Stories about women in the collections of Nissim ibn Shāhīn, Petrus Alphonsi, and Yosef ibn Zabāra, and their relation to medieval European narratives
Schippers, A.

Published in:
Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Arie Schippers

Stories about Women in the Collections of Nissim ibn Sháhin, Petrus Alphonsi and Yosef ibn Zabára, and Their Relation to Medieval European Narratives

In this article, I deal with the relationship between three medieval Jewish collections of stories and medieval collections in Western Europe in general. I mainly focus upon their choice of stories about women, and try to determine the fortune of their "women stories" in Western Europe.

Nissim ibn Sháhin (990–1062)

The Kitâb al-Faraj ba’d al-Shidda ("Book of relief after adversity") by the eleventh-century north African Jewish author Nissim ibn Sháhin is an interesting example of a Judeo-Arabic narrative work. The Faraj belongs to a literary genre that has religious and secular Arabic parallels in, for example, the works of Abû 'Ali al-Muhassin al-Tanûkhî (941–994). The "Relief after

1 Lecture given at the Deutsche Orientalistentag, Marburg University, 20 September 2010.


adversity" genre consists of collections of stories in which God grants relief to someone who finds himself in a difficult situation. 1 The author, Rabbi Nissim ben Ya’aqov ben Nissim ibn Shāhīn, had a difficult life. He was born in Kairouan (north Africa), where his father was head of the Academy, a learned assembly and an institution for the study of Talmud, which gave Jewish juridical advice. As a scholar, Ibn Shāhīn became widely known in the Jewish world. His later years were troubled by unhappy events resulting from the destructive invasion of the Banū Hilāl and Banū Sulaymān Bedouins. The first printed edition of Nissim ibn Shāhīn’s *al-Faraj ba’d al-Shidda* (Julian Obermann’s edition of 1933) was printed in the Arabic script. Obermann called the book *Ta’līf Hasan fil-Faraj* (“A Beautiful Composition about Relief”); the title was a translation of the title of a widespread Hebrew version of the book *Hibbur Yafe meha-Yeshu’a*. The edition also featured a facsimile of the Harkavy manuscript in Hebrew script. In his edition, Obermann frequently “corrected” the Middle Arabic of the text, often relying on the Hebrew translation of the text in his reconstruction of the “original” text. 6 The contents of Nissim’s work are completely different from those of al-Tanūkhi’s famous *Faraj* book: while the relief in al-Tanūkhi’s stories often consists of the escape of a government official from a difficult situation or an execution, or of a traveller from robbers or wild animals, the comfort offered by Nissim ibn Shāhīn’s *Faraj* is purely moral. In principle, all the stories have a pious aim. Compared to other Jewish storytelling (e.g. Yosef ibn Zabāra’s *Sefer Sha’ashu’im*, ca. 1170), the stories in this work are more religious and less mundane. This aspect is also manifested in the types of women who appear in Nissim’s *Faraj*. Most of Ibn Zabāra’s women are either wicked or stupid, although some are intellectually superior to their husbands or play the role of a clever girl, but always in a worldly way. The women in Nissim’s book, however, are embedded within a religious society. Rather than occurring in contemporary times, most of the stories are set in the period around the first century CE, a time in which rabbis like Rabbi Ele’azar, Yehoshu’a and

1 Brinner, *Elegant Composition*, p. xxvii.
3 The manuscript that Obermann used is preserved in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America Ms. No. 2472; see Elkan N. Adler, *Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Collection of Elkan Nathan Adler*. Cambridge 1921, p. 59, no. 4026; we will refer to the manuscript with “Harkavy” mentioning the folia.
4 He was criticized for this by David H. Baneth in his review in *KS* 11 (1934), pp. 349–357. Ibn Shāhīn’s text is written in Judeo-Arabic and Middle Arabic, although an intellectual of his stature could have written in Classical Arabic had he wished to do so.
Me’ir (who were known from the Mishna) played prominent roles. The moral ideals of this era appear from the stories; for instance, the sacrifice of a woman for her husband occurs more than once in Nissim’s work, while such incidents are completely absent from the works of Ibn Zabara and al-Tanukhi.

In Nissim ibn Shāhīn’s stories about women, we see a great variety of different women. As in Arabic medieval literary compilations and collections, stories of a similar type are often gathered together. The first and the second story are devoted to the chastity of wives. The first story also features a wife’s self-sacrifice for the sake of her husband. This self-sacrifice is illustrated by the wife’s willingness to be sold as a slave in the market place so that the proceeds can be used as charity for the poor, in order to earn glory for her husband. In the second story, the daughter of Hananya ben Teradyon remains chaste, despite being confined to a brothel or whores’ pavilion.

