Beauties and Beloveds: Gender Representation in Persianate Painting

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, in all its forms.

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Note on Transliterations, Translations, and Dates

Arabic and Persian are transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system, with some modification, including the removal of special characters. All translations and their sources are noted in the footnotes. All dates are specified as CE or AH, when available, except for centuries, which are CE.

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Figure 3.64. Attributed to Riza 'Abbasi, Kneeling man offering wine, Iran, Isfahan, 1630-35 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 260. 273

Abstract

This dissertation examines how gender is made legible in illustrated manuscripts made in the early modern Persianate world. In the lands centered around present-day Iran between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, what visual motifs, strategies, and conventions were used to depict gender in book arts? Drawing together the fields of art history, literary studies, and gender studies, this project focuses on a corpus of romances and epics that provide narrative contexts for the visual depiction of their characters' various gender identities. Chapter One examines the role of hair in gender representation, demonstrating how facial hair proves one of the most persistent features of gender differentiation while its absence offers a space of gender ambiguity and variance that challenges a male-female binary. Chapter Two then focuses on the trope of youthful moon-faced beauties, part of a beauty ideal that was undifferentiated by the gendered body and that contributed to an "erotics of sameness" in which lovers were physically and spiritually aligned. Chapter Three turns to instances of nudity, in which the physical body is not diminished but heightened, often to convey a subject's social alterity. This final chapter demonstrates how, prior to the mid-seventeenth century, breasts and genitalia played a limited role in gender differentiation but took on new importance at the time as the nude body gained increased erotic potential. As argued throughout this dissertation, the human body represented in Persian painting is a product of the culture in which it was formed. It thus reflects various, changing discourses around gender, in particular the open-endedness of this identity marker. While Persian society adhered to a rigid gender hierarchy organized around the superiority of the adult male, it also accommodated distinct gender positionalities rather than denying their existence, thereby accepting and leveraging ambiguity. As a result, pre-modern Persianate manuscript paintings lead us to question our assumptions about what is masculine, feminine, neither, both, or something else entirely.

Introduction: The Clothes (Sometimes) Make the Man

A beautiful youth lounges in a verdant outdoor setting, their head resting on one arm while the other drapes across a silk pillow depicting foxes and hares (fig. i). Their long hair flows behind their head, partially obscuring the pointed cap they removed. The scene, complete with a small bottle and cup of wine in the foreground, is one of outdoor leisure and pleasure. But who is this person? Those familiar with Persian paintings will recognize the style of this tinted drawing and know that it likely comes from seventeenth-century Iran, where such single page paintings were produced during the Safavid period (1501-1736). They may also recognize that the clothing is typically associated with members of the upper class, as the fine quality of the robe, hat, and pillow, as well as the figure's necklace, hint at luxury. The further we delve into the details, however, the murkier the figure's identity becomes. The tapered trousers and necklace are typically (but not exclusively) worn by women, while the hat and style of robe are associated with men. The stylized face provides no additional hints to the gender of the figure. Eventually we come to an impasse, finding little more to clarify who this person is, a figure that may have once been readily recognizable to a contemporaneous viewer or, even more tantalizing, may represent a figure who is intentionally ambiguous.

The field of Persian art abounds with figures such as these, who test the limits of our ability to read for identity, particularly gender identity. They also call us to question our assumptions about what is masculine, feminine, neither, both, or something else entirely. This dissertation takes up this challenge and examines how gender is made legible in pre-modern

manuscripts from the Persianate world. In the lands centered around present-day Iran between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, what visual motifs, strategies, and conventions were used to differentiate gender? How do images such as manuscript paintings signify and participate in the process of gender determination? From depictions of cross-dressing heroes and heroines to noble lovers that are similarly represented, illustrated manuscripts offer a rich corpus of pictorial material through which to take up these questions and investigate how gender was imagined in early modern Persian realms. As such, manuscript paintings form the core of this project's inquiry, though many of the ideas discussed can be extended to other media that feature figural representation, such as ceramics, textiles, and metalwork, which are not addressed in this dissertation.

The iconography of pre-modern book images provides a distinct lens through which to understand how gender was not only articulated and debated but also visually represented and made recognizable to the elite audiences that commissioned and viewed manuscripts. Artists were not limited by the texts they illustrated and could draw upon a range of options, including displays of hair, clothing, and the rendering of the body to convey a character's gender. By exploring several groups of paintings, this study seeks to locate conventions and broader strategies for depicting gender, while also searching for the ways that discrete details within manuscripts or even individual paintings can demonstrate important deviations from these norms, thereby expanding interpretive strategies beyond the textual corpus.

Gender is a social identity constructed through bodily attributes, behaviors, and culture. In this dissertation, the term "gender" is used over "sex" to more clearly indicate to a contemporary audience the culturally constructed nature of the material discussed and interpreted. The distinction between gender and sex is modern, with the former indicating social

roles, bodily attributes and behaviors, while the latter primarily relies on physical morphology, although the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling and others have shown that body-based definitions of sex are equally socially contingent.[1] Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was no distinction between gender and sex as we understand them today, and the two terms were conceptually collapsed into one another.

Medieval Islamic discussions around the body, for example, were heavily influenced by the cultures in which they were produced. They drew upon Hellenic sources, Arab and Persian medical theory, and Prophetic medicine. From these sources they established an understanding of gender as a spectrum in which a number of morphologies, including the presence and placement of hair (especially facial hair), pitch of voice, ability to menstruate, joint and muscle shape, fertility, sexual preferences, and the size and shape of genitalia, contributed to a varied sexual landscape that accounted for intersex individuals, masculine-presenting women, and feminine-presenting men alongside masculine-presenting men and feminine-presenting women.[2] While gender difference was recognized, its boundaries and what constituted the norm was a subject of debate.[3] As will be explored further below, the pre-modern period was one in which gender was

[1] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Sarah S. Johnson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[2] The foundation, however, from which all medieval scholars worked was that formed by Hellenistic philosophical and medical treatises, particularly Galen of Pergamon (129- c. 216 AD) and humoral pathology. Men were considered hot and dry, while women were cold and wet, and the difference in these two states contributed to physical and personality distinctions. Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, Press, 2007), 10; Ahmed Ragab, "One, Two, or Many Sexes: Sex Differentiation in Medieval Islamicate Medical Thought," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (2015): 435, 452; Sherry Sayed Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences in Medieval Scholarly Islamic Thought," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 66, no. 1 (2010): 81.

[3] This is also true in the European context. See Masha Raskolnikov, "Without Magic or Miracle: The 'Romance of Silence' and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 178.

more broadly considered than the male-female binary with which we are accustomed, and when possible, I provide visual examples that attest to this.

Methodologically, I begin with an idea borrowed from the literary scholar Zayde Antrim "to question any assumption that the sexed body is always already there."[4] From this position of questioning, I carefully attend to how the represented body is given form by an artist, and which features are emphasized or de-emphasized, particularly in relation to other figures represented within a scene or manuscript. By studying the images within the context of the narratives to which they are attached, the representations are always rooted in a particular gender that is established textually. Through this close looking, certain representational tropes emerge, lending to a recognizable iconography against which I further consider how certain characters align or deviate. By looking for compositional repetitions across the centuries I demonstrate which features had a continuous role in the representation of gender (such as facial hair), those that shifted over time (such as the breast), and those that seem to have a played a limited role (such as genitalia).

Structurally, each chapter focuses on a distinct feature of the represented body. Chapter One examines hair, first attending to two instances in which hair plays a crucial role in exposing the true gender identity of the characters. I conclude with a third example in which a lack of hair helps to disguise the gender identity of the subject. This example bridges to the following chapter and a discussion of youthful moon-faced beauties. A literary and visual trope, the moon face (*mah-ruh*) is one part of a beauty ideal that was undifferentiated by gender, highlighting a conception of beauty that is not androgynous (as it is often interpreted) but transcends the gendered body. The example of the moon-face also points to the ways in which visual tropes

[4] Zayde Antrim, "*Qamarayn*: The Erotics of Sameness in the *1001 Nights*," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28 (2020): 35.

were not always devoid of meaning but could operate metaphorically and thus carry complex meanings in familiar forms. The final chapter then turns to instances of nudity to examine the role of genitalia and breasts in conveying gender difference. As we will see, little distinction is made in the breasts of humans until the mid-seventeenth century when the nude body gains heightened erotic potential, and the breast becomes increasingly associated with the feminine. In contrast, genitalia are used to convey specific meaning, with gender often sublimated to more significant social meanings, such as to mark a subject as a social outsider.

One topic this project does not examine in detail is dress. While dress, then as now, was a fundamental marker of one's identity, often imparting such detailed information as one's ethnicity, social status, class, religious affiliation, and, of course, gender, I have included it only in instances where it is used in addition to a bodily feature to affirm or mask a trait. Unlike in our present day, where certain forms of dress can be rigidly defined between genders (take, for example, the evening gown as women's dress in modern Western contexts), clothing in the pre-modern Persianate world was not as highly differentiated, with members of the upper classes typically sharing in the practice of layering long, loose robes.[5] In contrast, what we might consider "secondary" forms of clothing, such as head gear, which was highly specialized, and material objects, including spindles and swords, served to distinguish between genders.[6] As the majority of examples I examine focus on characters who generally successfully masquerade as another gender through cross-dress, we can see that attire was an unreliable and easily

[5] Differences in dress were more likely to signal distinctions in class rather than between genders, with lower classes such as laborers often depicted in less sumptuous textiles and shorter garments.

[6] See for example, Barbara Schmitz, "On a Special Hat Introduced during the Reign of Shāh 'Abbās the Great," *Iran* 22 (1984): 103-112; Angus Stewart, "If the Cap Fits: Going Mongol in Thirteenth Century Syria," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 1/2 (2016): 137-146; Eric Schroeder, "Ahmed Musa and Shams al-Dīn: A Review of Fourteenth Century Painting," *Ars Islamica* 6, no. 2 (1939): 113-142, especially 120-1.

manipulated marker of a character's gender presentation. As the case studies discussed in Chapter One demonstrate, the clothes don't always make the man, but often hair and sometimes accessories do.

The remainder of this introduction lays out the broad historical and scholarly context in which this project is placed and framed. I begin by reviewing the historical gender hierarchy of pre-modern Persianate society, highlighting a perception of gender that favored the elite, rational male over all other gender presentations. From here, I turn to the ways in which literature and manuscripts contributed to the shoring up and dissemination of this gender hierarchy through the repetition of particular tropes, but also created spaces in which gender is left open-ended through ambiguity. The chapter ends with a consideration of how this project, which engages art history, literary studies, and gender theory, contributes to the field by inviting a more thoughtful consideration of represented gender that is sensitive to the practices of the period in which the works were made.

