

of al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/903), *al-Kāfi*, Ibn Bābawayh's *al-Khiṣāl*, *ʿUyūn akhbār al-riḍā*, *ʿIlāl, al-Amālī*, as well as al-Mufīd's *al-Irshād*, al-Ṭūsī's work on the *ghayba*, and *Bihār al-anwār* of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1699), among others. Ansari is rightly cautious (p. 310) about accepting all these passages as absolutely authentic, but he certainly has mined the material to considerable effect.

All told, this volume constitutes a major achievement—and a major contribution to the field of Twelver Shiʿi studies. Since the field's inception in 1968 with the Strasbourg conference (T. Fahd, ed., *Le shiʿisme imāmīte: Colloque de Strasbourg, 6–9 mai 1968* [Paris, 1970]), Western-language study of the premodern period—usually understood as ending with Safawid Iran (1501–1722)—has centered on the careers and contributions of the same handful of Twelver scholars. These few scholars, most of the now dominant Uṣūlī “persuasion,” are well known precisely because, in the seventeenth century, in Iran especially, multiple, highly charged, spiritual polemics encouraged the production of numerous manuscript copies of their works that were the bases for editions published later in the last century, especially since 1979. Based on continued recourse to the work of that handful of Twelver scholars, the trajectory of Twelver Shiʿi discourse from those early years to today is too often in the West, explicitly or not, portrayed in a teleological fashion.

Ansari's excellent contribution reminds the field of figures and their works from the very earliest years of Shiʿi history that were lost along the way. Their careers, contributions, and their influence in their own times, let alone later, have long deserved more consideration. The same holds true for many figures from later periods of Shiʿi history. Ansari is to be greatly thanked for what amounts to a wake-up call not to forget them.

ANDREW J. NEWMAN
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World: The Economics of Sex in the Late Antique and Medieval Middle East. By GARY LEISER. London: I.B. TAURIS, 2017. Pp. xv + 332. \$52.50, £35.

The trade in sex work is a subject of both topical and perennial interest, as demonstrated by the chronological range of Gary Leiser's latest contribution. The range of this work is not limited to mere chronology, however—it unifies in one volume diverse sources on prostitution from numerous eras, geographic locations, and languages, in some cases for the very first time. Leiser has brought his expertise on medieval Islamic literature to bear upon the subject matter, but he does not limit himself to medieval Islamic sources, presenting the most comprehensive (and comprehensible) portrait of the subject matter to date.

The subtitle of his work promises us a treatise on the “economics of sex in the late antique and medieval Middle East,” but its scope is actually much more modest, concerning depictions of female sex workers in literature from this region. From the outset, it must be said that the latter theme is far more practical than any foray into the dismal science, and therefore offers considerably more potential than the former, as Leiser's sources provide precious little fodder for that mill. As a consequence, his pronouncements on economics are suggestive and more than a little speculative, although to be fair to the author this is primarily a reflection on the deficiencies of the available sources (deficiencies that he readily acknowledges).

Departing from the broad promises of the work's title, Leiser defines prostitution rather narrowly as “the frequent and indiscriminate sale by women of their sexual favors to men” (p. xiii). He offers this as a “simple definition,” but by adopting it we necessarily neglect many aspects of the broader phenomenon of sex work in antiquity, as Leiser has. In particular, it grants women agency where such agency might not always have been present, excluding sexual slavery and other forms of sexual exploitation, such as the sale by men (or for that matter, other women) of women's sexual favors to men. He briefly acknowledges the existence of such prostitutes on pp. 44–45, before concluding that “in Late Antiquity

there may have been more free women than slaves, but this is difficult to determine.” Additionally, he limits himself exclusively to women prostitutes who serve an exclusively male clientele, excluding gigolos and catamites (among others) from his history of prostitution. I consider these to be missed opportunities rather than necessarily defects of his scholarship, partly because of the parameters that he has set for himself and partly because of the scholarly and general publics he serves. He includes occasional accounts of rape and pillage (e.g., pp. 180 and 195), although he never ventures to explain how these relate to the phenomenon of prostitution as defined above.