A third story stresses the contrast between a husband and his wife. This story, which is also known from the later Hebrew work Sefer Sha’ashu’im by Yosef ibn Zabara, provides an unfavourable image of women. In it, a king wonders whether there is a single woman in his city who is completely virtuous (that is, who is both chaste and wise). His viziers start searching and they find a chaste and wise woman, as beautiful as the sun, who is the wife of a wealthy merchant. The king puts her husband to the test by asking him to kill his wife and children and to marry his only daughter. The husband, however, remains faithful to his wife. The merchant’s refusal to kill his wife and children prompts the king to say: “You are not a man; your heart is that of a woman.” His wife is then put to the test. If she kills her husband, so the king promises, tomorrow she will be queen – but she is given a sword of tin. That night, when she strikes her husband to kill him, the sword proves ineffective. Both husband and wife must then relate their stories in the palace. The king’s wise men hear the stories and are convinced of the king’s wisdom concerning the faithlessness of women. This story is meant as a contrast to the first two tales, just as in another story the perfidious woman forms a contrast to the surrounding tales.

7 Harkavy, fols. 38b–42b.
8 Ibid., fols. 43b–45b.
11 See my previous article “Medieval Hebrew Narrative and the Arabic Literary Tradition”, in FJB 29 (2002), pp. 87–94.
Two other stories share the theme of women who appear religiously pious at first sight, but who ultimately prove to be vicious. One is about a seemingly God-fearing woman who is in fact a witch. Another involves a woman who seems to be pious, but later proves calculating because of the extra steps she prefers to take by going to a synagogue that is further away than the one in her own neighbourhood.

Another pair of stories offer the following contrast: one story tells of a woman who chooses her own husband against the will of her father. She also endures self-sacrifice and suffers for her husband. The wife in this story reflects the tone of the introduction, in which men are exhorted to choose learned women, or at least the daughters of scholars. The other story, in contrast, is about a woman who does not choose her own husband, but remains as passive as possible. She is given in marriage to a passive son by his father, while apparently failing to reveal that she had previously been engaged to someone else.

Two other stories are about women whose lack of intelligence results in them returning to the rightful owners goods that their husbands want to steal.

There are also stories that concern women who are much more fierce and are linked to biblical prototypes. The one about a woman who beheads the foreign king after introducing herself to him under false pretences, is reminiscent of such fierce biblical women as Ya'el – who killed Sisera – and the “deuterocanonical” Judith, who killed Holofernes. The story about a perfidious married woman who tries to seduce a famous rabbi, but fails and then accuses the rabbi of sexual harassment, is clearly reminiscent of the stories of Potiphar’s wife or Zulaykha, as she is called in the Koran.

As a contrast, we find in another story the image of a woman who remains chaste despite her husband’s attitude. Finally, there is a story that tells us about a clever woman who, by telling a story, persuades a king to reinstate her husband in his job and to have his rival beheaded.

The character of the women’s stories by Nissim Ibn Shāhrūn is primarily religious, especially because well-known rabbis from the Tannaitic period are the protagonists of the stories. Although the Sefer Sha'asbu'im of Ibn Zabara, which appeared a century later, has one story in common with the present book, the stories of the latter are far more secular and are more similar to medieval, ancient classical and oriental narrative in general.

\[\text{Harkavy, fols. 52b–53a.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 53a–58a.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 74a–75b.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 90a–93b.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 82b–84b.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 104b–106b.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 112a–116a.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., fols. 131b–152b.}\]
Petrus Alphonsi is essential known as a mediator between collections of stories from the East and collections from the West. His original name as a Jew was Moshe Sefardi. He was also known for his mathematical, astronomical and medical works. Later, he was baptized into the Christian faith of his master, King Alphonse. Petrus Alphonsi’s work is important as a source of knowledge of how Arabic literature was spread in the West. As Hämeen-Anttila expresses it: “In general, Mediaeval European literature has more Arabic influence than is usually realized. Reading Boccaccio’s Decameron, one often (especially in the novelle of the 7th and 8th days) finds an Arabic origin for the stories.” Some of Boccaccio’s stories indeed remind us of tales from Petrus Alphonsi’s Latin work “Disciplina Clericalis”, which he apparently took from the Arabic work of Indian origin called Kalila wa-Dimna, for instance stories with the theme of the husband who is cheated by his wife, who receives her lover when he goes away. When the husband returns unexpectedly, the lover has to be hurriedly hidden. Other stories are about a woman who uses a stratagem to recover a deposit. So the stories that are contained in his “Disciplina Clericalis” are secular and of Arabic or even sometimes Indian origin.