Laying the Socio-Historical Foundations

An in-depth discussion of the history of gender in the Persianate world is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, this section provides a brief sketch of the gender hierarchy that determined much of the operation of society from the pre-Islamic to pre-modern periods. A division between male and female access to power within social structures varied across time and location but was largely centered around elite male dominance and the subordination of women and other males. It was, as we shall see, a system based in class, assumptions about who was capable of rational thought, and notions of ideal manliness. It is notable that this system was

never confined to a binary but instead left open the possibility for multiple types of gendered subjects, emerging in relation to ideal manliness.

The patriarchal structure of Persianate society dates to before the Muslim invasion by several millennia, and it provided the cultural basis with which the tenets of Islam would fuse.[7] Islam brought with it its own positions on gender relations. The Prophet Muhammad fostered the role of women in the early Muslim community, Quranic revelations speak to the equality of believers before God, and women gained the right to inherit property.[8] Other institutions, however, such as the Muslim system of marriage, circumscribed women's rights, placing her under the control of the husband and, as Leila Ahmed argues, opening the door to limiting her right to interact with unrelated males, seclusion within the home, and wifely submission.[9] The latter, however, was not a unique development to Islam, aligning with marriage rights and restrictions in Christian and Jewish communities. Islam brought new practices to the areas in which it spread but the cultures with which the new religion and polity came into contact also had a profound impact on its development, including ideas and practices from the Hellenic world, Byzantine Christendom, Jewish communities, and the pre-Islamic Persian realm, including the practices of Zoroastrianism.[10] Female seclusion through veiling and notions of the

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[7] Guity Nashat, "Women in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Iran," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, eds. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 11.

[8] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 102 and 120; Nashat, "Women in Pre-Islamic," 36; Sura 33:35 and Sura 3:195. Barbara Freyer Stowasser points out that the Qur'an describes women as possesses of spiritual freedom and thus morally responsible for themselves, thus pointing to a form of self-individuation that imbues women with agency and autonomy. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 21. The language of the Qur'an is, however, largely directed towards a male audience. Ghasem Darzi, Abbas Ahmadvand, and Musa Nushi, "Revealing gender discourses in the Qur'ān: An integrative, dynamic and complex approach," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 77 (4): 7.

[9] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 62.

[10] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 4, 18 and 33.

impurity of women due to menstruation were inherited from or enhanced by ideas from these spheres.[11] Despite Quranic revelations about the equality of male and female believers before God, inherited coeval and current traditions continued to foster a patriarchal gender hierarchy.

Gender relations, however, were never strictly confined to only male and female presenting individuals, and distinct gender presentations are recorded in the early Muslim community. According to several hadith, the Prophet Muhammad cursed those men and women who dressed in another gender's clothes.[12] Other hadith, however, record a tradition of men who displayed feminine traits and sometimes wore women's clothing and plucked their beards, known as *mukhannasun*. They predated Islam and found acceptance, in part, within the early Muslim community in Medina, particularly as musicians.[13] At least one, named Hit, was granted access to the Prophet's private quarters, a privilege that he lost when he made immodest

[11] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 5 and Nashat, "Women in Pre-Islamic," 16-7. While the Prophet Muhammad's wives veiled, this was considered a special circumstance and was not blanketly followed by other Muslim women in the early period of the formation of the Muslim community. Nashat, "Women in Pre-Islamic," 37-8. The uncleanliness of the female body was also a prevalent idea in pre-Islamic Arabia and one which was debated by later legal scholars. Mernissi, *The Veil*, 73.

[12] According to al-Bukhari, "The Prophet cursed effeminate men and mannish women." The most common variant is "The Prophet cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men." Both cited in Everett K. Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (1991): 673. See also İrvin Cemil Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants of Dress and Personal Appearance in Southwest Asia," *Khil'a* 3 (2007-9): 36. There may be a connection to distinguishing Islam from Judaism, as cross dressing was practiced in some religious ceremonies of the latter. An argument along these lines has been made regarding Christianity's rejection of cross dressing found in Deuteronomy. Vern L. Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 224.

[13] The term "mukhannath" (I have chosen to use the Persian transliteration, *mukhannas* throughout this dissertation), shares the *kh-n-th* root in Arabic with "khuntha," a person who possessed neither fully female or fully male genitalia. Saqer Almarri, however, points out the distinction between the two is that the *khunsa* referred to an ambiguous body, while the *mukhannas* identified "a male person's transgression of heteronormative and gender-normative practices." Saqer A. Almarri, "The Khunthā and the Community: A Study in the Medieval Islamic Understanding of the Body and a Critical Edition of 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Isnawī's Īḍāḥ al-Mushkil fī Aḥkām al-Khunthā al-Mushkil," PhD diss., (Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2019), 24. The *khunsa* is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

comments about a woman.[14] In the Abbasid period (758-1258 CE), *mukhannasun* again found partial acceptance as court entertainers, along with *ghulamiyyat*, young women who performed dressed as young boys.[15] In these contexts, cross dressing was a form of entertainment but also, at least in the case of some *mukhannasun* about whom more is known, indicated a distinct and long-term gender identity.

It was in the centuries following the Prophet Muhammad's death, when the center of Islamic political power shifted from the Arabian Peninsula to Iraq, that the gender hierarchy was further embedded within the religion. The Abbasid courts in Baghdad and Samarra adopted many of the practices of the Sasanian court, including the seclusion of women within a harem guarded by eunuchs.[16] Muslim scholars also began the process of codifying and interpreting (*tafsir*) the Qur'an, while hadith and shari'a guided the Muslim community henceforth.[17] The Abbasid exegetical process was one that favored male-focused interpretations and the superiority of men as believers, despite Quranic revelations to the contrary. The impact of this is prominently visible, for example, in the writings of one of the most important Muslim theologians, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), who wrote "Consider the women

[14] Here I use masculine pronouns for Hit in alignment with the original Arabic sources, although an argument could be made that Hit's sustained gender bending makes the application of gender-neutral pronouns more appropriate. Rowson, "Effeminates," 673-4; and Everett K. Rowson, "Reveal or Conceal: Public Humiliation and Banishment as Punishments in Early Islamic Times," in *Public Violence in Islamic Societies: Power, Discipline, and the Construction of the Public Sphere, 7th-19th Centuries C.E.*, ed. Christian Lange and Maribel Fierro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 121-2.

[15] Everett K. Rowson, "Gender Irregularity as Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages,* ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003) 47-51.

[16] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 83 and Nashat, "Women in Pre-Islamic," 28. Nashat points out that while Zoroastrian religious doctrine preached the subordination of women to their husbands and their ultimate duty as a reproductive role, the lived experience of women may have been different from this. For example, women could inherit and manage wealth, giving them a degree of autonomy. Yet, ultimate authority rested in the hands of male relatives.

[17] Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84.

who have struggled in the path of God and say, 'O my soul, be not content to be less than a woman, for it is despicable for a man to be less than a woman in matters of religion or of this world.'"[18]

This period of interpretation and codification had a lasting impact on Islam, one that is felt to the present day. Zahra Ayubi demonstrates in her study of *akhlaq* (philosophical ethics) texts that, through thinkers such as al-Ghazali, a conception of a gendered and hierarchical cosmology dominated.[19] Examining the *Kimiya-i Sa'adat* (The Alchemy of Happiness) by al-Ghazali, *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* (The Nasirean Ethics) by Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274 CE), and *Akhlaq-i Jalali* (The Jalalean Ethics) by Jalal ad-Din Davani (d. 1502 CE), Ayubi determines that "[in] the ethicists' view, the entire cosmos is created for men, radiating from the king at the center to the various ranks of subordinates and social classes around him. The enslaved and other nonelite men have a place in the hierarchy based on their occupational skills, but only as instruments of elite men's refinement."[20] Only men were capable of being "rational and spiritual souls," while women were "embodied and limited by biological function."[21] Access to power was conceived on a spectrum that begins with the body in which women are confined but from which other men can ascend if they are intellectually capable and possess higher reasoning.[22]

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[18] Quoted in Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 68.

[19] Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019) 6. See Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book that Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), 186-7.

[20] Ayubi, *Gendered Morality*, 237.

[21] Ayubi, *Gendered Morality*, 24. Zadeh describes the ideal male further as one whose body is marked "for purification and perfection," signaling a material as well as spiritual difference. Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, 186.

[22] Ayubi, *Gendered Morality*, 8.

The centrality of the ideal rational man was shaped by and shaped how the very concept of gender was perceived. As Thomas Bauer summarizes, "The gender category of 'man' is the focus of all patriarchal gender projections. It is not a binary category, but a continuous line from 'non-man,' through several degrees of 'partly man' to 'real man.' Age plays a role. A boy is born with male sex, but he still has to *become* a man. The most important sign of having acquired the status of a 'real' man is growing a full beard."[23] Bauer's point is significant for its move away from a rigid male-female binary to a re-assessment of gender in the Persianate world in terms of degrees of manliness.

Expanding upon Bauer's idea, I refer to "male" and "non-male" throughout this dissertation, with the former referring to the bearded adult male and the latter as a shorthand for the range of genders that exist in relation to "real man." Although this structure may seem to set up a binary between "male" and "non-male," and indeed Bauer uses the term "line," suggesting a linear progression between two poles, this model instead accounts for a range of gender presentations in a way that the male-female binary does not. Rather than a line, we can better understand the structure as a scatter plot around the central position of "male," with "non-male" encompassing multiple positions around it and proximity to the center indicating a higher degree of manliness. One's position within is not fixed but can shift if certain conditions can be met, including class and age.

For example, as Bauer notes, a boy is not a man until he grows facial hair, thus the beardless youth, or *amrad*, is only "partly man," holding the potential to be a rational adult with time. Beholden to different social rules than the bearded adult male, including serving as an

[23] Thomas Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty: The Beard in Classical Arabic Love Poetry," in *Barbe et Barbus: Symboliques, Rites et Pratiques du Port de la Barbe dans Le Proche-Orient Ancien et Moderne*, ed. Youri Volokhine, Bruce Fudge and Thomas Herzog (Bern: Peter Lang, 2019), 132.

acceptable recipient of adult male desire, the *amrad* thus operated as a distinct gender until he is able to grow a beard.[24] Additional gender positions included intersex individuals (*khunsa*), women who performed as *amrad*s (*ghulamiyyat*), and adult men who plucked their beards and displayed a mixture of male and female attributes, including makeup and dress (*mukhannasun*).

This hierarchical approach to gender impacted the landscape of sexuality and desire. A social world organized around the adult male favors homosocial interaction and gender segregation, including in instances of love and sex.[25] Opinions varied on the licitness of same-sex relations, with distinctions drawn between acts and desires, roles, and social positions. Broadly speaking, sexual relations as acts were generally understood through the "axis of penetration," with the social norm of the adult male as penetrator and the recipient as a non-male, which could include women and the *amrad*.[26] The penetration of an adult male was highly abnormal and was considered a pathological disease (*ubna*) that was condemned.[27] Meanwhile, male homosocial desire was more acceptable and in some cases promoted as a means for refining

[24] Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 26.

[25] Ayubi, *Gendered Morality*, 12. "Homosociality was the ultimate expression of a patriarchically structured society, in which men interacted with one another in a world that belonged to elite men, excluding all others."