Leiser’s most obvious intervention in the study of this phenomenon, thus defined and limited, is the introduction of the neologism “public women,” which he repeats and reinforces through the titles of the first five chapters of the book. He informs the reader of his rationale for adopting this phrase: “The need for a term or expression which elicits the least visceral reaction in this respect led me to the use of ‘public woman’ for one who sells her sexual favors” (p. xiii). “Public women” lacks the emotive connotations of “prostitute” and the clinical detachment of “sex worker,” but introduces a new and potentially confusing dynamic into the question of prostitution. Leiser fails to outline what distinction (if any) he is attempting to make between public and private, or engage the voluminous literature concerning the public/private divide and how it relates to gender. I presume that that he intends “public women” in the sense of “public houses,” i.e., public places within which customers, usually men, can obtain traditionally domestic benefits (such as food, drink, and lodging) through pay. On the other hand, we are unable to appreciate how he might distinguish “public women” against “private women,” or for that matter “public men” against “public women.” What might these terms mean? We have already established that male sex workers or sex slaves of different genders are not his concern, but the reader is left to consider what sort of linguistically neutral terms Leiser might have coined for them.

Furthermore, his neologism obscures distinctions, socioeconomic or otherwise, that may be deployed to great effect both in the source languages and the target language. Concubines, courtesans, doxies, escorts, harlots, hookers, hussies, prostitutes, streetwalkers, strumpets, tarts, trulls, trollops, and wenches are all classed under the totalizing rubric of “public women,” just as their equivalents in the source languages are, and obvious differences in terms of the agency of these women and their social status are thereby erased. For that matter, Leiser only offers rare glances into the lives of their madams, panderers, pimps, and procurers of different genders, despite their manifest relevance to the subject matter.

Quite apart from all this, Leiser is confronted with an epistemological conundrum, which he does not always navigate gracefully. Given the seeming near-universality of the “world’s oldest profession,” it would not be unwarranted to assume that sex workers must have operated in the places and at the times that he has adopted as the subject of his inquiries. On the other hand, to what extent do the literary sources for these same times and places accurately reflect this phenomenon? In his analysis of his sources, he occasionally acknowledges the need for skepticism—for example, with regard to the subject of sacred prostitution in pre-Islamic Arabia (pp. 56–62) or the pious motif of the penitent prostitute (p. 8), but his approach is ultimately positivistic. On the same page, for example, he notes that the lives of saints are “the richest sources by far for the presence of prostitution.” This may be true, but they are also extremely rich sources for miracles, demons and other mythical creatures, as well as legendary figures whose historicity is questionable at best. The universality of sex workers, and the cultural baggage with which the figure of the sex workers has been freighted, make them popular as rhetorical devices. As such, references to “prostitutes” (penitent or otherwise) in such texts should probably be considered literarily and not necessarily literally, at least not any more literally than the numerous legends from the same region concerning women immured within the foundations of famous buildings and bridges. What these kinds of stories do illustrate quite accurately is the diffusion of ideas and themes within literature, which is of fundamental concern to philology, rather than the diffusion of goods and services in the real world, which is of equal concern to economics.

Such an approach is valuable even when addressing an authority no less than Procopius, whom Leiser cites in discussing the role the rich “harlots” of Edessa played in the ransom of the captive Antiochians (p. 25), as well as Theodora’s rise from common prostitute to Byzantine empress (pp. 36–39). For Leiser, the former is evidence that prostitutes “could become wealthy and that they decked themselves