This book includes 33 exemplary stories that are based on the works of Hunayn b. Ishāq (Adāb al-falāṣifa) – which were translated into Castilian in the time of Ferdinand III, under the title “Sentencias morales de los filósofos” – and Mubashshir ibn Fatik’s “Diets and Sayings of the Philosophers”, which

---

22 The Book of Kalila wa-Dimna – which is also known as the “Fables of Bidpai” – was translated from Persian into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa (d. ca. 760). This “Mirror for Princes” derives ultimately from the Sanskrit “Pancatantra” and was called “Karatka and Damanataka”, the names of the two jackals (Kalila and Dimna) at the court of King Lion who try to persuade him for their case by telling stories. See Isidoro Montiel, Historia y bibliografía del “Libro de Calila y Dimna”. Madrid 1975.
23 See Pedro Alfonso, Disciplina Clericalis, introduccion y notas de Maria Jesus Lacarra. Zaragoza 1985, pp. 60ff.; 120ff.
24 Ibid., pp. 67ff.; 126ff.
was composed in 1048 and translated into Castilian under the title “Bocados de Oro” (1495). Moreover, the “Disciplina” contains many well-known stories, such as the ungrateful snake story (which we find in Tanūkhī’s al-Faraj ba’d al-Shidda and elsewhere in world literature), the story about the deceit of women (which appears in many medieval sources, such as Boccaccio’s “Decameron”) and stories about deposits that are not returned, which we find in both Eastern sources (such as Al-Ibshihi’s Mustatraf and the Judeo-Arabic Kitāb al-Faraj ba’d al-Shidda by Nissim ibn Shāhīn) and Western sources, such as the “Ciento novelle antike” and Boccaccio’s “Decameron”.

Yosef ibn Zabāra (1131–1209)

Yosef ben Me’ir ibn Zabāra apparently lived in Barcelona. His cultural environment was clearly Arabic. To judge from his own work, he practised medicine. His Maecenas was Rabbi Sheshet Benveniste. His main work is the Sefer Sha’asbu’im (Book of Delight), which he wrote around 1170. The medical debate plays an important role, going back to discussions on food from the “Physician’s Dinner Party” by Ibn Butlan (d. 1066), which reflected his medical debates in Fatimid Cairo. Ibn Zabāra’s “Book of Delight” indeed has many stories that are pro or contra women, for example the fox fables, which are used to illustrate the pro-women or contra-women debate at the beginning of Ibn Zabāra’s book, where the narrator Yosef says to the devil Enan that he wants to consult his wife before going on his travels with him.

21 Al-Ibshihi’s al-Mustatraf fi kull fann mustatraf (“The most fascinating topics from every elegant art”), a representative of the encyclopaedic genre, was compiled in Egypt (middle of the 15th century).
22 Schippers, Book of Delight, pp. 135ff.
In the first fable of the fox and the leopard, the leopard’s wife is described as clever and crafty (“The fox feared her, for her subtlety, cleverness and sound sense”). The leopard wants to consult his wife before moving to the paradise the fox has shown him. The leopard’s wife tells her husband a fable to warn him against “the wiles of the cunning fox”. The leopard does not want to listen to his wife, but is nevertheless moved by her words of advice. The fox tells four stories to counteract her advice. He shows that it is better not to listen to a wife’s advice. The leopard is finally persuaded by the fox and goes to live in the beautiful garden with his wife and young ones, but heavy rains fall in the night of the seventh day, and the river rises and overwhlems them. The leopard sank into the water crying, “Woe, woe to him who puts his faith in a fox and his counsel, and does not listen to the voice of his wife.” So he perished, dying before his time.

A misogynous story embedded in the fable told by the fox is about the carpenter of Damascus, whose wife was boasting that her father was a better workman than he, because her father was able to use both his hands whereas he could use only his right one. “Try to use both your hands as my father did.” Raising the axe with his left hand, he struck the thumb of his right hand. “In a great rage he rose up and struck his wife’s head with the axe, and her skull was crushed and she died. The matter became known at the court of justice, and they took the woodcutter and they brought him out of the city and stoned him with stones.” The fox concludes: “Therefore do I declare to you that all women are deceitful; they ensnare the lives of all.”