[26] Thomas Bauer, "Male-Male Love in Classical Arabic Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tukhanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 113; El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 71; Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2008), 299-300.

[27] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 19-20; Floor, *A Social History*, 295.

the self, for example through the Sufi practice of gazing on beautiful *amrad*s.[28] Though they did exist, female same-sex acts and desire were rarely discussed.[29]

The social environment of the pre-modern Persianate world was thus structured around the superiority of the elite adult male over all others, permeating all levels of society and knowledge production. The dissertation's chapters attend more closely to specific bodies of knowledge, including medical, legal, and theological, to demonstrate the specific ways in which writers and scholars in these fields disseminated an overarching framework in which the rational male achieves his power and superiority over others through their exclusion. In the next section, we explore how this system supported itself through gendered tropes, establishing the cultural foundation from which artists drew for their works.

Producing Gendered Tropes: Persian Literature, Manuscript Production, and Theories of Gender

Ethical tracts like those discussed above were not the only means for transmitting social rules and norms. Epics and romances also served a didactic function as "mirrors for princes" that provided lessons in ethical behavior through storytelling. The tales of Abul-Qasim Firdawsi's (d. c. 1020 CE) *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), for example, were considered from the time of their

[28] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 3; Ayubi, *Gendered Morality*, 196. Floor, *A Social History*, 296; Nasrollah Pourjavady, "Stories of Ahmad al-Ghazali 'Playing the Witness' in Tabriz (Shams-i Tabrizi's Interest in *shāhid-bāzī*), *Reason and inspiration in Islam: theology, philosophy and mysticism in Muslim thought: essays in honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 204.

[29] Floor, *A Social History*, 320, 333-4, 349-50; Kathryn Babayan, "'In Spirit We Ate Each Other's Sorrow': Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 255.

compilation to be wisdom tales that laid out ethico-political guidance for kings and courtiers.[30] Romances such as Nizami Ganjavi's (d. 1209 CE) *Khusraw and Shirin* and 'Abd al-Rahman Jami's (d. 1492 CE) *Yusuf and Zulaykha* similarly provided direction on the proper behavior of a ruler as well as love as a conditioning force.[31] The narrative space was one in which gendered tropes, such as the idea that women are wily or that men have the right to power over women, were repeated and disseminated, shoring up social hierarchies.[32] Like the tales themselves, the paintings that accompanied epics and romances similarly helped to establish these norms, including standards of gender representation and understandings of manly appearance within the gendered hierarchy.

And yet, such tales operated on numerous levels, including as forms of entertainment, in which authors could imaginatively experiment with social boundaries and expand the realms of the possible, for example breaking with gender norms and allowing for more ambiguity in gender presentation. As Masha Raskolnikov writes in her study of gender queerness in the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*, "Imaginative literature, [as opposed to juridical or medical texts], offers affordances to explore what the world *might be* rather than what it *is*, and can sometimes function as the space where the nature of sex and gender gets worked out in a relatively consequence-free way."[33] Epics and romances, therefore, were a space in which poets

[30] Nasrin Askari, *The Medieval Reception of the Shāhnāma as a Mirror for Princes* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 2.

[31] Julie Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 180 and 182.

[32] Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Reading and Enjoying: 'Wiles of Women' Stories as a Feminist," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 203-222; Alexandra Hoffman, "Cats and Dogs, Manliness and Misogyny: On the *Sindbad-nameh* as World Literature," in *Persian Literature as World Literature*, ed. Mostafa Abedinifard, Omid Azadibougar, and Amirhossein Vafa (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2021), 137-149.

[33] Raskolnikov, "Without Magic," 178. For more on ambiguity in Western imagery, see Silke Tammen, "Stelzenfisch und bilnisse in einer baumkrone, unähnlichkeit un montage: gendanken zur ambiguität mittelalterlicher bilder," in *Ambiguität in der kunst: Typen und funktionen eines ästhetischen paradigmas*, ed.

might test, challenge, or confirm gender norms. Artists similarly participated in this process through their choice of which scenes to depict and how to convey a character's identity, which sometimes represented a creative rupture not only with the narrative but also social norms.

This is most clearly demonstrated in Persian literature in instances of cross dress, which illuminate medieval and pre-modern Persianate attitudes around gender. Cross dress was an important narrative device often employed by or enacted upon characters for a brief period.[34] Donning another gender's clothes was generally not a reflection of a character's new gender identity but was instead used to achieve a particular goal, for example giving a character access to spaces that they might not normally see or else allowing them to avoid detection.[35] The interpretation and impact of cross dressing as a narrative device and a real practice is context dependent, allowing for a range of possibilities and repercussions. In some cases, cross dressing "confirms traditional order; in others, it genuinely overturns order; in yet others, it remains an ambiguous trope."[36] As Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler point out in their article on cross-dressing in theatre, the act always holds the potential to be transgressive and destabilizing of gender norms but its actual impact is determined by context, in particular spectator response.[37]

Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader (Böhlau, Köln: 2010), 53-72. Thank you to Tina Bawden for bringing this source to my attention.

[34] Temporality is a key difference between cross-dressing and transgenderism. As Miqqi Alicia Gilbert describes, "…the cross-dresser, unlike the transsexual, is in constant violation of the bi-gender system. He or she is not seeking admission into the non-birth designated sex but only a temporary visa, so to speak, one good for several hours or a few days, confounding many social constituencies." Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, "Cross-dresser," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 66.

[35] To this end, a more expansive view of cross dressing could also include characters who dress in as a member of a different class to achieve their objectives, seen for example in the *Shahnama* when Rustam dresses as a merchant to rescue Bizhan or Iskandar disguises himself as a messenger to meet with Queen Qaydafa.

[36] Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland, 1996), 10.

[37] Robert L.A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, "Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama," *New Literary History* 28, no. 2 (1997): 340.

Chapters One and Three examine several examples of cross dress, revealing how each instance demonstrates a different function and brings to the surface varying attitudes and anxieties around sexuality, gender, power, and more. The paintings that accompany these scenes not only provide insight into what was considered relevant to the iconography of gender but also offer an additional gloss on such themes and attitudes around gender initiated by the text. In some cases, they provide counter-narratives or clarifications to the text, which were themselves left open-ended to foster creative ambiguities.

Gender indeterminacy was common due to the particularities of the Persian language. Gender is often a defining grammatical structure, but this is not the case with Persian, whose emic linguistic tradition does not distinguish between masculine or feminine pronouns and collapses "he," "she," and "it" into a gender and animacy non-differentiated, third-person singular pronoun (*ū*).[38] This factor had a major impact on the literary tradition by allowing for a degree of subject ambiguity, as with the trope of the beloved in Persian lyric poetry whose gender often remains illegible unless marked by other culturally specific clues.[39] A poet might, for example, allude to bodily features such as a beard to elucidate the subject's gender. In other instances, a particular term might be associated with one gender over another, such as those derived from the word *mard* ("man") like *javanmardi* ("chivalry," or literally, "young manliness"), which can function as a gendering adjective but also indicate behaviors like martial

[38] Language, as the means by which we communicate concepts to one another including our sense of self, is foundational to shaping how gender is understood in a given culture, and the Persian language presents a particularly fruitful space in which to explore this given its lack of gendered pronouns. For a broader discussion on pronouns, see Amia Srinivasan, "He, She, One, They, Ho, Hus, Hum, Ita," *London Review of Books* 42, no. 13 (July 2020), accessed 4 October 2022, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n13/amia-srinivasan/he-she-one-they-ho-hus-hum-ita.

[39] Dominic P. Brookshaw "To be Feared and Desired: Turks in the Collected Works of 'Ubayd-i Zākānī," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2009): 727; Bauer, "Male-Male Love," 110.

virility.[40] Such terminology could of course be applied to non-male genders but always brought with it specifically gendered connotations.[41]

Poets frequently exploited the grammatical gender ambiguity of Persian, purposefully moving between abstraction and specification.[42] As recent scholarship has shown, dissecting such indeterminacy holds major relevance for interpreting Persian literature, including clarifying meaning, authorial intent, and notions of desire.[43] As will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two, there was a tendency amongst nineteenth-century Western translators of Persian texts to apply contemporary sexual norms to the originals, for example translating the beloved of love poetry as a female subject lusted after by the male poet. More recently, translators and scholars have acknowledged the homosocial context in which the poetry was written and re-inscribed the identity of the beloved as the *amrad*. Returning to the idea of ambiguity, however, I argue that such gender indeterminacy contributed to an idealized notion of beauty undifferentiated by gender and expressed through poetic tropes such as "moon-faced." The gender indeterminacy of the Persian language likewise extends to the visual realm, and some artists similarly exploited ambiguity in depicting youthful beauties.

The reciprocity between text and image is demonstrated through examples such as these, but also objects themselves, namely luxury manuscripts in which epic and romantic narratives

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[40] C. Cahen and W.L. Hanaway, Jr., "'Ayyār," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, article published 15 December 1987; last modified 18 August 2011. https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ayyar; Lloyd Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1.

[41] Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi*, 8; Amanda Catarina Leong, "'I'd rather be married to someone I can control': Female *Javānmardī* in Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunnamah* as a Mirror for Princesses," *Iranian Studies* 57 (2024): 511.

[42] Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Saʿdi of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 197.

[43] See for example Ingenito's study of Sa'di's poetry, Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*.

are accompanied by paintings. The two media are fundamentally intertwined in this format, with each informing the other. Text was modified and adjusted to accommodate paintings, while painters drew inspiration from descriptions provided by the texts. Artists, however, can and did place their own interpretations on the text, sometimes deviating greatly to emphasize a different theme or point. The paintings examined in this dissertation are rarely just literal illustrations of a given scene, and instead often include key descriptive and interpretative details that impart additional meanings beyond those shared in the text.[44] As Jerome Clinton and Marianna Shreve Simpson summarize, "epic poetry and epic painting interact as much through competition as through complementarity," in their shared illustration of a narrative event.[45] This dualistic relationship between text and image makes for a fruitful space in which to explore the ways in which gender was navigated and expressed through the production of language and form.

The period of manuscript production under consideration, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, was one of great importance in the development of Persian painting, a period that Eleanor Sims calls "the golden age."[46] Paintings were produced to accompany luxury manuscripts for wealthy patrons (though more affordable versions appeared later), from histories and epics to romances and collections of poetry.[47] The manuscript was a collaborative endeavor,

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[44] For a discussion of literal, descriptive, and interpretative modes of painting in manuscripts, see Oleg Grabar, "Pictures or Commentaries: The Illustrations of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri," in *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100-1800, volume II, Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, ed. Oleg Grabar (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 187-205.

[45] Jerome W. Clinton and Marianna S. Simpson, "How Rustam Killed White Div: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006): 177.