with finery,” just as the latter proves that prostitution “was not a bar to marriage” and “could take a woman to the highest levels of male power and society” (p. 46). Need we necessarily assume, with Leiser, that Procopius is deploying his account of Edessa’s “harlots” or Theodora’s checkered past in a factual and value-neutral manner, or could other rhetorical devices be at play here? With regard to the former, Procopius specifically mentions the “harlots” (here *ἑταῖραι* “companions” rather than *πόρνα* “[sex] slaves”) and farmers (*γεωργοί*) of Edessa, standing metonymically for the lower echelons of free society, who are willing to sacrifice their adornment and their livestock, which is to say the trappings of their respective professions. These are prevented from doing so by the disgraced general Bouzes, to whom he attributes a motive of profit. The contrast between the charity of Edessa’s poorest citizens and the greed of those in authority is almost too good to believe. This is also another instance in which the rubric of “public woman” seems to eliminate a critical distinction between free sex workers and enslaved ones. As for Theodora, Leiser relegates scholarship critical of Procopius’s portrayal to a spare mention within an endnote (p. 262 n. 98).

We are obliged, of course, to extend this same skepticism to the medieval sources as well, even though Leiser is on somewhat firmer ground here. For example, William of Tripoli’s *Tractatus de Statu Saracenorum* portrays the Mamluk sultan Baybars as abolishing Syrian brothels on the grounds that they produce soldiers “who war for Venus rather than for Mars” (p. 120), skillfully deploying a common literary trope that situates the Crusades within the broader context of a perennial war against paganism and idolatry. In discussing Henry of Segusio’s obvious hypothetical concerning the status of a “Crusading harlot” under canon law, Leiser concludes that some prostitutes “may even have taken up arms” (p. 177). In discussing “the hordes of public women who met the ships that dropped anchor in the ports of India and beyond” (p. 240), he cites the legendary island of Wāq [*sic*, for Wāqwāq] (p. 303), a state run by women for women, existing not in reality but only in literature. All these are examples for which his analysis would have benefited from a much more cautious approach.

If I have restricted this review to the literary qualities of his sources, it is only because his approach is almost exclusively text-critical. He refers to archaeological evidence only in brief asides, on pp. 17–18 and 23. Rather than material or economical, his sources are therefore very much literary and historical, such as those belonging to the “mirrors for princes” genre (e.g., pp. 178–80) and, of course, the *Arabian Nights* (pp. 150–54). In discussing one of the tales from the latter, he prefaces his remarks with a caveat, “setting aside the fact that this tale is largely a male fantasy...” (p. 152). The same could, of course, be said about many of his other sources. In Leiser’s defense, he openly and repeatedly acknowledges their limitations, albeit not the debt that some of his conclusions owe to them.

The lack of nonliterary sources occasionally results in arguments from silence, as when he argues for the legality of prostitution in the medieval Muslim world. He seems to acknowledge this when discussing the paucity of evidence for punishment (p. 162), beyond the obvious social stigma and financial burdens in the form of taxes and fines. Those sources he does cite raise more questions than answers, such as when it was ever legal, where it was legal, for whom it was legal, why it was legal or illegal, and just how legal or illegal it was. All of the evidence he provides is highly circumstantial; prostitution appears to have been legal at some times but not others, in some places but not others, for members of some religions but not others, for different reasons, and to different degrees. In effect, prostitution was seemingly “legal” (or at least not impermissible) for some classes under the law, in some places and at some times, while simultaneously prohibited to others. Of course, it is not uncommon for existing laws to effectively lapse through lack of enforcement even as they remain on the books, especially when they govern sexual acts. His insistence that prostitution must have been legal is made all the more puzzling by his occasionally cavalier attitude toward the laws that demonstrably govern it, such as when he infers that prostitutes must have been soliciting sex from Muslims and Jews on the grounds of a legal prohibition against this behavior (p. 247).

