the Slander as an occasion of revelation. The full passage on adultery and accusations extends from verse 12:2 to 12:20. When ‘A’isha as narrator of the Hadith singles out verse 11 for direct citation, she aligns verses 12:11-20 with her particular situation. Šahih al-Buhhārī assigns verses 12:2-10 to other, unrelated occasions. Could it be

recitation of the actual words of Sura 24. It is not clear whether that narration sequence would imply that ‘A’isha the protagonist made this strong statement between the time Muhammad told her she had been vindicated and the time he recited the revelation, or whether the scene is woven in by the narrator at this moment for other reasons.

A special problem in the splitting of the two passages arises in verse 13, a verse that criticizes those who brought accusations of adultery without having four witnesses. But the Qur’anic stipulation that there be four witnesses occurs in verse 4, in the passage that some commentators refer to a later occasion than verses 11-20. For an analysis based on this tradition, see Richard Bell, The Qur’an, translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937, 1960), vol. 1:335-38. But by this account, verse 13 would criticize those who bring accusations in a manner contradicting the protocol of verse 4 which
that ‘A’isha as narrator chose verse 11 to represent the entire passage, not because it was the first verse of the passage occasioned by her vindication, but because it contained the intertextually key term ‘usba’? If ‘A’isha cited as the key verse the one verse with a clear link to the story of Yusuf, that might help explain the confusion over Q 12:2-10 and the confused division of it into the two occasions.

However one interprets the thorny issue of the occasion(s) of revelation for Q 2-22, ‘A’isha is doubly vindicated. Her innocence has been declared by the Prophet and, by the standard now announced, there are no eyewitnesses to attest to the alleged infidelity. Yet the actions and positions the Hadith shows her taking demonstrate that her concern is not only that she is vindicated, but also—and this is the crucial point—that her vindication rests not on the actions or deeds of Muhammad, but with the divine author of the revelation. By citing the verse of the Qur’anic revelation that contains an intertextual allusion to the story of Yusuf to which she had attached herself by evoking the words of Ya’qub, she would reinforce the direct connection between Allah and her own situation.

‘A’isha’s biting refusal to thank Muhammad, even after the urging of her parents, can be seen as a personal rebuke to a husband who refused to stand up for her. But in fact, the Hadith relates that Muhammad had forcefully attempted to vindicate ‘A’isha. Before he commanded ‘A’isha to confess to the accusations or wait for God’s intervention, Muhammad had demanded punishment for her accusers, including ‘Abdullah ibn Ubayy, suggested as the chief accuser. As the kin of ‘Abdullah prepared to defend him, the larger tribal groups of Aws and Khazraj (which, according to traditional history, Muhammad had reconciled after civil war in Medina) were once more on the verge of civil war.

had not yet been revealed. In Bukhari’s treatment of Sura 24, the hadiths that depict the occasions for revelation of verses 2-9 have no reference to the Hadith of the Slander. See Bukhari 6.60.269-272. Then, verses 11-22 are backed up with the Hadith of the Slander or other hadiths that include references to the Hadith of the Slander as the occasion for the revelation. See Bukhari 6.60.273-280. Ibn Ishaq, on the other hand, has the punishment of eighty lashes for false accusation of adultery applied on the spot to ‘A’isha’s slanderers, linking the 24:2-9 more closely to 24:11-22. The Life of the Messenger of God, A Translation of [ibn] Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah with an introduction and notes by A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 497.

19 By the Qur’anic pronouncement associated either directly with the affair of the slander or coming a bit later, those who launch unsubstantiated charges of adultery are to be punished with a flogging of eighty lashes (24:4). For one effort to untangle the relationships among verses 12:4-20, see Bell, The Qur’an, vol. 1:335-38. In Bukhari 5.59.462, the Hadith of the Slander includes an interpolated comment by ‘Urwa ibn az-Zubayr, one of the transmitters, enumerating a list of those who circulated the slander (‘Abdullah ibn Ubayy, Hassan ibn Thabit, Misbah ibn Uthatha, and Hamma ibn Jahsh). He then confirms the centrality of the term ‘usba to the story, by stating: “As far as any others involved, I do know of them, except that, as God Almighty has proclaimed, they were an ‘usba.”
Muhammad was caught in a dilemma. If the community believed the slander to be true, Muhammad would lose face and legitimacy, dishonored by the alleged unfaithfulness of his wife. If he denied the charges, that reaction in turn would necessitate punishing the slanderers and asking men of different tribes to turn on their kinsmen in defense of the new religion. In either case, the Islamic community was faced with catastrophic internal conflict. Thus, although ‘A’isha might have been personally annoyed with Muhammad for not vindicating her, the Hadith makes it clear that the problem was not that Muhammad refused to vindicate her, but that he could not vindicate her without reverting to the role of a tribal leader defending his honor. Indeed, as soon as he called for the punishment of ‘A’isha’s accusers, the Aws and Khazraj began to revert to the very tribal structures of feud that Islam was attempting to eliminate. Had Muhammad persisted, the young umma or Islamic community would have been endangered.