[46] Eleanor Sims, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 1. The idea of a "classical" period of Persian painting is not without its issues, inferring a linear development of Persian painting and assumed periods of rise and decline bookending the "classical." For more on this, see Christiane Gruber, "Questioning the 'classical' in Persian painting: models and problems of definition," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 2.

employing scribes, painters, and illuminators to achieve the final product.[48] Over these several centuries artists established the "look of the book" through canonical compositions, standard themes (such as courtly audiences, hunting expeditions, and battles), and figural tropes, such as the enthroned ruler, beardless male youth, and fair maiden, among others.[49] This process was aided by artistic training, which encouraged copying earlier works.[50]

The repetition of forms produced certain standards in depicting gendered subjects, establishing an iconography of gender that would have been recognizable to audiences. While individualized portraits did exist in this period, the figures included in the paintings examined in this study are most aptly described as "types" and they adhere to clear representational tropes, such as the enthroned king or brave warrior. The specific identity of the figures is often only made clear through narrative context. This, however, did not mean that such figures were devoid of meaning. Rather, as Francesca Leoni writes, "…individualized types may not exist, but this did not impede these forms from bearing precise meanings and associations, which the practice

[47] B.W. Robinson named a class of manuscripts as the "commercial Turkmen style," which emerged in the fifteenth century and catered to a broader wealthy clientele, such as well-off merchants. Robinson bases the assertion that the style developed for commercial and export manuscripts on the large number of surviving manuscripts (at least a hundred manuscripts) that share this streamlined style from the last quarter of the fifteenth century. B.W. Robinson, *Fifteenth-Century Persian Painting: Problems and Issues* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 39 and B.W. Robinson, *Persian Paintings in the Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1998), viii. For a more recent study on this style see, Elaine Wright, *The Look of the Book: Manuscript Production in Shiraz, 1303-1452* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2012).

[48] For a detailed study on the collaborative production of a single manuscript see, Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's Haft Awrang: A Princely Manuscript from Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Washington, D.C. and New Haven: Smithsonian Institution and Yale University Press, 1997).

[49] Sims, *Peerless Images*, xi.

[50] Ada Adamova, "Repetition of Compositions in Manuscripts: The *Khamsa* of Nizami in Leningrad," in *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 69; Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 163-5; Zeren Tanındı, "Repetition of Illustrations in the Topkapı Palace and Diez Albums," in *The Diez Albums: Contexts and Contents*, ed. Julia Gonnella, Friederike Weis, and Christoph Rauch (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 163.

of repetition of compositions so distinctive of Persianate painting contributed to consolidate in the viewer's mind."[51] Chapter Two discusses the trope of the moon-faced beauty, but this type of repetition points to a shared ideology of gender across time and place, which manifested in an iconography of gender.

Due to my focus on tracing patterns that emerged over several centuries, this project does not attend to in-depth discussion of features that one might commonly find in other art historical studies. I do not delve into artistic intent or patron preference except in limited cases in which a painting clearly breaks with canonical modes of representation in a manner that alters its depiction of gender. I similarly do not attend to stylistic shifts as these do not appear to have impacted the manner in which gender was represented. While these levels of detail are important to art history and the history of painting, they do not help to trace ideologies that persisted beyond a single lifetime or generation. My interest in persisting modes of gendered representation lies in a desire to delineate the wider symbolic system of gender that permeated the pre-modern Persianate world and a collective understanding of what gender meant and how it was expressed visually. This marks a new approach to studying gender within the field of art history, by broadening the scope beyond particular styles, artists, or objects. It also encourages a cross-disciplinary study to reconstruct the wider environment in which artists created.

Euro-American scholarly interests in the Islamic world since the eighteenth century have resulted in a vast corpus of secondary sources from a range of disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, theology, and literary studies, that address issues of gender to varying degrees. For many years, studies focused primarily on women, but more recently scholars have

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[51] Francesca Leoni, "The Revenge of Ahriman: Images of *Dīv*s in the *Shānāma*, ca. 1300-1600," PhD diss., (Princeton University, 2008), 7.

turned to examining gender broadly. For example, in the field of medical history, Sherry Gadelrab and Ahmed Ragab examined how gender was determined by a range of factors, including bodily humors, physiology, and pitch of voice, while several studies of legal documents address the *khunsa*, a term applied to a broad range of people who might today be considered intersex.[52] In the field of literary studies, there was an earlier focus on men, for example in J.W. Wright, Jr.'s, Everett Rowson's and Thomas Bauer's examinations of Arabic poetry that unveil homoerotic desire, challenging earlier perceptions that the beloved was always a female subject for the male author.[53] Rowson also contributed important early research into cross dressing in the Islamic world, shedding light on non-normative gender practices.[54] Finally, Zayde Antrim encouraged a move away from binaristic understandings of gender, examining one narrative story through the lens of an "erotics of sameness," where gender difference is collapsed.[55] Despite their diversity of approaches, what all of the above works share is a focus on textual evidence to support their claims.

Like textual analysis, art historical studies that address gender have tended to focus on women, for example tracing the often-overlooked history of women's patronage.[56] Several

[52] Gadelrab, "Discourses," 40-81; Ragab, "One, Two, or Many Sexes," 428-454; Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender,* ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 74-95; Saqer A. Almarri, "You Have Made Her a Man among Men: Translating the *Khuntha*'s Anatomy in Fatimid Jurisprudence," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (November 2016): 578-586; Indira Falk Gesink, "Intersex Bodies in Premodern Islamic Discourse: Complicating the Discourse," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (July 2018): 152-173.

[53] Bauer, "Male-Male Love in Classical Arabic Poetry," 108; J.W. Wright, Jr. and Everett Rowson, *Homoeroticism in Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[54] Rowson, "Gender Irregularity," 45-72.

[55] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 2.

[56] D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

scholars, including Layla Diba and Mehreen Chida-Razvi, have produced important analyses of the depiction of women in painting from the Islamic world, with the latter, for example, tracing the gradual disappearance of royal women from Ilkhanid paintings as they became less powerful in society.[57] In 2013 Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif published an important volume of essays anthology on gender and sexuality in Islamic art, which brought a new critical lens to these topics.[58]

As Natif and Leoni note in their introduction, however, the study of sexuality is nascent within the field of Islamic art history. I would argue the same is true for the study of gender, despite some advancements in uncovering the hidden or ignored histories of women. Islamic art historians can critically examine what gender meant in the historical past. As scholars such as Robert Hillenbrand, Oleg Grabar, and Sheila Blair have demonstrated, manuscript paintings provide insights into cultural history and information that is unrecorded in textual sources: traces of oral traditions and distinct, non-textual modes of representation among them.[59] A closer look at the many ways in which people and desire are represented will continue to nuance our understandings of historical expressions of gender and sexuality, clarifying that neither are static and natural. Rather, they are always socially constructed and dependent upon their cultural, political, and religious contexts of production and reception.

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[57] Layla S. Diba, "Lifting the Veil from the Face of Depiction: The Representation of Women in Persian Painting," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 206-236; Mehreen Chida-Razvi, "Power and Politics of Representation: Picturing Elite Women in Ilkhanid Painting," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no. 4 (2022): 762-791.

[58] Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif, *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

[59] Robert Hillenbrand, *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004); Grabar, "Pictures or Commentaries"; Sheila Blair, *Text and Image in Persian Art* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2014).

For example, the visual can elucidate what is left ambiguous in a text, add a cultural gloss to a popular tale, and build bridges between literary and philosophical traditions. All of these issues are made apparent in Mika Natif's study of a Mughal painting from Sa'di's *Gulistan*, which depicts Sa'di as an old shaykh and his slightly younger friend in a garden.[60] Natif demonstrates how the artist's choice of poses, gestures, and garden elements elevate the erotic undertones of the text into central features of the painting. Furthermore, Natif relates specific elements to descriptions of the love relationships between master and student in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which was circulated in the Mughal court, thus expanding the intellectual context within which both the painting and manuscript should be understood. Natif's reading provides space for both profane and mystical readings of the painting, moving away from prior interpretations of such master-student love relationships as purely mystical, with no earthly or carnal equivalent. Her approach opens the door to multiple levels of meaning and experiences of desire within a single painting.

The visual can also help us to reconsider the relevance of the male-female binary. To understand the role of gender in the formation of Iranian modernity, Afsaneh Najmabadi turned to largely nineteenth-century visual and textual sources, including canvas paintings, newspapers, jewelry, prints, tilework, poetry, and novellas. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Najmabadi argues that the male-female binary was used to "screen out" other gender positionalities in the nineteenth century, in particular the *amrad*. Tracing the *amrad*'s erasure primarily from paintings, Najmabadi argues that the pressures of heteronormalization and

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[60] Mika Natif, "The Generative Garden: Sensuality, Male Intimacy, and Eternity in Govardhan's Illustration of Saʿdī's *Gulistān,"* in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, ed. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 43-64.

anxieties around modernity from increased contact with Europe curtailed a broader gender horizon found in pre-modern Iran. Najmabadi's study sheds light on the ways in which a strict adherence to the modern concept of the two-gender binary limits the ways in which we analyze the history of gender, continuing to obscure alternative genders and objects of desire from view.

Building on these studies, I seek to add to this discussion through a sustained analysis of the iconography of gender in painting from the Persianate world. I do not focus on a single gender but rather look to the multiple ways in which gender was expressed through particular features, such as hair and breasts. My focus on the visual construction of gender remains an unmapped area of inquiry. While scholars of Islamic history and literature have used texts to explore questions around the conceptualization of gender, pre-modern representational images have not received sustained examination, despite the fact that they provide much insight into how not only gender, but bodies more broadly were conceived. Manuscript paintings are, of course, filtered through multiple lenses, including the artist, the patron, and cultural context, and therefore never neutrally presented (if such a thing is possible) but each of these layers adds to our insight into how gender was constructed in a particular time and place.

My approach is informed by contemporary gender theory. Following the work of scholars such as Joan Scott and Judith Butler, I contend that gender was not a stable identity category within the pre-modern Persianate world. Rather, as discussed above, it was shaped by many factors, including age and class, shifting debates around human physiology, legal rights, and cosmology.[61] In her pivotal article on the usefulness of gender as analytic framework, Scott questioned how we might get to the root of embedded social dynamics, such as the association of

[61] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986): 1053-1075, and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

masculinity with power. For her, we can only start to answer such questions by attending to symbolic systems, "to the ways societies represent gender, use it to articulate the rules of social relationships, or construct the meaning of experience."[62]

While many studies have thus far examined gender representation through textual sources, I take Scott's guidance more literally and seek to unpack visual representations of gender as a symbolic system. In each chapter I delve into the wider historical relevance of a feature, such as hair or nudity, in order the contextualize the intellectual and social environment in which such symbols communicated, images operated, artists produced, and patrons and other viewers received the manuscripts. I attend to the numerous ways in which gender was inflected by culturally relevant discourses, such as humoral pathology and notions of nobility and social order, while also leveraging iconographical analyses key to art history as a scholarly discipline and praxis.

In contrast to Afsaneh Najmabadi's look at a moment of cultural rupture in the nineteenth century, my project examines a longer stretch of time to trace slower moving shifts and consider what was sustained. In this way, I can more fully examine Judith Butler's ideas around the performative repetition of gender. As she writes, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."[63] Although Butler is speaking about the material body repeating the performance of gender, performance is not limited to the individual but enforced across society, thus moving it outside the temporal limits

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[62] Scott, "Gender," 1063.

[63] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

of a single life or generation. By looking at four centuries of visual material, I show how certain attitudes were held and repeated across time. Butler's idea of repetition also synthesizes well with the format of manuscript painting, and its repeating tropes and compositional formulas. Iconographical repetitions across manuscript forms reaffirm the legibility of specific features and their place within the pre-modern symbolic system of gender.

The case of figures who temporarily cross dress is a particularly apt illustration of gender performance. For example, the male warrior Bahram Chubina is forced to don women's dress and perform as a lower-class spinster, the young woman Gurdafarid disguises her gender to engage in manly battle, a nameless youth conceals himself as a harem girl, and a trickster name 'Amr-i Umayya quite literally performs as a dancing girl or *mukhannas*. Each of these moments and, except for the case of 'Amr-i Umayya, their multiple iterations in several different manuscripts demonstrate artistic decisions about what to conceal or reveal about their "true" or masqueraded gender.

Rather than a wholescale adoption of Western contemporary gender theory, I seek to demonstrate how emic traditions can problematize gender studies and contribute to a more nuanced and complex reading of gender—of what constitutes "manliness" and "womanliness"—than has previously been understood in studies that focus on European, American, and contemporary source material. For example, I try, when possible, to maintain original terminology, which is often far more nuanced than modern English translation allows, as discussed above regarding the gender of the beloved in poetry.

Furthermore, I am cautious about using contemporary Western terminology. In the above I use the term "true" gender to indicate the gender with which each character typically

identified.[64] A contemporary equivalent would perhaps be "cisgender," used to denote people who possess the sexual reproductive organs that align with the sex identity with which they were assigned at birth. However, I have chosen not to use this term as it activates its correlate "transgender," which describes individuals who do not possess the sexual reproductive organs that align with the sex identity with which they were assigned at birth.[65] This is not to deny that such terms have relevance to historical analysis.[66] Rather, in the specific instances I am examining, the application of such terminology can obscure more nuanced gender and sexuality positions that are better captured through an emic term or better left undefined. For example, in his study of sexuality in the pre-modern Arab world, Khaled El-Rouayheb cautions against using the term "homosexual" over more specific Arabic terms, such as *ubna* and *liwat* because the former flattens the nuances expressed in the latter, which were important to how acts and identities were received in their given societies.[67] It is for this reason that I also do not use the term "transgender" to describe *mukhannasun*, who were a culturally and temporally distinct gender category.[68]

[64] Time plays a role here. As Robert Mills writes, "Accordingly, applying the term 'transgender,' as we currently understand it, to fictional characters who enact or experience sex/ gender transitions or transformations misses the fact that the protagonists' assumption of attributes such as male dress and appearance tends to be conceived as a temporary fix or disguise that enables them to transcend the social barriers they face as women." Robert Mills, "Recognizing Wilgefortis," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 150.

[65] B. Aultman, "Cisgender," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 62.

[66] See for example, Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 10.

[67] El Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 6.

[68] Abdulhamit Arvas, "Performing and Desiring Gender Variance in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 161.

As will become apparent by the end of this dissertation, gender in the pre-modern Persianate world was open-ended and in flux, a source of debate for pre-modern scholars and creative fodder for poets and artists. It is rare to find features that can consistently be attributed to a single gender. As with any symbol, gender markers were easily manipulated to mislead or intentionally obfuscated gender identity. Furthermore, certain features that we might consider to be reliable indicators of gender, such as the face or genitals, were often largely irrelevant to pre-modern Persianate viewers and instead used to convey entirely different meanings, such as an idealized form of beauty or social alterity. An ability to attend to these nuances requires that we try, as much as possible, to put aside pre-conceived notions of gender and allow the sources to guide us to more refined hypotheses.

In discussing non-binary genders in medieval and pre-modern Europe, Leah DeVun writes that our ideas about sex and anatomy are never just about the physical body: "instead they are always ideas about what it means to be human and what it means to be a self in relation to other selves and to the world."[69] This study is an invitation to consider the ways in which personhood was debated, shaped, and represented through the lens of gender in the pre-modern Persianate period, with an eye towards how these past images and imaginings might challenge and expand our own contemporary understandings on this fundamental aspect of selfhood.

[69] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 5.

Chapter 1 Hairy Matters: Gendering through Head and Facial Hair

Following the unjust murder of her husband, Siyavush, the pregnant Farigis mourns by cutting her hair and scratching at her cheeks.[1] Nearly a thousand years after Abul-Qasim Firdawsi (d. c. 1020 CE) recorded this story in his *Shahnama*, women in Iran took to the streets where they burned their hijabs and cut their hair to mourn and protest the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a young woman who was arrested by the morality police for violating dress code. In each instance, cutting one's hair is a sign of sorrow and loss, but also a powerful act of feminist resistance within a patriarchal society. As these two examples also show, hair has been an important and long-standing means of personal expression. Hair is fundamental to one's social position, marking out class, politics, religious affiliation, and, of course, gender. In the case of the women of Iran, it can be employed as a centuries-old tool of defiance. This chapter looks more closely at the relationships between gender and hair in the pre-modern Persianate world, specifically assessing how it was used by artists to communicate a particular gender identity. As we shall see, hair is a particularly potent marker of gender.

After detailing the historical social relevance of hair in the pre-modern Persianate world, I turn to three examples of characters who cross dress and the way in which hair operates in each of these cases. The first is a tale of punishment from the *Shahnama*, where the Sasanian general, Bahram Chubina, is sent women's clothing and spinning implements as an ironic gift from the

[1]Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 273.

shah Hurmuzd. Bahram Chubina is meant to be humiliated by the presents, diminishing not only his manly status but also his position from warrior to spinster. Artists' depiction of this scene always include facial hair in order to indicate that Bahram Chubina is still an adult man, despite his feminine dress. The second tale also appears in the *Shahnama* and recounts the battle between Suhrab, the son of the warrior Rustam, and a young woman named Gurdafarid, who disguises her gender identity hiding her long hair. Here length Gurdafarid's lengthy locks are used by both Firdawsi and artists to signal her gender identity, but so too is facial hair employed to shore up Suhrab's masculinity. In the final example, I turn to a story from the *Khavarannama* (Book of the East), in which the trickster hero Amr-i Umayya uses cross dress to enter an enemy king's inner sanctum and humiliate him. A surviving fifteenth-century painting of this scene breaks with traditional depictions of Amr-i Umayya as a bearded male to show him in the guise of a dancing woman. Lacking facial hair and yet still technically male, Amr's depiction recalls the *mukhannas* discussed in the introduction, thus raising important new avenues for reading for different gender positionalities. Through these examples we gain a sense of the social codes of hair, which matter just as much today as they did in the medieval and pre-modern periods.

Combing through the Cultural Relevance of Hair

Early studies of the anthropological relevance of hair focused on its sexual symbolism.[2] More recently, however, scholars have turned to the specificities of cultural context to reveal the

[2] See for example E.R. Leach, "Magical Hair," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 88, no. 2 (Jul-Dec 1958): 147-164. For overviews of these early studies, see Ingrid Pfluger-Schindlbeck, "On the Symbolism of Hair in Islamic Societies: An Analysis of Approaches," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 74-6; Farzin Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming Punishments in Nineteenth-Century Iran," *Iranian Studies* (2023): 2-3.

myriad ways in which hair operates within a given society. In the Islamic world, hair has many varied and contradictory meanings that are shaped by social, religious, political and historical contexts.[3] The cutting and growing of hair, coerced and uncoerced, signaled one's status in society, age, sexual availability, and religious affiliation, to name just a few of the connotations held by hair.[4] Facial, head, and body hair were each bound by distinct rules that shifted over time and by location, but were particularly differentiated by gender.[5] By examining salient points related to gender for both facial and head hair, we will get a sense of the normative framework within which artists constructed their representations of different genders through hair.

One of the most visible and consistent signs of gender was facial hair. Broadly speaking, the beard and mustache were crucial markers of masculinity and male adulthood and therefore were an outward marker of a person's position within the gender hierarchy of Islamic society.[6] Styles of course shifted over time, for example the Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbas (r. 1587-1629 CE)

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[3] Pfluger-Schindlbeck, "On the Symbolism," 73. For more on beards in contemporary Iran, see Faegheh Shirazi, "Manly Matters in Iran: From Beards to Turbans," in *Critical Encounters: Essays on Persian Literature and Culture in Honor of Peter J. Chelkowski*, ed. Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Costa Mesa, CA, Mazda Publishers, 2007), 145-166 and Faegheh Shirazi, "Men's Facial Hair in Islam: A Matter of Interpretation," In *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, ed. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 111–122.

[4] For more on hair sacrifice, see Pfluger-Schindlbeck, "On the Symbolism," 81-2 and Shahzad Bashir, "The Mediation of Hair: Sūfī, Ḥurūfī, and Poetic Usages in Persian Texts," *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 90-106.

[5] Body hair will not be discussed in detail in this chapter due in large part to its non-representation in painting. This aligns with the general practice for both men and women of depilating the pubic region and armpits İrvin Cemil Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants of Dress and Personal Appearance in Southwest Asia," *Khil'a* 3 (2007-9), 25-7.

[6] Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009) 26; Thomas Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty: The beard in classical Arabic love poetry," In *Barbe et barbus: Symboliques, rites et pratiques du port de la barbe dans le proche-orient ancien et moderne*, ed. Volokhine Youri, Fudge Bruce, Herzog Thomas (Bern: Peter Lang, 2019) 132; Hadas Hirsch, "Hair: Practices and Symbolism in Traditional Muslim Societies," *Sociology of Islam* 5 (2017): 37. The beard was also an important marker of the stages of a man's life. As Thomas Bauer writes, "The states of being bearded marked the two most important periods of transition in a man's life. The growth of a bear signaled the end of youth and the beginning of adulthood. When the beard became grey or white (the Arabic word *shayb* tends to designate whiteness) it was a signal that old age had begun." Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty," 131.

popularized a type of drooping mustache over the beard. Yet facial hair remained a consistent marker of masculinity. To be beardless was to be either a woman, a eunuch, or a beardless male youth (*amrad)*, all of whom were considered lesser than their bearded male counterparts, particularly when it came to access to power.[7]

For example, a story in the *Qabusnama* (Book of Qabus) by Kay Ka'us ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus ibn Vushmgir (d. c. 1090 CE) completed in 1082 CE recounts that the kingly-author purchased a slave, but after an incident in which he gazes upon him (i.e. lusts for him), he decides to free the man and instructs him to only return to his presence after his beard is grown.[8] The anecdote demonstrates the relevance of the beard as a social marker of autonomy that the slave gains through his manumission. It also reveals some of the dynamics of what Domenico Ingenito calls the "aesthetics and erotics of the beard," where a beardless male could be an acceptable object of desire for a bearded man of a certain age.[9] When Qabus ibn Vushmgir feels a lust for the beardless slave that he decides is unbecoming of his own age and status, the ruler negates the temptation by freeing the man and commanding that he grow a beard, thus forcing him to exit the beardless state that allowed him to be a socially acceptable object of desire and assuming the position of a fully enfranchised (male) member of society.

As the primary marker of masculinity, the forced removal of a person's facial hair was an effective, albeit temporary, form of punishment used by individuals and sometimes medieval

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[7] Beards also identified a man as a Muslim, as it was prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad according to hadith. It was equally important that a man's beard be well kept, due to cleanliness, and long beards were considered a sign of stupidity in Arabic literature. Geert Jan van Gelder, "Rebarbative Beards in Classical Arabic Literature," *Al-Masāq*, 30, no. 1 (2018): 56, 58.

[8] Kay Ka'us Ibn Iskandar, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qābūs Nāma*, trans. Reuben Levy (E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1951) 74.

[9] Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021) 64.

Islamic governments to castigate certain crimes, including for perjury, refusing the orders of a king, or engaging in illicit sexual affairs.[10] As Petra Sijpestseijn succinctly summarizes the impact of this retribution: "In short, shaving off the beard as a punishment served three potent ends: to make the offender immediately recognisable, to 'unman' him through derogatory associations with the sexually immature or inert; and to infringe upon his private space and personal agency in a shamefully obvious way."[11] Removing a man's beard operated at a symbolic level of emasculation, but also brought the punished into line with men who were visibly unmanly due in part to their lack of a beard, including eunuchs and *mukhannasun*, the latter of which voluntarily removed their own beards through shaving and plucking, thus consciously rejecting masculinity.[12] To have one's beard removed went beyond just signaling to the public that a man was a criminal deserving of humiliation (which potentially brought them further verbal abuses and social ostracization) but associated them with men who operated outside of normative gender roles.

Head hair, regardless of gender, is far more variable, shifting in length and style across the centuries. For example, in the early Islamic period, the Prophet Muhammad and some of his male and female companions had shoulder-length hair plaits, and it is said that he disapproved of asymmetrical haircuts.[13] In general, however, there do not seem to have been consistent

[10] Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 13-14; Petra M. Sijpesteijn, "Beards, Braids and Moustachios: Exploring the Social Meaning of Hair in the Mediaeval Muslim World," *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 8; Everett K. Rowson, "Reveal or Conceal: Public Humiliation and Banishment as Punishments in Early Islamic Times," in *Public Violence in Islamic Societies: Power, Discipline, and the Construction of the Public Sphere, 7th-19th Centuries CE*, ed. Christian Lange and Maribel Fierro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 120.

[11] Sijpesteijn, "Beards, Braids and Moustachios," 17.

[12] Hirsch, "Hair," 37-8; Sijpesteijn, "Beards, Braids and Moustachios," 17; Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 11-12.

[13] Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants," 27.

proscriptions on length of hair, except for the Quranic advisement that *hajj* pilgrims shave their heads at the end of the journey.[14] In keeping in line with a modest and respectful appearance, The Prophet Muhammad advised that believers should keep their hair neat and combed.[15]

The mélange of cultures that came to influence Islam and the Persianate world specifically also impacted head hair norms. As will be discussed further below, men's hair was largely covered by headgear due largely to ideas around modesty, propriety, and conveying social affiliations, but when a bare head is visible in paintings, we can see some of these shifts.[16] Paintings from fourteenth-century Iran that depict a clear Mongol influence often depict men with shoulder length or longer hair, which is sometimes styled into curls at the shoulders, but in the fifteenth century, under the Timurids, short hair became the preferred style for men. This continued into the late sixteenth century when styles again shifted and long side curls (*zulf*) gained popularity among young men and women. As we will see in the next chapter, however, certain men, like the Prophet Yusuf, were depicted with long hair as a symbol of beauty, thus showing that exceptions existed in every era.

Women's hair, like that of men, shifted in style over time but was for the most part, was consistently longer than men's hair, providing a gendered point of contrast. Like men, women were also kept their heads covered in public as a sign of modesty, though the specific justifications for this could extend into the realm of gendered bias, for example belief that women's hair was a sign of their sexual threat to men.[17] As will be discussed in greater detail in

[14] Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 3.

[15] Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants," 27.

[16] Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 14-5.

[17] Hadas Hirsch argues that the patriarchal need to control hair is due to its role as a symbol of sexuality. Hirsch, "Hair," 39; Pfluger-Schindlbeck, 77. The seductiveness of women's hair was also a prominent idea in early

Chapter Three, the head was considered part of a woman's *awrat*, or the parts of her body that should be kept covered.[18] The realities and styles of covering the head, of course, varied over time, and artists' rendering of women seem to record these shifts. As a general rule, class played a role in style and degree of hair exposure. Women of lower classes and attendants such as nurses are typically shown with opaque hijabs that encircle the face, with little hair exposed, while royal women may or may not be shown with head coverings, depending on the period, and thus had more visible hair in paintings. In public spaces, all women are typically depicted wearing a chador and sometimes a face veil, adopting a more modest appearance.[19]

The headgear and hairstyles of royal women, and thus the degrees of exposed hair, demonstrates even greater variety than that of men over the centuries. Early paintings, such as those in the Great Mongol Shahnama, show that they favored sheer veils that wrapped around their faces, while in the following century the veils were opaque and could be quite long, descending to the floor. From the fifteenth century women of the court seemed to favor a shared hairstyle, consisting of visible hair coiled into black flaps descending along the sides of their faces and secured by bands of gold or pearls that run under the chin, with an opaque head scarf

Christian writing. See Thérèse (Tineke) Rooijakkers, "The Luscious Locks of Lust: Hair and the Construction of Gender in Egypt from Clement to the Fāṭimids," *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 29.

[18] Men also possessed *'awrat*, though theirs was more limited, covering the area between the navel and knee for men. For women, *'awrat* could include the whole body except for the face and hands. Birgit Krawietz, "Body, in law," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, eds. K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas and D. J. Stewart (Leiden: Brill, 2012), accessed 1 December 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23722; Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants," 36; Fuad I. Khuri, *The Body in Islamic Culture* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 41; Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 172.

[19] Known as a *picheh*, this type of face mask was woven of horsehair and intended to the cover the eyes but in paintings is typically shown flipped up onto the forehead. On the *picheh*, see Jennifer Scarce, *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 139.

fastened to the backs of their heads.[20] This style was popular until the sixteenth century, when hair became less visible due to a new type of short, layered opaque headscarf. By the following century, however, this headscarf was no longer in style and was replaced by a type of pointed diadem, with much more of a woman's hair visible.[21] Erotic paintings, which became more prevalent in this period, also depict women with more exposed, sometimes entirely uncovered, hair. What remained consistent is that artists communicated the female identity of a character through her headgear and sometimes also through her hairstyle or length, which was generally more elaborate or longer than that of her male counterparts. The specifics of the visual representations of gender through hair will be explored through the subsequent three case studies of figures who cross-dress.

The Emasculated "Spinster": Bahram Chubina's Punishment

The importance of the beard as a marker of masculinity is clear in the paintings that accompany a story of forced cross dress that appears in the latter third of the *Shahnama*, in the cycle of Hurmuzd, the historical Sasanian king Hurmuzd IV (r. 579-90 CE). Characterized as an evil ruler, Hurmuzd comes into conflict with one of his generals, Bahram Chubina, for the latter's mistreatment of an enemy emperor and for hoarding some of the emperor's treasure for

[20] Whether the black flaps are a type of cap or hair styled into flattened loops is not immediately clear. Sheila Blair identifies this as a cap while Jennifer Scarce describes it as hair. I believe that by at least the end of the fifteenth century it is a hairstyle rather than a form of cap (see for example, British Library, Add MS 25900, fol. 41r). Sheila Blair, "A Romantic Interlude: The Wedding Celebrations from a Manuscript with Three Poems by Khwaju Kirmani," in *Text and Image in Medieval Persian Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 195 and Scarce, *Women's Costume*, 141.

[21] Different forms of headgear that signaled different ethnicities, such as Georgians, also became more apparent and revealed more of the hair, which was perhaps less of a concern given that these women were not Muslim.

himself rather than sending it on to Hurmuzd, as was his due. In response to these acts, the shah sends the general gifts that he deems fitting of his shameful behavior:

چو بنهاد بر نامه بر مهر شاه　　بفرمود تا دوکدانی سیاه

بیارند با دوک و پنبه در اوی　　نهاده بسی ناسزا رنگ و بوی!

هم از شعر پیراهن لاژورد　　یکی سرخ شلوار و مقناع زرد[22]

When the Shah had sealed the letter　　He ordered a black spindle case

Brought with spindle and cotton to him　　All appearing inferior

All [made] from hair: a blue shirt,　　Red trousers and a yellow headscarf[23]

Hurmuzd picks a messenger of ignoble character to deliver the "gift." Upon their arrival, Bahram Chubina dons the clothing and lays out the implements before himself, then inviting the king's nobles to enter and view him in this state. He asks what to make of the king's message and gift, to which the Persians reply that they will no longer serve the Shah or consider Bahram as his commander. Dick Davis notes that this act of punishment actually has the opposite of Hurmuzd's intended effect, setting in motion a series of events that encourage Bahram Chubina to make a serious bid for the throne.[24]

[22] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 7*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 580-581.

[23] Translation my own. Thank you to Shadi Shafiei for reviewing my work and Cameron Cross for helping to parse خلعت ناسزا.

[24] Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnama* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 1999), 81.

An Unworthy Robe: A Punishing Gift

In several instances, the clothing sent to Bahram Chubina is described by Firdawsi as خلعت ناسزا (*khil'at-i nasaza*), or an "unworthy robe." Here is an allusion to the practice of *khil'a* ceremonies. Throughout the Islamic world, gifting played a vital role in establishing political authority and securing diplomatic bounds, most notably through gifting a robe of honor (*khil'a*, plural *khila'*).[25] Investiture through robes was a well-established practice by the time of Islam's rise on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, with textual records documenting its earlier use in Central Asia and the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires.[26] Such robes were often made of luxurious materials such as silk and gold, thus giving them great monetary value. Robes of honor were also often accompanied by other luxury gifts, such as horses, slaves and jewelry. More valuable, however, was their symbolic importance, particularly for the gifter. The gift of a robe of honor through a *khil'a* ceremony marked a bestowal of favor upon on the recipient but also, through the gift's acceptance, signaled the allegiance of the recipient to the gifter.

This exchange was, however, not always used as a positive form of establishing a relationship between a superior and subordinate. In some instances, the mechanisms of the exchange were used to enact punishment on a rebellious or displeasing subject or envoy. For

[25] For an expansive study of gift giving, see Linda Komaroff, *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Court* (Los Angeles and New Haven: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2011). For more on *khil'a*, see Stewart Gordon, ed. *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) and Norman A. Stillmann, "Khilʿa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Accessed 22 May 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0507.