The most basic and common mechanism for the enforcement of such laws is financial. Leiser describes all such mechanisms for enforcing legislation on prostitution as “taxes,” eventually arguing that even those described explicitly as “fines” are effectively taxes (p. 228). On the one hand, he argues that the very existence of these enforcement mechanisms implies a kind of legal recognition and regulation, implicating the state itself in the activity they circumscribe and creating a pernicious incentive

to decriminalize it; on the other hand, such penalties functionally make the behavior they circumscribe “legal” for the wealthy and “illegal” for the poor. It should not surprise us that all of the prostitutes of his account are subalterns (women, slaves, religious minorities, the urban poor, and others living on the fringes of our sources’ societies), even as the charge of prostitution was effectively wielded against wealthy and influential women, at all times and in all places. In his final chapter, Leiser concludes that “prostitution was not a threat to the social order” but rather “reinforced it.” This is undoubtedly true, but the question still remains: Whose social order? *Cui bono?*

Despite these objections, which primarily concern Leiser’s sources rather than Leiser’s scholarship, his treatment of them is erudite and reasonably well grounded, even when he does not sufficiently address their limitations. The fact of the matter is that he is extremely limited in the evidence that he can bring to bear upon the subject of prostitution in the late antique and medieval Eastern Mediterranean, and can only speculate when it comes to its economic implications. Very often, he makes his sources do a lot of work in supporting this speculation, as when one source notes the existence of rooms for rent, and Leiser concludes, “such rooms, of course, could serve the purposes of independent prostitutes” (p. 104). On rare occasions, he makes some odd observations that do not appear to be sustained by the evidence he has presented. For example, on p. 101, he glosses *mukhannath* as ‘bisexual.’ Grammatically, this term is a passive participle with the basic meaning of ‘made (to appear as) a woman,’ but seemingly encompasses what modern readers would perceive as a broad spectrum of gender identities and expressions, in addition to serving as a term of abuse. On p. 242, he situates the Yuán capital Hānbālfī “not far from the coast,” when in reality it is over one hundred miles away. On p. 184, even as he rightly highlights the problematic nature of ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī’s account of the conquest of Jerusalem, in which he claims that the Franks attribute no sin to a woman who fornicates with a celibate man, Leiser nonetheless refers us to another source, James of Vitry, who implicates certain clergymen of Acre in renting lodgings to public women under Muslim rule (p. 186). By the time we reach that chapter’s conclusions, “many people, including men of the cloth, profited from” prostitutes in Christian-controlled Syria (p. 206). Furthermore, the anecdotes he provides to defend the legality of prostitution under Islam frequently alternate with ones of prostitutes being banished, stoned, and even “strung up like chandeliers,” sometimes even within the same anecdote, as on p. 229. The effect can be quite jarring.

Nonetheless, Leiser is an engaging writer, even allowing for the nature of the material with which he is working. He has obviously taken great pains to make his work accessible to a broad audience, presenting all of his sources in translation, while at the same time occasionally winking in the direction of a more scholarly public, as when he furnishes transcriptions of problematic terms in the original languages. His gentle humor makes light of even the driest subjects, such as St. John Chrysostom’s homilies on female vanity (“John [...] clearly paid *very* close attention to what women wore,” p. 28). Describing one of his sources for *waqfs* (religious or charitable endowments) for prostitution, he plainly admits, “It is difficult to know what al-Muqaddasī was talking about” (p. 286). In describing Richard Burton’s *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, he grouses “despite the claim of the title, is in unidiomatic and painful English” (p. 288). His other anecdotes about the great orientalists, including Reinhart Dozy and Shelomo Dov Goitein, are similarly entertaining. Even when his arguments about “public women” occasionally fall flat, he nonetheless does make critical interventions into the literature, such as when he situates past scholarship on sacred prostitution in pre-Islamic Mecca within the context of anti-Muslim polemics, particularly with regard to the sexual excesses often attributed to Arabs (p. 62). He omits citing Edward Said here, but he might as well have.

In the final analysis, Leiser has created a comprehensive introduction to a somewhat universal phenomenon, female prostitution, as it is represented in literature from the late antique and medieval Eastern Mediterranean. While his work does not necessarily succeed as an economic history, this is primarily a reflection of the nature of his sources. His subject will nonetheless garner interest from a broad public, and the accessibility of his work will ensure that it will serve that public ably.

CHARLES G. HÄBERL
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY