Mulaika Hijjas, *Victorious wives: The disguised heroine in 19th-century Malay syair*. Singapore/Kuala Lumpur: NUS Press and The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2011, xvi + 324 pp. ISBN 9789679948493. Price: USD 30.00 (paperback).

*Victorious wives* is a study of six Malay romantic *syair*, ‘long, narrative poems’, written around the middle of the nineteenth century by and for women on the small island of Penyengat, Riau. Its publication breaks the spell that post-colonial and post-modern debates in the later part of the twentieth century seemed to have cast on the study of nineteenth century Malay narrative writings. In the 1980s and 1990s the study of Malay oral narratives began to overshadow the study of Malay narrative texts from the manuscript tradition. During the following period, scholars’ attention turned to the discussion of what exactly constitutes ‘Malayness’. Recent trends in the study of Malay texts do not relate to narrative works either, but instead comprise investigations in genres other than the ‘literary’ ones that have been scrutinized in the past (letters, a buyers’ guide book on ceramic jars), manuscripts or texts that were considered lost, such as the *Hikayat Hikamat*, and contextual studies of so-called Malay chronicles.

*Victorious wives* revolves around the question of why women at the court of Penyengat in the middle of the nineteenth century composed and read long narrative poems that featured a heroine disguised as a man. Hijjas argues that these Malay *syair* form a female counter voice to the contemporary hegemonic male discourse on women.

Only a handful of Malay texts are known to have been written or copied by women. Almost all originate from the Riau region and were produced around the middle of the nineteenth century. It is not known exactly why extant manuscript collections contain so very few of these texts by women, but there are clues that point to various possible causes. Hijjas argues that perhaps the male European collectors who came to the Archipelago to gather Malay texts for their study of the language were generally less interested in the *syair* written by women. Or they did not have access to these writings as they seem to have circulated mainly among (court) women only. Lastly, romantic *syair* are less likely to contain the date and place of production and the name of the author than, for instance, texts on religious matters. The latter clearly belonged to a male dominated domain. Now, it
was this marked presence of these *syair* at a certain time and place (Penyengat, mid nineteenth century) that led Hijjas to her research question.

The first chapter provides the socio-historical background of the women authors and their audience. The narratives that were written, and in all probability consumed as well, at the court of Penyengat. Hijjas convincingly shows how the popularity of the theme of the heroine disguised as a man coincided with recent changes socio-economic and political status of women at the court. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Islamic modernist winds from Arabia had blown eastward to touch Southeast Asian hearts and minds. Adherents of this strand of Islam preached a more or less radical (re)interpretation of Islamic authoritative sources, which resulted, in Penyangat as elsewhere in the Islamic world, in a diminished role of women in public life and a restriction of their freedom. At the same time, the colonization of the Riau region by the Dutch in the late eighteenth century meant a major blow to the prestige of the local courts. Well educated and without economic and political matters to attend to, the Penyengat elite turned to writing Malay texts, women included. By becoming the leading cultural centre in the Malay world, it was hoped, the Malays of Riau would be able to restore part of their courts' former lustre.

Hijjas links the prominence of the theme of the disguised heroine to the restrictions in their social life the women authors of Penyengat experienced. In accordance with Malay rules on gender and behavior at the court, the hero of the Malay narrative usually is a man. Men were allowed to leave the confines of the court, to hunt, to fight, to court a princess in a neighboring state, in short, all those things Malay narratives tell of. In contrast, women could never leave the court, except in the company of male relatives. By turning up side down the conventional idea of a male hero and by relating the story of a woman who acts independently of men and fights her own battles, the women of the court presented a voice that ran counter to the dominant male discourse on the proper behavior or women.

The last three chapters of the book present readings of the six *syair* that elaborate and support the main argument. In each chapter, two *syair* that address an identical theme are read against each other; Chapter 3 deals with the control of emotion, while Chapter 4 focuses on the analogy of the struggles of marriage with those of war. The comparison between the *Syair Sitti Dhawiyyah* and the *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* in the last chapter looks
into the marked reversal of gender roles expressed by the protagonists of the ‘foolish men’ and ‘calculating wives’ (contrasting with the Malay general conception of men as having more *akal*, ‘reason’, and women as more prone to the ill effect of *nafsu*, ‘passion’). Finally, excerpts of the texts and translations are presented in the Appendices.

There are various reasons why *Victorious wives* should be read by all who have an interest in Malay writings from the manuscript tradition. As mentioned above, it is the first work published in a long time that deals with a collection of romantic *syair*. Next, it forms, at least as far I am aware, the first comprehensive study of the combined Malay writings that are known to be written by women. Third, through the combination of an in depth analysis of *syair* and historical research in the tradition of New Historicism, Hijjas succeeds in providing a detailed picture of the social world of women at the court of Penyengat around the middle of the nineteenth century. And lastly, this book supports the premises that all writings are important, even those considered ‘whimsical’ or ‘frivolous’, or specimens of ‘bad literature’. Texts have meaning to both authors and audience alike in that they serve a function in society. For why else would writers write and readers read? It requires a study such as *Victorious wives* that looks into the texts’ historical context to describe that meaning. As it is, the book forms an open invitation to scholars to look anew at writings that they are all too familiar with, but refrain from examining because they either do not know what do with them, or worse, believe that that they have nothing to offer us.

Marije Plomp
Independent researcher affiliated with Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society
marijeplomp@gmail.com