At the moment of deepest crisis, ‘A’isha as protagonist invoked the story of Yusuf. Then, ‘A’isha as narrator embedded her dramatically charged and theologically significant refusals to approach Muhammad within the account of her vindication. She also cited only the verse of the Qur’an with the explicit link to the story of Yusuf. Then, by refusing to thank Muhammad, she dramatically shifted the focus of vindication from her husband to the deity, helping further to defuse the logic of blood feud that was about to explode into civil war. To understand the further implications of her stance (in thanking only Allah) and the double speech act (of invoking the story of Yusuf and, as narrator of the Hadith, describing her invocation of that story), it is necessary to turn to the politically and sexually charged subtext within the Sura of Yusuf.

*Invoking The Sura of Yusuf*

By taking Ya’qub’s words as applicable to her own situation, ‘A’isha aligns herself with the male prophets of the Sura of Yusuf about whom and to

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20 Although the crisis is averted here, civil war between the partisans of ‘Ali and his enemies, including ‘A’isha, would break out later. See Spellberg, *Politics.*


22 We have distinguished here between the story of Yusuf as it was invoked by ‘A’isha and the Sura of Yusuf as it now exists in the canonical Qur’anic text. Given the controversies over when and how the Qur’anic text was divided into Suras, it cannot be assumed that, at the episode of the Slander, the verses cited by ‘A’isha would have made up a complete and distinct Sura. But, it is the Sura of Yusuf to which we have access now as a text and through which Muslims have commonly read ‘A’isha’s evocation of the Qur’anic verse on the conspiracy of Yusuf’s brothers. Thus, even if the story had not fully been composed within a Sura form at the time of the slander, since the time of Bukhari we can assume that the story of Yusuf de facto evoked in the mind of the readers by ‘A’isha’s reference is the story as it appears in the Sura of Yusuf.
whom lies and slanders were told. However, in evoking the story of Yusuf and Ya‘qub, ‘A‘isha also evokes the associations of women with wiliness (kayd) and seduction that form a major subplot of the story of Yusuf. ‘A‘isha’s own situation thus becomes entwined with an interpretation of the role of the female characters in the Sura of Yusuf, and insofar as they are generalized to represent all women, of women as a whole. Her evocation of the story of Yusuf leads ineluctably into the issues of women, authority, sexuality, and kayd within Yusuf’s story.

In the Sura of Yusuf, Yusuf’s gang (‘uṣba) of half brothers drop him into an abandoned well. When they tell their father that wolves have devoured Yusuf, Ya‘qub responds (12:18): “You your selves have concocted a story. Beautiful patience! I will seek help in God regarding what you describe” (bal sawwalat lakum anfusukum amran fa šabrūn jamīlūn wa līahu l-musta‘ānu ‘alā mā taṣīfūn). Ya‘qub has no way to know the actual truth and he resigns himself to patience. The expression “beautiful patience” (šabrūn jamīl) occurs a second time in the Sura of Yusuf. After Yusuf’s brothers return from their journey to Egypt, they tell their father that his youngest son, their half brother and Yusuf’s full brother, is being held captive in Egypt because he attempted to steal something from a high official in Egypt. The brothers and Ya‘qub do not know that the Egyptian ruler holding the boy captive is Yusuf and that he planted the stolen item in his brother’s bag. Ya‘qub knows that the story his sons tell him about the theft must be untrue and so he states again, šabrūn jamīl, and continues, “God will bring him to me” (12:83). Ya‘qub’s patience is ultimately rewarded with the return of both of his sons. Yusuf also exercises patience. He reveals his true identity to his brothers upon their return to Egypt saying, “I am Yusuf and this is my brother... God does not deprive of reward those who fear Him and exercise patience (yaṣbir)” (12:90).

‘A‘isha allies herself with Yusuf and Ya‘qub through her appropriation of ṣabr and their own exact words about ṣabr. Aspersions cast upon her because of her female sexual attractiveness are repelled when she aligns herself with male prophets vindicated through patience. Yet such an alignment is unstable, given the sexual polemic within the Sura of Yusuf itself. That sexual polemic begins when Yusuf is rescued from the well by a passing caravan, brought to Egypt, and ends up in the service of an unnamed Egyptian noble (analogous to the Potiphar of Genesis), who is referred to in the story as simply al-‘azīz (the potentate). The mistress of the house, the ‘Aziz’s wife, unnamed in the Qur’an but known in popular tradition as Zulaykha, attempts to seduce Yusuf. As he flees from her advances, she tears his shirt. When Zulaykha’s spouse arrives, she accuses Yusuf of attacking her (12:23-25). The theme of false accusation against someone in a vulnerable position, in this case against Yusuf, emerges in the Sura and further connects it to the Hadith of the Slander in which ‘A‘isha (vulnerable because of her sexual
attractiveness and the political intrigues swirling around her and her family) is falsely accused of sexual misconduct.