A variant of the story of the widow of Ephesus (this time a widow of Rome) is also used in this framework to show how untruthful women are even after the deaths of their husbands. The basic story derives from Petronius’ “Satyricon” about a married woman in Ephesus of famous virtue who followed her dead husband to his grave, and began to watch and weep over the body night and day. The attention of the soldier who was guarding the crosses of the crucified, to prevent anyone taking down a body for burial, was drawn to the beautiful weeping woman. In the end, they met each other and the soldier won her over. So they passed several nights together. But the parents of one of the crucified men, seeing that the watch was ill-kept, took their son down in the dark. The next day, the soldier saw that one of the crosses was lacking a corpse. He was terrified of being punished, and declared to the lady that he would chastise himself with a thrust of his sword. The lady said she wanted her husband’s body to be taken out of the coffin and fixed on the empty cross. The soldier availed himself of the lady’s device.

Ibn Zabära’s version does not omit any of the cruel detail”, compared with other versions in world literature. John of Salisbury (1120–1180), who bases
his version on Petronius Arbiter' "Satyricon" (Chapters 111–112), has a milder version\(^\text{12}\). Here, the soldier or knight who has the corpse in custody has to use much more persuasion and even has to use a stratagem to win the lady’s graces. Although it is the widow who proposes replacing the stolen corpse with that of her husband, she only comes up with that proposition after the knight has threatened to kill himself. In this version, there is no question of mutilating the corpse of the husband and there is no subsequent marriage between the woman and the knight.

In Ibn Zabārā’s version, there are no alleviating circumstances as far as the widow is concerned. It is she who wants to be in contact with the knight, and she perseveres despite his objections to exhuming her husband’s corpse. The widow herself mutilates the corpse in such a way that it can be substituted for the corpse of the hanged man, and having done this, she marries the knight. In some versions – for instance the "Seven Wise Masters"\(^\text{13}\) and the "Ciento novelle antike"\(^\text{14}\) – the knight refuses with abhorrence to marry the widow despite his earlier promise.

But perhaps more interesting as regards the probable indebtedness to the literature of al-Andalus are the sayings and anecdotes about wise men and their negative opinions about women recounted by the already mentioned fox to the leopard. Most of those sentences have Greek origins, but are also found in Andalusian Arabic literature, such as El-Shaykh al-Balawi’s Kitāb alif Ba.\(^\text{35}\)

Let us give some examples of Socrates and Diogenes:

- Socrates, the divine philosopher, also, in the abundance of his wisdom and the greatness of his piety, hated women and loathed to look into their countenances. His own wife was spare and short, and when his disciples asked of him, "How came it that such a man as thou art should wed such a woman as this?" he replied, "I have chosen the lesser of the evil."


\(^{14}\) Cf. story no. 59 on p. 66 of the Rizzoli edition (Milano 1964): "Allora il cavaliere vedendo quello che ella avea fatto di suo marito [li ruppe un dente di bocca], disse: ‘Madonna, si come poco v’è caluto di costui, che tanto mostravate d’amare, così vi carrebbe vie meno di me’. Allora si partì da lei e andossi per li fatti suoi; ed ella rimase con gran vergogna”.

One day as he was walking with his disciples in the cool of the day there passed before him a woman of comely figure and beautiful appearance, and one of his disciples gazed at her. Socrates said to him, "Woe is thee, wherefore dost thou gaze upon her?" The disciple replied, "Not for love nor for desire do I gaze, but to behold in her form the craftsmanship of the Creator." The master said, "Turn her inside out; then you will understand her ugliness."

Another time he was walking upon the way and he saw a woman hanging from a fig tree. He said, "Would that all the fruit of this tree were the same."

And once he was walking with his disciples by the banks of a river, where a certain woman was washing clothes. She cried out upon him, and cursed him, and heaped him with abuse; then she threw of the water upon him and drenched him. He said: "Surely she has cast her lightning and hurled her thunder, and now she brings forth rain."

Again, one of the great men built him a new house and wrote over the lintel, "Let no evil enter here." Diogenes, the philosopher, passed and saw the inscription, and then wrote underneath, "And how will your wife enter?"

Further, when one man reported to another, "Your enemy has perished," he replied, "If you would have said, 'I have taken a wife', I had been better pleased."