[26] Gavin R.G. Hambly, "From Baghdad to Bukhara, From Ghazna to Delhi: The *Khil'a* Ceremony in the Transmission of Kingly Pomp and Circumstance," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 193-222; Willem Floor, "*KEL ʿAT*," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, accessed 12 December 2023, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kelat-gifts. For more on the Sasanian practice of robing, see Jenny Rose, "Sasanian Splendor: The Appurtenances of Royalty," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 35-56.

example, in 1618 the Transylvanian ambassador to the Ottoman court, Thomas Borsos, complained of receiving robes of honor made from inferior velvet, a sign of the court's discontent with the diplomatic mission.[27] As a symbol of submission to the gifter, the robe of honor could hold negative consequences for the recipient if the gift was unwelcome. If one did not want to submit and rejected the gift, there was the threat of retribution, including execution.[28] Donning a robe of honor was a sign of humility but could also be a sign of humiliation, depending on the circumstances of the exchange, as demonstrated in the instance of Bahram Chubina and Firdawsi's use of the term "unworthy robe." Within the context of traditional robes of honor, the irony of Hurmuzd's gift is rich.

Hurmuzd's contempt for Bahram Chubina is signaled on several other layers of the gift. To begin, the gifts are described as inferior, or more literally "of an unworthy color and smell" (بسی ناسزا رنگ و بوی). Instead of sending luxury goods, such as a horse or weaponry befitting of Bahram Chubina's warrior station, Hurmuzd sends goods for spinning, an activity conducted by women, particularly of the lower classes.[29] Rather than made of silk, the clothes are made of hair, an itchy and poor material typically utilized by the lower classes or the pious as an act of reverence. While Firdawsi does not specify that the shirts and trousers are women's clothing, it may be inferred based on the inclusion of the head scarf (مقناع), which is a specific headdress

[27] Louise Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th-21st Century* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2015), 280-1.

[28] Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 280-1.

[29] Amongst ancient Near Eastern cultures, weapons were traditionally a symbol of masculinity and weaving implements associated with femininity. As such, these tools could be reversed to undermine or transform the gender of a person, much as is done here. See Sophus Helle, "Weapons and weaving instruments as symbols of gender in the ancient Near East," in *Fashioned Selves: Dress and Identity in Antiquity*, ed. Megan Cifarelli (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), 108. The association of spindles and wool with women's labor is notably cross-cultural. For example, during the Third Crusade (1189-1192), those men who refused to join the Christian European cause to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims were given distaffs and wool, implying they were womanly. Kassia St. Clair, *The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 131.

associated with women. Indeed, this is one of the key distinguishing factors of Bahram Chubina's dress being so unsettling, as will be discussed further below. The color of the clothing perhaps held gendered and class-based significance, however, this requires more detailed research into color symbolism in Firdawsi's own time and the centuries in which the scene was depicted, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.[30] The exact configuration of the clothing, as lacking a robe and consisting of shorter garments, more typically worn as undergarments, may have added another layer of disgrace.[31] Together with the spinning implements, the clothing is intended to undermine Bahram Chubina's masculinity and class, as a member of the paladins, through forced cross-dressing. What is clear from the text is that, by wearing the "unworthy robe" Bahram Chubina submits to Hurmuzd's authority and engages in an act of self- abasement and emasculation.

[30] Gendered associations attached to color in the early Islamic period may have worked their way into Firdawsi's text. The three colors specified for the clothing – blue, red, and yellow – were the three least desirable colors for male clothing. According to hadith, the Prophet Muhammad prohibited men from wearing some shades of red. Blue held negative associations for its connection with foreignness, mourning, and Christianity (at various times, Christians were commanded to wear blue to distinguish themselves), and during the *Jahiliya*, prostitutes indicated their practice by flying a blue flag. In hadith, the Prophet is said to have banned men from wearing yellow, and, like blue, Jews were commanded to wear a patch of the color to distinguish themselves from Muslims, thus establishing it is a color of marginality. In 13th- and 14th-century sources, the color was also associated with concubines and female dancers, and it was also said to be worn by *mukhannasun*. Yellow was thus associated with non-masculine gender positions, and best avoided by men. Whether these color connotations were relevant in Firdawsi's time is unclear, though it does seem that the specificity of the colors mentioned likely held some cultural importance. More importantly, however, artists rarely followed the textual description and instead used a range of colors and patterns to depict Bahram Chubina's clothing. Hadas Hirsch, "Clothing and Colours in Early Islam," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 15.1 (2020): 106-7, 108; Stewart "If the Cap Fits," 138, fn. 9; Julie Meisami "'I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues:' Depictions of Majnun in Persian Illustrated Manuscripts," in *Diverse Are Their Hues: Color in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 121-151; Robert Hillenbrand, *The Great Mongol Shahnama* (London, Washington D.C., and New Haven: Hali Publications Ltd., Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art and Yale University Press, 2022) 308 and 319.

[31] It is typical in other scenes in which men are being punished that they are depicted shirtless and only in white trousers. Shorter garments are also typically shown worn by members of the lower classes, such as laborers.

Donning the Veil of Shame: Depicting Bahram Chubina's Punishment

Paintings of this scene all depict the same moment in the story when Bahram Chubina has donned the clothes and is observed by other male courtiers. The compositions are consistent, with Bahram Chubina seated and observed by the surrounding men. Spinning tools, including a wheel, cotton (spun and unspun), and a group of distaffs are usually shown near him. In some instances, Bahram Chubina is shown in the act of spinning itself (figs. 1.1-1.5). Most importantly, he is typically shown dressed in a wide sleeve robe with a head scarf that wraps around his face and over his shoulders, with his large beard prominently visible (in one case, just his mustache).[32] A key exception to this standard format, which I will return to later, depicts Bahram Chubina with only a spinning wheel and not wearing women's dress.

Artists' interpretations of the scene provide an important visual gloss on the story that highlights a detail not emphasized in the text, namely Bahram Chubina's incongruous appearance as a bearded adult man wearing a woman's head scarf. The uncanny conjunction of these two distinct gender markers punctuates the punishment and humiliation that the general is undergoing, a point to which I will return shortly. Both the story and visual interpretations of the story of Bahram Chubina do not take his punishment so far as to remove his beard. Indeed, the prominence of Bahram Chubina's beard is crucial for reaffirming his true gender identity and thus right to return to power as a general later in the *Shahnama*. Instead, the artists emphasize the peculiarity of the situation, particularly in comparison with the men who surround him. In

[32] In one 15th-century painting (fig. 1.5), Bahram Chubina is shown with just a mustache and goatee. This was also an acceptable form of male facial hair styling in certain periods, but it may also represent the artist's intervention to further undercut Bahram Chubina's manliness by lessening his facial hair. Unfortunately, this folio is detached from its original manuscript, so it is unclear if Bahram Chubina is consistently shown with this facial hairstyle or if the artist intentionally diminished it.

contrast to Bahram Chubina's head scarf, the men are all depicted with exclusively male-associated headgear, namely turbans, helmets, and Mongol-style hats (figs. 1.6-1.7).[33] Hat removal, like beard shaving, was another potent form of public humiliation that stripped a man of part of his identity and exposed him to public condonement.[34]

Bahram Chubina's punishment, however, extends beyond only having his normal headwear removed. Instead, he is forced to don women's headgear, thus indicating that Hurmuzd's gifts were intended as a form of forced cross dress. This is the only instance of an overtly male character in the *Shahnama* wearing a head scarf, although they do appear in other epics. In the 14th-century illustrated unicum *Samak-i 'Ayyar*, the titular hero appears several times in women's dress to trick people, and this is illustrated with the hero wearing a white chador and face veil, which conveniently conceal his beard, unlike in the depictions of Bahram Chubina. Samak, however, cross dresses to achieve his goals and not as punishment, thus reframing his action as one of clever trickery rather than humiliating emasculation. Here, the incongruity of Bahram Chubina's appearance and the emphasis on his beard highlights the emasculating nature of Hurmuzd's present and the afront it presents to the general's masculinity.

The relevance of depicting a humiliated character this way helps to clarify the only other instance of a bearded man in hijab that I have found, in a 15th-century copy of the *Khavarannama* (fig. 1.8). In one of the manuscript's paintings, the trickster hero 'Amr-i Umayya, a companion of the Prophet's son-in-law 'Ali, is shown sneaking into the bedroom of the king of the East and binding him to humiliate him. The text describes that 'Amr shaves the

[33] While Mongol headgear is frequently discussed in textual accounts, the exact appearance of such hats is not provided. In 1939 Eric Schroeder created a compendium of line drawings of Mongol headgear in 14th-century manuscript painting but the various identities that might be associated with each has not been analyzed. Stewart, "If the Cap Fits," 143-4.; Schroeder, "Ahmad Musa," 120-1.

[34] Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 15.

faces of the sleeping guards and makes their faces look horrendous with tar.[35] The artist, however, decided not to depict the act of shaving and most of the guards are still shown with facial hair. Instead, the artist glosses the text with their own interpretation of the scene and renders one of the guards, at right, with a white hijab. His still intact facial hair and style of hijab are identical to that of a contemporaneous painting of Bahram Chubina in hijab (fig. 1.4).

Two acts of emasculation, enforced hijab wearing and beard shaving, are interposed in the *Khavarannama* painting, giving insight into how these humiliating acts might have been visual equivalents for one another. While the text describes that 'Amr shaved the guards' beards, the artist instead chooses to convey a different act that conveys the same message of emasculation. Why the artist chose to depict the guard in hijab rather than shaved is unclear but the intended impact, to show a man humiliated through a challenge on his masculinity, is apparent once the two paintings are brought into comparison with one another. For an adult male to forcibly don a hijab was demeaning, perhaps as much as having their beard forcibly removed.

Women's Work

Adding further insult to injury, Hurmuzd's gift also questions Bahram Chubina's class, namely as a paladin warrior. Rather than sending him goods befitting of a warrior, such as a horse or sword, Hurmuzd instead sends along spinning tools and cotton, implements associated with lower class female labor. The inclusion of cotton, rather than silk, implies that Bahram Chubina would not even be spinning thread for a fine textile. Furthermore, the reference to

[35] Thanks to Shadi Shafiei for reviewing my translation of this text. This is not the only instance in which 'Amr is described as having shaved men's beards to humiliate them and this act is captured in another painting in the same manuscript. See Chester Beatty Library, Per 293.6.

spinning connects to another story of a rebellion found in the *Shahnama*, that of a poor man named Haftvad, his daughters, and the giant worm.[36] In this tale, Haftvad's daughter cares for a worm she finds while eating an apple and in turn, the worm brings her good fortune, allowing her to spin large amounts of cotton that brings the family wealth and respect. Haftvad transforms his wealth into political power and establishes a fortress and army. His rise in power is seen as a threat by Ardashir, who goes to the kingdom and disguised as a merchant, slays the worm and Haftvad. The story reinforces themes found elsewhere in the *Shahnama*, including rightful leadership through blood lineage and the just order of society underneath a divinely endowed ruler.[37] Cotton spinning and a person rising above their station connects the stories of Haftvad and Bahram Chubina and serves as a warning to the latter if he continues his arrogant behavior.