The ‘Aziz decides that his wife was chasing after his servant because Yusuf’s shirt is ripped from the back instead of the front. He concludes (12:28): “surely this is one of your [f. pl.] wiles and indeed your wiles are great” (innahu min kaydikunna inna kaydkunna ‘azim). The use of the feminine plural has led many commentators to suggest that the ‘Aziz is referring to the wiles of women in general, of all women.23 The ‘Aziz follows his famous statement in the Arabic feminine plural about “your wiles” with a rebuke to his wife.

After being rebuked by her husband and blamed by the women of the court, Zulaykha invites the gossiping women to a feast. She gives them paring knives and orders Yusuf to enter the room to serve them. Stunned and distracted by his beauty, they cut themselves. Zulaykha triumphantly responds, “This is the one you blamed me for.” (12:32). Thus Zulaykha allows the women to see the comely Yusuf for themselves and understand why she desired him (and why she continues to insist that unless he agrees to an affair with her, she will have him imprisoned).

Confronted by the persistent entreaties of Zulaykha and the admiration of the other women (Yusuf’s “Companions”), as well as by the offer to escape prison if he follows Zulaykha’s bidding, Yusuf exclaims: “Lord, prison is dearer to me than what they invite me to. Unless you turn their guile (kayd) away from me I shall succumb to their charms and thus become one among the ignorant” (al-jähiliyín). God then turns “the women’s wiles (kayd) from him” (12:33-34). Given the sequence of the narration, it was an easy step to equate the wiles of the Companions of Yusuf with the wiles the ‘Aziz attributes to the feminine plural while criticizing his wife, and then to move that attribution into a polemical attack on the wiles of women as a universal phenomenon.

Like ‘A’isha, Yusuf is falsely accused. Like ‘A’isha he is subsequently vindicated. In Yusuf’s case, vindication comes not through a divine revelation, but rather the words of his would-be seducers. “We know no evil against him,” respond Yusuf’s Companions, in response to the ‘Aziz’s question concerning Yusuf’s innocence. The words of one of ‘A’isha’s defend-

23 Baydawi gives two options: it refers to Zulaykha and those who are like her, or it refers to all women. But then he goes on to imply the second option is valid, by explaining that the kayd of women is more subtle, more emotionally entrapping than that of others (presumably men), and that women use it to confront men, even as Satan whispers with it. See Baydawi’s Commentary on Surah 12 of the Qur’an, text accompanied by an interpretative rendering and notes, by A.F.L. Beeston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). See p. 82 for the Arabic text of the commentary on “your wiles are great” (kaydahunna ‘azim).
ers in the Hadith of the Slander, Usama ibn Zayd, are strikingly similar: "O Messenger of God, we know nothing but good about her." When Zulaykha finally admits that it was she who attempted to seduce Yusuf, Yusuf exclaims "from this, the minister should know that I did not betray him in his absence and that God never allows the wiles (kayd) of those who engage in treachery to succeed" (12:51-52).

The virtues that attracted the women to Yusuf are confirmed when he refuses their temptation. It is the women themselves who provide the evidence that exonerates Yusuf and wins him an appointment as a high administrator. The resolution of the story occurs when Yusuf reveals his identity to his brothers and orders them to return to his court with their father: "I am Yusuf and this is my brother. Allah has been gracious to us; for Allah does not deny those who are patient their recompense" (12:90). When 'A'isha's story is superimposed over that of Yusuf, it becomes clear that 'A'isha and Yusuf resort to patience, in similar situations, until they are vindicated.

The parallels between 'A'isha and Zulaykha are more complex. While Zulaykha becomes a symbol of the "wiles of women" in medieval commentaries, it was through her and through the Companions that the true worth of Yusuf was recognized and that Yusuf was vindicated. In the mystical tradition, allusions to the "cutting of the hands" are used to evoke the notion of bewilderment of reason in the presence of divine beauty or transcendence. Even in more prosaic interpretations, the problem with Zulaykha and the companions was not their attraction to Yusuf, but the way they responded to the attraction. Their belated recognition of this sets the stage for their redemption and Yusuf's vindication.25

By quoting the words of Ya'qub in the story of Yusuf, 'A'isha has evoked a double-edged set of associations. The analogy to Ya'qub and Yusuf places her in the company of wrongly accused and subsequently vindicated prophets. The unavoidable analogy to Zulaykha and the companions, which any reference to the story would evoke as well, places her within the sexual polemic of the story. The word kayd means no more than plot or stratagem—whether positively or negatively viewed. A strong strand of traditional commentary, however, defines kayd through the 'Aziz's application of it to all women in a context where it means sexual trickery. Indeed some medieval commentators, both Shi'ite and Sunni, used the association of Zulaykha and

24 Bukhari 5.59.462; 6.60.274; and 6.60.281.
the Companions of Yusuf with ‘A’isha to attack ‘A’isha and, more generally, women’s roles in public affairs.26