After the departure of Ibn Zabara and Enan, the latter tells him the story "Why the ape jumped onto the necks of the king's wives". It is a wisdom story about a king who dreamt one night that an ape jumped onto the necks of his wives. He sends an officer to find a clever interpreter to explain his dream. On his way, the officer meets a peasant and greets him in an enigmatic manner. They accompany each other for the rest of the journey. The officer says enigmatic things with hidden meanings to the peasant when they see a field of wheat, and after that a lofty tower and a funeral procession. Then they come to the village of the peasant, who invites the officer to pass the night in his house. While the officer sleeps that night, the peasant tells his wife and daughters about the officer's enigmatic remarks. His youngest daughter, who is only fifteen, is so clever that she discovers all the hidden meanings of the strange remarks uttered by the officer. In the morning, the girl asks her father to give the officer the food she is preparing. She gives him 30 eggs, a dish full of milk and a whole loaf, and asks her father to take them to the officer. The peasant also has to ask the officer how many of the days of the month are gone, whether the moon is full and whether the sun is a whole.

On his way to the officer, the peasant eats two eggs and samples the bread and the milk. He puts his daughter's questions to the officer, and the latter tells
him that the sun is not whole, the moon is not full and the month is lacking two days. The peasant is convinced that the officer is a fool, but his daughter asks him if he ate some of what he took to the officer. This being the case, the daughter knows that the officer is very wise and understands the hidden meanings of her message. The officer takes the girl to the king’s palace, since she pretends to know the solution of the king’s dream. At the palace, she tells the king that if he searches his harem, he will find a man dressed in women’s clothing. Her explanation turns out to be correct, and the man and all the women of the harem are killed.

This story has two elements. First, it contains the same misogynist elements as in the frame story of One Thousand and One Nights. A man disguising himself as a woman is also a favourite theme in this collection, as is the theme of the husband who is deceived by his wife. The theme of the clever young girl occurs in the Indian folktale “Why the Fish Laughed”, as Davidson has demonstrated, and I discovered a story with a clever girl in the Kitāb al-Aghani, in the Akhbār about Imra’ al-Qays. This story has a similar interest in numbers that refer to another reality than at first sight. The story about Imra’ al-Qays’ marriage goes as follows:

Imra’ al-Qays swore by oath that he would not marry a woman unless he had asked her about $8 + 4 + 2$. He had asked several women to marry him, but when he had asked them about the numbers, they answered: 14. Once when he was travelling on a dark night, he met a man who was carrying his little daughter. She was as beautiful as the full moon itself. She made a great impression on Imra’ al-Qays and he said: ‘O girl, what is $8 + 4 + 2$?’ The girl answered: ‘The 8 are the teats of a dog, the 4 are the mamillas of a she-camel and the two are the nipples of a woman.’ Imra’ al-Qays asked her hand in marriage, and her father gave his consent and he married her to him.

Stories based on the theme of the clever lass (“die kluge Dirne”) are abundant in early Indian and modern European literature.

At the end of Yosef ibn Zabara’s journey with Enan ha-Natash, the story about the washerwoman who did the Devil’s work is told. The Devil came to a place where no sins were committed. When he departed, the washerwoman offered him to make the place full of trouble. She whispered to the wife of one of her customers that her husband was making love to another woman. She whispered to the wife of one of her customers that her husband was making love to another woman. The wife became sad, and the washerwoman told her not to weep, but to shave

---

17 Ibid., pp. 139–140.
three hairs from her husband’s beard while asleep and to bring those hairs to her. Thereupon the washerwoman went to the husband and pretended to tell him a frightful secret: she had heard that his wife and her lover wanted to kill him in his sleep. The husband pretended to be asleep, but seeing his wife pick up a razor, he killed her. The news spread and the wife’s relatives wanted to avenge her death and to kill the husband. Both families were troubled and the feud cost 220 lives. This story also figures in “El Conde Lucanor”. The main part of it is based on a tenth-century Arabic version by Humayd al-Tusi, as was discovered by Ulrich Marzolph.

Comparison of the Three Works

The differences between the three works are influenced by the different backgrounds and intellectual preoccupations of the three authors. It is indeed a personal motivation that pushes the compiler Ibn Sháhin to choose his stories. As a Halakhist, he occupies himself on a daily basis with the rabbis of the legal system of his religion. As a chief of the Academy, it is he who represents this system. For him the period of the rabbis is an ideal period for the formation of the Jewish legal system. Rabbis who are protagonists in his stories have an exemplary function. Even when on one occasion he chooses Solomon, the famous biblical king, as protagonist, it is because Solomon is exemplary of the good judge for his co-religionists.