A reported conversation between Muhammad and ‘A’isha suggests that the Aziz’s view of kayd and women was easily extrapolated into such a polemic even at an early period. In this story, ‘A’isha narrates how Muhammad, on his deathbed, designated Abu Bakr, ‘A’isha’s father, to lead Friday prayers. ‘A’isha objects that her father is “a delicate man with a weak voice who wept much when he read the Qur’an.” After ‘A’isha repeats her objection, Muhammad exclaims: “You are like Yusuf’s Companions; tell him [Abu Bakr] to preside over prayers.”27

It might seem, therefore, that by evoking the words of Ya’qub, ‘A’isha is evoking a larger subtext of particular peril for her—an attractive woman accused of adultery. The Qur’anic story of Yusuf is at least open to a polemical interpretation that can be used to question a woman’s authority and trustworthiness. The ‘Aziz’s position that the kayd of women is great, taken only in its immediate context, is clearly at least a potential threat to women. When read against the wider Qur’anic understanding of kayd, however, the import of the ‘Aziz’s comment is transformed by a transformation of the semantic field of kayd itself.


[It] is the association of this term [kayd] with specifically feminine artifice that resonates in the depiction of Zulaykha, the Qur’anic women of the city [Companions of Yusuf], and ‘A’isha. In the confluence of feminine guile, ‘A’isha’s actions as described by the prophet are both clarified and condemned with her association of negative precedents found in the Qur’an.

To the expression “are clarified and condemned with her association of negative precedents found in the Qur’an” we would wish to add the explicit caveat, “in the views of these particular commentators.” The passive voice here could sound as if the “clarification” was inherent within the Qur’an. Although the historical context provided by Spellberg might mitigate such an essentialist and a historical reading, it is precisely the ease with which such essentialist readings can be passively evoked that, we argue, makes ‘A’isha’s evocation of the Sura of Yusuf a gesture of particular danger, and the success of the evocation (as narrated in Ḥadīth al-Iṣṭ), a particularly brilliant intertextual performance.

27 Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, pp. 680-81. This incident is part of a larger debate over who should succeed the last prophet Muhammad as leader of the Islamic community and highlights ‘A’isha’s proximity to the decision making. Sunni Muslims emphasize Muhammad’s choice of Abu Bakr to lead Friday prayers in his place as evidence for Abu Bakr’s authoritative claim on the caliphate. Shi‘i Muslims point to another hadith in which Muhammad says that ‘Ali is his closest companion and should have succeeded Muhammad as Imam, with more religious authority than the Sunnis would attribute to the Caliph. Shi‘i renditions of the story found in the sīra depict ‘A’isha as calling for her father to be chosen as Caliph.
Kayd in the Qur’an: Multiple Contexts and Meaning

Ibn al-Jawzi, a twelfth century writer, relays the response of a group of women to a man who had disparaged them as “Companions of Yusuf.” The women reply: “And who threw him in the well, we or you?” When the man attempts to use the Sura of Yusuf against them, the women point out that the men in the Sura are equally treacherous, if not more so.28 In the Sura of Yusuf, Ya’qub warned Yusuf not to reveal to his brothers his special talent of dream interpretation because of their kayd—because they will plot against him (yakidu laka kaydan)—as indeed they do when they drop him in a well (12:5) and lie about it. The women in the story of Ibn al-Jawzi recognize that in the story of Yusuf, kayd is an attribute of both genders.

In its wider Qur’anic context, kayd is attributed to the Qur’anic prophets, to their enemies, to Satan, and to God. Translators of the Qur’an qualify what alone is really a morally neutral concept with favorable nouns and verbs, such as stratagem, wit and cunning or pejorative terms, such as guile, plot, deception, wile, or trick, depending upon which character is exercising kayd. The ultimate efficacy of a character’s kayd is determined by the extent to which that character is aligned with the ultimate master of kayd, the God of the Qur’an.29

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The response by the women in the story of Ibn al-Jawzi is not alone in its critique of misogynist use of the term kayd. See, for example, Amina Wadud-Muhhsin’s contemporary critique of a treatise from a traditional theologian for ignoring the positive role of kayd in many Qur’anic stories. Amina Wadud-Muhhsin, Qur’an and Women (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1992), p. 99. Wadud-Muhhsin’s critique is leveled at ‘Abbās Maḥmüd al-‘Aqqād, al-Mar’a fi al-Qur’ān (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1962). It is also important to recognize the other negative Qur’anic associations of kayd (with the unbelievers and Satan) to fully appreciate the danger and the success of ‘A’isha’s appeal to the Sura of Yusuf.

29 When kayd’s scope of meaning is limited to the sexual deceit and trickery of women, it can be conflated with a term that carries similar meaning, fitna. In its broadest sense fitna is any test put before humans. Fitna is often used to describe a tendency of women to function as moral and spiritual tests, tempting men away from devotion to God and towards themselves. “Female beauty” as “a bait that leads to perdition, to damnation” is only one of the many meanings of fitna; it becomes primary when linked to the negative aspect and female-associated meanings of kayd, a link reinforced by A’isha’s place in Sunni-Shi’ite polemics and her association with both kayd and fitna in the civil strife (fitna) of early Islam. ‘A’isha took an active role in the first, fitna, civil war that divided the Muslim community and challenged the stability of the new religion of Islam.

Abdel Haleem discusses how intra-Qur’anic conceptual relationships were encapsulated in the dictum: al-Qur’an yu’fassiru ba’daha ba’dan (different parts of the Qur’an explain one another), “which, given the structure of the Qur’anic material, was argued to provide the most correct method of understanding the Qur’an.” See M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, “Context and
Kayd is central to the incident in which the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) smashes the idols of his father’s clan. Ibrahim makes an open threat: “I swear by God that I will plot (akidanna) against your idols when your backs are turned.” (21:57) While they are gone he smashes all of their idols except for the largest one. When they return to the destroyed idols, they ask him if he smashed the idols. “No,” he replies (21:63), “It was done by that chief of theirs. Ask him in case they can speak.” Ibrahim points them towards the largest of the idols which he has left intact, demonstrating the obvious powerlessness of the idol. “Do you worship instead of Allah that which can neither profit you nor do you harm?” asks Ibrahim (21:66).

Did the prophet Ibrahim lie? One prominent Qur’anic commentator views Ibrahim’s words as a rhetorical strategy. He reads the words, “The big one did it; ask them, if indeed they speak,” with the conditional first to mean: “if they could speak, they would say the big one did it, but of course they can’t speak. . . .” What Ibrahim did is justified because: “it is permissible to concede an untrue premise in the course of a debate with the intention of leading an opponent to admit the falsity of a premise.”30 The Qur’anic final word on the incident is that the idolater’s kayd is impotent in confronting a more powerful kayd (21:70): “They wished a plot against him” (arâdû bihi kaydan), after he destroyed their idols.” The non-believers are not able to enact a successful kayd; they can only wish kayd against Ibrahim.

Kayd is also at the center of the Qur’anic accounts of Musa (Moses) and Pharaoh. Pharaoh accuses Musa of using kayd to “expel the people from” his land by leading them toward belief in one God (7:123). Pharaoh also challenges Musa to a competition in kayd. First, “Pharaoh withdraws and draws together his kayd.” Musa allows Pharaoh’s magicians to “cast” their “spell” first causing “their cords and rods [to fly].” Pharaoh then says to Musa: “Prepare your kayd, and come forward. He alone shall win today who is superior.” The divine voice consoles Musa that “what they have fashioned is only kayd of sorcery.” Musa then throws down “what is in his right hand” and it swallows up what the magicians “have conjured.” Musa’s kayd convinces the magicians to pledge their allegiance to one God despite Pharaoh’s threats to cut off their feet and crucify them on date-palm trees (20:60-69).


The confrontations between the prophets and their opponents serve as models for the Qur’an and its messenger. Through the proper interpretation and manipulation of signs, both the text and Muhammad’s strategic use of it work to win people over to its message. In almost all cases, the use of kayd is tied to the strategic use of language and to the willingness to creatively and actively rest patient in a situation in which one seems trapped. In the Qur’an, the divine voice consoles Muhammad on his lack of apparent success and his need for patience with stories of the trials and ultimate vindication of earlier prophets, such as Musa and Ibrahim.

While the prophetic stories show kayd and patience within a temporal framework, kayd in the Qur’an is eschatological as well. Concerning those who would thwart the divine plan, the divine voice warns (7:183): “I will give them no respite. My kayd is invincible (inna kaydī matīn)”; and (86:15-16) “They (the unbelievers) are plotting but I too am plotting (innahum yakidūna kaydan wa akidū kaydan).” Although God is not called “patient” directly, the depiction of divine kayd implies exactly the kind of strategic use of waiting that human patience entails. Thus, after the deity declares “I too am plotting” the Qur’anic voice (86:17) makes the command to “give a respite” (mahhil) to the unbelievers, one of many references to the deity’s decision to wait and allow injustice to triumph for a time. One of the ninety-nine standard divine names in Islamic tradition is as-Sabīr (The All-Patient).

These passages scandalized anti-Islamic missionaries and polemicists who understood kayd in negative context and who expressed their abhorrence at the notion that the deity could exercise such deception with such self-proclaimed satisfaction. The plotting of the unbelievers is placed in parallel syntactic structure with the plotting of God, creating through the text itself a suspense in the outcome of the conflict. The unbelievers have fallen under the effective kayd of Satan, which will be no match for divine kayd at the end of time (4:76). On the Day of Reckoning, the divine voice asks: “Do they want to stage kayd (yuridūna kaydan)? Then only those who do not believe will be tricked (hum al-makidūn)” . . . (52:42) “On a day their kayd will be of no avail to them” (yawma lā yughnī ‘anhum kayduhum) (52:46).

‘A’isha as Character, ‘A’isha as Narrator, and ‘A’isha’s Kayd

Like Ibrahim, Musa, and Muhammad, Yusuf is a transmitter of divine signs. Like them he is confronted by enemies with resources apparently beyond his power. Yusuf’s strategy for dealing with adversity is to practice patience (sabr). He also enacts a kind of kayd in the act of planting a stolen cup in his brother’s bag. Having not yet revealed his true identity he holds his brother as a prisoner for the alleged theft and entices his father to come to
Egypt where he victoriously shows his father all that their patience has accomplished for them.