Ibn Sháhin’s Faraj genre is different from the original genre as found in the Faraj by Tanükhi, who practiced the original Arabic narrative genre. Ibn Sháhin focuses on rabbis, while Tanükhi – being a secretary, a judge and a civil servant, and having a father who told rather similar accounts from the public sector – focuses on the public office and the political atmosphere. His accounts are dictated by his professional interest. Ibn Sháhin’s stories took place in a remote past, whereas Tanükhi’s stories are contemporary or from a century ago from his perspective. In Ibn Sháhin’s stories there is a more balanced division between women and men as protagonists, whereas in Tanükhi’s stories males preponderate over females. In Tanükhi it is politics and public life that dominate the stories, whereas in Ibn Sháhin it is private life, the

José Manuel Blecua (ed.), Don Juan Manuel, El Conde Lucanor. Madrid 1971, pp. 206–212 (de lo que contész a una falsa vegüina). In an introductory note the editor points at an early collection in Latin by Rabanus Maurus (died 858), with a story entitled “De Vetula que fecit quod dyabolus non poterat facere”.

relationship within a marriage or the relationship within religion. The stories
of Ibn Sháhin are balanced in the sense that pious women are alternated with
sinful women, women with a strong will with weak women who submit them-
selves to the circumstances, and women who are loyal to their husbands with
women who are treacherous and disloyal. This kind of alternation and variety
is, according to the Arabic ideal of adab writings, entertainment literature that
should not bore the reader. The diffusion of the book of Ibn Sháhin has been
more restricted than the works of Petrus Alphonsi and ibn Zabára. Its use was
limited to Jewish readers. However, this work certainly played an important
role in the transmission of the East towards Europe in the Jewish community,
given its popularity and its diffusion in Europe and its translation into He-
brew under the title Hibbur Yafe meha-Yesbu'a.

As regards Petrus Alphonsi, his “Disciplina Clericalis” is important for its
place in the transmission of stories from East to West. The women stories we
alluded to in his work have their origin in the Sanskrit “Pancitánitra” and
were translated via Old Persian into the Arabic Kalila wa-Dinma. Some are
tales of treachery by someone’s wife when the husband goes away to conducts
his affairs, while others are tales of women who play a role in recovering a
deposit. Some of these stories have entered Boccaccio’s “Decameron”.
The work of Ibn Zabára has an intermediary function between the Eastern and
Western literatures. Whereas the work of Petrus Alphonsi goes in only one
direction, namely from East to West, the work of Ibn Zabára is at the same
time a reception of the old classical, Western and Eastern literatures. However,
it is difficult to determine its spread, although the stories of Ibn Zabára are
deeply anchored in the world literature rather than in a religious or political
world. One finds there the story known as “the woman of Ephesus”, as well
as many Arab stories. These stories irradiated towards Western literatures.
Admittedly, the motivation of Ibn Zabára is also professional, because he is a
surgeon. The account that forms the general framework of his book is, as I
said, a dream during which the author meets another surgeon who later seems
to be the Devil. This account also constitutes a debate between surgeons. All
the “sub-stories” enter within this framework, whose model is the discussion
between the two surgeons in the “Banquet of the Surgeons” by Ibn Butlan
(d. 1066). As the text of Ibn Zabára is in rhymed prose and is told in the first
person, it was felt to be closer to the Arab maqama, a famous narrative genre
that was also imitated in medieval Hebrew literature. This maqama functions
as a frame story.

If Ibn Zabára is more misogynist than Ibn Sháhin, it is undoubtedly because
he lived in a profane world where the world literature crops up in all its facets.
Ibn Sháhin on the contrary lived in a more restricted world dominated by
interest in the history of the Jewish rabbis.
The two works, by Ibn Shāhīn and Ibn Zabāra respectively, nevertheless also present similarities, as testified by the story of “Solomon and the perfidious woman”, which appears in both collections. The two works devote important fragments to the character of women, their fidelity or their perfidy, their stupidity or their intelligence. Although Ibn Zabāra has the more misogynic version in more than one story, such as in the Solomon story and in the story inspired by the story of the widow of Ephesus, his collection is not unilaterally for or against women. All three compilers of women stories pass from one example to another and one opinion to another, so that the discussion continues and that the reader finds an alternation of assertions. To always utter the same opinion would be tedious.