Against the wider backdrop of the Qur’anic conception of *kayd* and the specific allusions to Yusuf, ‘A’isha’s strategic use of language becomes more apparent in her roles both as the character within the Hadith of the Slander and as the original narrator of the Hadith. Through her appropriation of Ya’qub’s key words, ‘A’isha establishes a parallel between her situation and those of both Ya’qub and Yusuf, but also evokes possible associations between herself and the sexually deceitful women of the Sura of Yusuf. In so doing, she allows for and, indeed, forces a reinterpretation of the narrowly gendered and negative conception of *kayd* as it has been ascribed to Zulaykha and the Companions of Yusuf.

‘A’isha’s quotation from the Sura of Yusuf unifies the two approaches of *sabr* and *kayd*. She claims Ya’qub’s words as her own, announcing *sabr* as her only defense against the accusations. In so doing, she exercises a type of *kayd* in her manipulation of language to draw unexpected associations between herself and the men of the Sura. This act in itself breaks down the gendered conceptions of good and evil on the surface of the Sura text, complicates the association with the women of the Sura of Yusuf with a direct association to Ya’qub, and leads to a more nuanced reading of the Companions of Yusuf and Zulaykha. The original speech act by ‘A’isha the character is rendered effective by the manner in which it is framed by ‘A’isha the narrator, with a strategic use of foreshadowing, plot narration, and final summary. This double speech act (the original allusion and the retelling of it within a highly developed narration) also demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between *sabr* and *kayd*, a relationship that has important theological ramifications throughout the Qur’an.

The power to demonstrate effective *kayd* is linked to the ability to read divine signs. Pharaoh denies the divine signs presented by Musa (20:56). When the enemies of Musa judge that his *kayd* is only sorcery like their *kayd* and go on to order the sons of all those who believe in Musa’s signs to be executed, Allah assures Musa that “the unbelievers’ *kayd* is bound to fail” (40:24). In the Hadith of the Slander and in the Sura of Yusuf and other Qur’anic passages on *kayd*, divine intervention vindicates the words and confirms the authority of characters such as Musa, Ibrahim, Yusuf, Muhammad and ‘A’isha, even as it averts the *kayd* directed at them. Divine intervention is tied to human acts of language and acts of patience, even as the Qur’an speaks of the divine actions as being based upon *kayd* and presents divine actions as being mediated or deferred through a strategic use of respite that implies a divine analogue to human *sabr*.

‘A’isha as a character in the Hadith of the Slander both acts and speaks in a manner that emphasizes and respects the distinction between divine words or signs, on the one hand, and human words and authority, on the
other. She praises the Messenger of God, saying to him: "you see what I do not see." However, when Muhammad finally brings news of her vindication, she dramatically refuses to attribute her vindication to him: "I will not go to him. I praise none but God"—or in the shorter version of the story—"I thank only God. I do not thank anyone else and I do not thank you [Muhammad]."31

Although Muhammad is portrayed in the Qur'an as always and fully human, the early Islamic tradition moved toward a veneration of the figure of Muhammad that could instill complete authority in his person (not only in the words he transmitted as the Messenger of God). By citing the words of Ya'qub and by placing her trust in the authority of the divine revelation revealed through her husband, ‘A’ishah makes a crucial theological statement. That theological statement affirms Allah as the source of the revelation and the source of her vindication. While it is phrased in personally mordant terms ("no thanks to you, Muhammad"), it effectively vindicates Muhammad’s claim to be the messenger of God. Had she credited Muhammad with her vindication, she would have engendered suspicions that Muhammad was the author of the Qur'anic revelation, not God. The authenticity of the Qur'an as the word of God would have been put into question and Muhammad would have been in danger of reverting to the role of just another tribal leader defending his 'ird or honor.

At this moment of vindication, there is a dramatic irony; the roles of Muhammad and ‘A’ishah have been reversed. Earlier ‘A’ishah had expected Muhammad to vindicate her. Now, the validity of Muhammad’s role as the messenger of God is in part dependent upon how ‘A’ishah responds and whether, by refusing to acknowledge his human agency in the affair, she will vindicate his role as Messenger of God. Her personal rebuke is also a theological vindication for the authenticity of the Qur’an as God’s word and Muhammad as its messenger. The theological implications of ‘A’ishah refusal to approach Muhammad in Bukhari’s versions of the Hadith of the Slander are most apparent when we look at another famous version of the slander episode, that of Ibn Ishaq. In Ibn Ishaq’s account—not narrated in the voice of ‘A’ishah, but pieced together from a variety of sources—the same basic narrative is given. However, the account omits ‘A’ishah’s two refusals to approach Muhammad. ‘A’ishah does praise God after being vindicated, but that praise is not framed within the context of a refusal to thank Muhammad, and thus the theological stakes behind ‘A’ishah’s response are not illuminated or dramatized.32

31 Bukhari 5.59.474.
In the Hadith, ‘A’isha relates that she was stunned when Muhammad came with a prophetic pronouncement vindicating her. She relates that she had evoked the words of Ya’qub even though she was a young girl and unlearned in the Qur’an. She later adds she had never expected that Allah would have considered her important enough to send down a revelation in her behalf, but had hoped at most that Muhammad might have a dream vindicating her. Yet this humility and clear understanding of social and gender hierarchies do not prevent her, as protagonist, from dramatically shifting the credit for the vindication from Muhammad to God. Such a shift and theological stance suggest that however young, unlearned, and humble she might be, Allah has responded directly to her situation.

As narrator, ‘A’isha shapes the Hadith in a manner that highlights the intertextual resonance between the gang that plotted against Yusuf and the gang that plotted against her. She then sets the crucial moment of crisis and vindication within the center of the narration, and places her own refusal to thank Muhammad as the dramatic climax. When ‘A’isha states that she evoked the words of Ya’qub even though she was young and naive, one might be tempted to think that, indeed, invoking the story of Yusuf was a blunder in view of the associations with the kayd of Zulaykha and the Companions of Yusuf that it would also inevitably evoke. However, when we follow through on the textual cues she seems to provide, and thread her story through the story of Yusuf and then the wider Qur’anic understanding of kayd, we are led to a counterreading of the understanding of kayd offered by the ‘Aziz, a counterreading of relevance to both classical and contemporary concerns involving women, authority, and sexuality.33

33 Fedwa Malti-Douglas recognizes kayd as a major concept continuous throughout the tradition, pointing to the frame story from A Thousand and One Nights in which a young woman coerces, under threat of death, two kings into having sexual intercourse with her:

“It is only when she has revealed her trickery that Shahriyar and Shahzaman [the kings] respond in unison with their Allah...Allah...inna kaydakunna ‘azim (God...God...your guile is great),” the ‘Aziz’s famous quote. Malti-Douglas argues that Sharazad has transformed the kayd of the women of the Sura of Yusuf and the figure who seduces the kings in A Thousand and One Nights: “The earlier women’s behavior was defined in terms of its kayd: its guile or trickery. Sharazad also uses ruse, that of narration, to achieve her ends... . Hers could be argued to be the ultimate form of female trickery, since it represents the continual game of attraction (the storytelling) followed by denial of satisfaction (the end of the story which must await another night).” In this sense we might say that ‘A’isha, in her relation of the Hadith of the Slander, like Sharazad, uses the narrative to move away from “sex to text.” See Malti-Douglas, Women’s Body, Women’s Word, pp. 19, 22, 33.

While ‘A’isha, in the Hadith of the Slander, triumphs, Mernissi suggests that the slander weakened Muhammad’s position and made him vulnerable to pressures for restraints on women and the institution of strict veiling. Mernissi, The Veil, pp. 163-64.
The Wiles of Women are Great

Let us sum up the above discussion. The hadiths of al-Bukhari present ‘A’isha as “the beloved of the beloved of God” (habibat ḥabib allāh). ‘A’isha’s sexual desirability is linked in one hadith directly to Muhammad’s prophetic capacities. However, in the Hadith of the Slander, ‘A’isha’s sexuality has been turned against her, and she risks being shamed before her family and religious community. She is also presented as the “Mother of the Islamic Community” (umm al-umma). This image is based upon ‘A’isha’s acknowledged relationship to language as transmitter and preserver of Qur’an, hadith, poetry, and the details of the life of Muhammad and the early Islamic community.

This second area of capability is useful to ‘A’isha in seeking vindication of the charges of adultery. She adopts the words of the prophet Yusuf’s father as her own and practices sabr, the timely resort to patience and trust in divine intervention when human speech or acts are caught in a particular kind of dilemma. She protests that she is a mere girl, lacking in learning, but not only cites a key Qur’anic statement at a moment of crisis, but also goes on to make a dramatic theological statement about the true author of her vindication in a manner that would be seen in any normal circumstances as a brazenly insubordinate disobedience to her parents and dismissal of her husband and the leader of the Islamic community. In her narration, she highlights the link between the divine pronouncement and her own evocation of the story of Yusuf, and by doing so, encourages a second reading of her story (as told from the end and after the vindication in the Hadith) against the story of Yusuf, a second reading that compounds the effect of the first reading (of her story as protagonist in the midst of trouble evoking the story of Yusuf).

After seeing that Yusuf’s shirt is torn from the back (12:28), Zulaykha’s husband exclaims: “surely this is your [f. pl.] ruse, and indeed your wiles are great” (innahu min kaydikunna inna kaydakunna ʿazīm). When the Hadith of the Scandal is read against the story of Yusuf and within the wider Qur’anic understanding of kayd and sabr, the gender-polemical reading of the story of Yusuf is opened to reconfiguration. Thus, we might attribute to ‘A’isha (as she is portrayed in the Hadith) a form of kayd. This kayd comprises the ability to interpret signs and language, to remain patient, and to use language strategically. Based on other references in the Qur’an, kayd is measured by its success. In the affair of the slander, ‘A’isha, her husband, and the young Islamic community were in peril. ‘A’isha’s narration of her own vindication brings the theological implication of her dramatic refusal to thank Muhammad and establishes her as both the original master of discourse and sign (in her original evocation of Yusuf) and the interpreter and
framer of her own original speech act (as the narrator of the Hadith). 34

In attributing to 'A'isha the trait of kayd, as modeled by the earlier prophets, are we saying that 'A'isha, either as protagonist or as narrator (whether or not either 'A'isha can be identified specifically with the historical 'A'isha) somehow "intended" such an extraordinary series of effects? The issue of intention here runs up against two problems. In the first place, we do not know the circumstances of the production of the Hadith and what role 'A'isha played in the creation of such a complex and highly artistic narration, and even if we did know (and even if we could relate the Hadith to the actual historical 'A'isha), we could never be secure in knowing her intention; indeed, appeals to authorial intention are generally unreliable even in cases where the author is living and even when carried out by the author herself.

The second problem is theological. The Qur'anic prophets and 'A'isha (if we choose to read 'A'isha's story in the Hadith as modeled on them) can read and interpret signs and, when in an untenable situation, resort to or trust in ṣabr and kayd. In the cases emphasized in the Qur'an, their patience is ultimately vindicated by the kayd of the deity. But it would be theoretically problematic to consider the prophets as having intended such an outcome or to have used ṣabr as if it were some kind of self-conscious plot that secured their vindication. Their only plot was in the divine plot. To see patience as a kind of infallible self-conscious weapon would go against the fundamental Qur'anic principle, embodied in Islam in the use of the phrase "god willing" (in shā' allāh), that any human presumption of counting on any particular outcome would violate divine omnipotence and determination. 35

One recent feminist approach to the words and deeds of women in sacred texts focuses upon the reconstruction, if not of the historical figures, at least of the context reflected in the stories about them. 36 A second approach reflected in this essay is more emphatically literary. It involves a close scrutiny of the text itself and a reinterpretations of key elements of the text through close reading. The assumption is that such close scrutiny, in the light of contemporary concerns, can retrieve key aspects of the text that

34 Such a rereading of the story of Yusuf against the story of 'A'isha as told in the Hadith of the Slander offers a particularly intriguing new understanding of the epithet given to her, as-Siddiqa or as-Siddiqa bint as-Siddiq ("the Truthful," "The Truthful daughter of The Truthful") in some accounts of her life (see the citation of Muhammad Ibn Sa'd in n. 1). The most proximate referent is to her being the daughter of Abu Bakr who was known as as-Siddiq. But Yusuf was also known as as-Siddiq and—in the context of the Hadith of the Slander and its use of the Yusuf story as a subtext—the epithet "the Truthful, daughter of the Truthful" may come to imply spiritual lineage with Yusuf as well.

35 See The Qur'an 18:35-40 for just one of many examples of the injunction not to preempt divine prerogative with future expectations or assumptions concerning one's own agency.

36 For one example, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
have been covered over or neglected through interpretations based on other, sometimes tendentious assumptions. What appear to be essentialized and fixed structures of gender relations are open to reconsideration and an appeal to reconsideration from the very canonical sources that had been used to justify the stereotypes in the first place.37

‘A’isha is known in the Islamic tradition as a particularly outspoken woman. Her spirited rejoinders to Muhammad, her parents, and the early Islamic community are widely appreciated. In the Hadith of the Slander, she highlights her social and gender-based vulnerability: she was a young girl (jāriya) and unlearned in the Qur’an, who never imagined the Deity would send down a revelation in her behalf. Yet she also dramatizes her willingness to stand up her parents and her refusal to offer gratitude to the husband and prophet who announced her vindication. Through the play upon the story of Yusuf and the concept of șabr (and its corollary, kayd), the Hadith of the Slander opens up significant perspectives on issues of gender even as it allows ‘A’isha’s own persona, as it has been handed down in the tradition, a fuller context for understanding. She emerges in this Hadith defending her role as both a socially and religiously influential woman with full sexuality, a deep and subtle sense of the religious implications (and traps) of her situation, and an unshakable adherence to the Qur’anic models she has evoked.

The theological significance of Qur’anic kayd is related to patience. In such kayd, (as opposed to the kayd of the sorcerers), one cannot intend, expect or count upon any particular intervention. The significance of one’s actions, like the significance of Yusuf’s dream, can only be determined post facto, after the story is concluded. If the Hadith of the Slander does turn out to be a resource for re-examining assumptions about gender, sexuality, and kayd within Islam, we might apply with some irony the ‘Aziz’s exclamation: “indeed, your kayd is great.”

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37 Mernissi’s The Veil focuses on a critical reevaluation of misogynist and falsified hadiths, as well as the complementary impulse to recover within the hadiths themselves aspects that would criticize misogynist traditions and both legal and customary practices based on them. See also: Ruth Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994). For a revision and retrieval of the image of Biblical women from traditions of male-dominated authorship and commentary see Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). For a variety of useful approaches, see also Karen King, ed., Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).