The centrality of spinning to this story (one of the only tales in the *Shahnama* to focus on this theme) and its proximity to the tale of Bahram Chubina (it also occurs in the last third of the *Shahnama*) would have made for an easy connection for any listener or reader. In two manuscripts, there is also a visual connection between these scenes. One of the small *Shahnama*s and two Injuid *Shahnama*s dated to 1330 CE and 1341 CE contain illustrations of Haftvad's daughters spinning (figs. 1.9-1.11) appears shortly before the image of Bahram Chubina's punishment. All six paintings feature a prominent spinning wheel, an item rarely featured in *Shahnama* illustrations, which provides an easy visual connection between the two scenes.[38] Bahram Chubina is thus brought into pictorial and narrative alignment with these lower-class

[36] Firdawsi, *Shahnameh,* trans. Davis, 652-661.

[37] Kinga Ilona Márkus-Takeshita, "From Iranian Myth to Folk Narrative: The Legend of the Dragon-Slayer and the Spinning Maiden in the Persian Book of the Kings," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60 (2001): 207.

[38] The manuscript is now dismantled but Shreve Simpson has reconstructed it. See Marianna Shreve Simpson, *The Illustration of an Epic: The Earliest* Shahnama *Manuscripts* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), Appendix 4.

women, further undermining his manliness and warrior status. The disjunction between Bahram Chubina's (temporary) feminized lower social position and his former masculine warrior status is particularly highlighted in the 1330 CE rendition (fig. 1.1), where several warriors brandishing swords and wearing armor are positioned behind Bahram Chubina, who is busily occupied with spinning the cotton. They are a reminder of what Bahram Chubina should be, and the degree to which he has fallen.

An Uncanny Conjunction

The many layers of Hurmuzd's insult are thus both gendered and class-based, features that are highlighted by the paintings of Bahram Chubina, which are arresting for their depiction of a bearded adult male with a female head scarf, a rarely seen conjunction of two distinct markers of gender. It is a visual innovation specific to the story, one that appears in the earliest surviving *Shahnama*s and continued as a trope specific to this story for several centuries and likely served the source of inspiration for the *Khavarannama* painting. What should we make of this striking pairing of gender markers? Might Bahram Chubina's appearance in this manner signal his gender queerness, or non-alignment with a binaristic understanding of gender? Or does the pairing of these two markers rely on the binary for their legibility? And how might the image have been received?

To answer the first question, we can look to a point of visual comparison in medieval Christian painting, in depictions of St. Esmarade, a person who was born female but lived disguised as a male eunuch in a monastery for most of their life. In her study of several manuscript paintings of the saint in the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*, Vanessa Wright examines the

degree to which the figure's gender queerness, which is signaled in the text through the juxtaposition of their given female name (Eufrosine) and grammatically feminine "sainte" with the masculine role as a monk, is represented.[39] One example provides an intriguing point of comparison for the painting of Bahram Chubina. Produced in the mid-fourteenth century by the so-called Maubeuge Master, the painting depicts St. Esmarade in a black habit of a monk but their hair is not tonsured and instead is shown long or else covered with a headscarf, similar to that of other female figures' depictions elsewhere in the manuscript.[40] Wright argues that while St. Esmarade's dress signals their association with the male monastic order, their hair/ head covering aligns them with femaleness and their assigned-at-birth gender, thus reinforcing their gender queerness through the combination of gender signifiers.[41] Here, the visual amalgamation evokes Esmarade's in-betweenness and non-alignment with a strictly male or female identity.

Bahram Chubina's full beard and female headscarf runs parallel to the representation of Esmarade's male dress and female hair/ headscarf in terms of blending of gendered markers. And yet, the narratives create exceptionally different contexts for the ways in which each image can be received. In the case of the latter, the saint chose to live under the guise of being a eunuch in an exclusively male environment and thus marks a sustained engagement with a life outside of their time's existing social rules around gender. In contrast, Bahram Chubina only temporarily crosses his society's gender lines as an act of repentance and submission, rather than a conscious choice of gender non-conformity. The gender markers operate differently, with the headscarf as a

[39] Vanessa Wright, "Illuminating Queer Gender Identity in the Manuscripts of the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, eds. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 163.

[40] Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5204, fol. 87v.

[41] Wright, "Illuminating Queer Gender Identity," 165.

symbol of shame and the beard as symbol of redemption, prominently featured in nearly all the paintings. The latter signals his status as an adult male and his ability return to this place by removing the unworthy robes and putting aside the spinning wheel. Bahram Chubina's punishment is temporary (unlike with beard shaving, there is no waiting period) and in short order the warrior can return to his manly status. Indeed, in the very next scene in the *Shahnama*, Bahram Chubina enters a castle and finds himself enthroned alongside a mysterious woman, thus reigniting his desire to be a ruler. Where clothing fails to make the man and can instead undercut their masculinity, the visual emphasis on Bahram Chubina's beard is an indication of his true gender identity.

This not to say that gender queerness of a kind is not at work in this painting. Rather, the narrative context of the story of Bahram Chubina compared with that of Esmarade heightens the distinct approaches to gender in each and alters the way that we read for the identity marker in these paintings. The difference serves as a clear reminder of the vital importance of context for interpreting the iconography of gender. While Bahram Chubina cannot be read as a gender queer figure in the same manner as the French saint, both paintings share a break with gendered visual tropes and require a more thorough examination of the identity of the represented individuals. The images are meant to give the viewer pause and consider how visual tropes are defamiliarized and used to new ends.

Bahram Chubina's depiction is both familiar and unfamiliar in its approach to that most fundamental aspect of identity, gender. Taken on their own, the elements that constitute his appearance are legible (beard = masculine, headscarf = feminine) but when brought together they form an unexpected amalgamation of gender identity. The markers are defamiliarized and unsettled from their initial coherence. How are we to receive a bearded man wearing a woman's

headscarf? Drawing on the work of Sigmund Freud, several scholars have called such defamiliarization of gender the queer uncanny.[42] Freud described the uncanny as that which defamiliarizes the familiar and creates uncertainty and fear in a person, including amongst his examples dolls, things that are hidden and come to light, and castration.[43] The relevance of Freud's idea to queer theory is summarized by Olu Jenzen as follows:

> Within queer criticism the naturalness of gender, sexuality and heteronormative kinship is shown to be a constructed (and hegemonic) paradigm. The uncanny as an instrument of 'defamiliarization' thus relates to the critical tools of the deconstructive thread of queer theory on that it destabilizes the notion of the known and the knowable, undermining the position of the home as a stable and 'safe' cultural space and its symbolic function within a heteronormative economy.[44]

Moments of uncanniness serve as reminders of the instability and permeability of gender.

Drawing on Freud, we can also see that it is not only the women's clothing and labor that destabilizes Bahram Chubina's masculine gender identity but the looming specter of castration.[45] Indeed, the general is metaphorically castrated by being forced to don a woman's headscarf and do women's labor, and there is a fear that such a circumstance might become more permanent. Bahram Chubina's humiliation thus draws on not only on feminine tropes but also those of the castrated male, or eunuch, and even the *mukhannas*. Thus, the gender transgression presented by Bahram Chubina's forced cross-dress is not a simple move within the confines of a binary, from

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[42] Paulina Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 4, 7-8; Olu Jenzen, "The Queer Uncanny," *eSharp* no. 9 (2007): 1-16.

[43] Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature* (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 339, 344-5, and 354.

[44] Jenzen, "The Queer Uncanny," 6.

[45] Freud, *Art and Literature*, 354.

the position of male to female but rather a shift from male to non-male, which encompasses several different gender positionalities, all of which are culturally diminished in relation to the general's original masculine identity.

By engaging with familiarity and unfamiliarity, the uncanny is constructed through society and what is considered "normal." In this way the uncanny is not limited to the individual but is reflective of broader cultural standards. As Nicholas Royle writes, "It may be that the uncanny is a feeling that happens only to oneself, within oneself, but it is never one's 'own': its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world 'itself.'"[46] The public nature of Bahram Chubina's cross dress, both at the narrative level of taking place in court and at the level of reception as a tale that was heard and paintings that were viewed, is a vital condition of his humiliation. The impact of Bahram Chubina's uncanny appearance is nothing short of revolutionary. The Persians that see him abandon the traditional social order established throughout the *Shahnama* and terminate their allegiance to the shah Hurmuzd, leading to a chaotic struggle for power. Meanwhile, for a male audience of the story and the paintings, it is easy to imagine Bahram Chubina's appearance, though temporary, would have been unsettling and perhaps even monstrous in that it signals his exclusion from the normative bounds of society and a potential long-term threat to his manliness.[47]

An acute awareness of this uncomfortable diminishment of and threat to Bahram Chubina's masculinity is perhaps what compelled the artist of a 1648 CE painting of the scene to altogether avoid the trope of the bearded male in women's dress (fig. 1.12). Instead of showing the rebellious warrior in a hijab as in previous iterations, the artist, who is believed to be

[46] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2.

[47] Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2.

Muhammad Yusuf, shows him in the garb of a king, replete with gold faceted crown and a shaved head and bushy mustache. Only the spinning wheel remains as a symbol of the gift from Hurmuzd but Bahram Chubina is not shown spinning. And while the manuscript does include a painting related to the story of Haftvad, it only shows his and his son's execution by hanging, without any reference to his daughters, their spinning, or the magic worm. The prior visual association between the two stories via the spinning wheel seen in the earlier manuscripts is abandoned here.

Bahram Chubina's appearance in this iteration is reminiscent of that of Shah 'Abbas, as can be seen in manuscripts such as a 1605 CE *Shahnama* now in the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. In her study of this latter manuscript, Kishwar Rizvi writes that while early Safavid paintings provided suggestive portraits of rulers, starting in the early seventeenth century portraits became more specific and identifiable with particular personages, such as Shah 'Abbas. His visage permeated painting and "[i]n subsequent Safavid manuscripts, many completed after Shah 'Abbas's death in 1629, his face, too—with its shaved beard and dropping mustache—would become an ideal type and disseminated in diverse contexts."[48] This perhaps provides an explanation for Muhammad Yusuf's break with both the text and standard representation of Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothing.

While Shah 'Abbas I's appearance became a trope, it may not have been entirely divorced from the memory of the shah and the artist may have sought to preserve Bahram Chubina's masculine identity and avoid humiliating the warrior who takes on the visage of Shah 'Abbas, lest his rendering of the warrior in women's dress be misconstrued as an affront to the

[48] Kishwar Rizvi, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas: Prayer and Likeness in a Safavid 'Shahnama,'" *The Art Bulletin* 94.2 (2012): 245.

late ruler. The manuscript's patron, Qarajaghay Khan, was the governor of Khurasan and his grandfather of the same name was a prominent member of Shah 'Abbas I's court.[49] It is unlikely that the younger Qarajaghay Khan would have appreciated a feminized doppelganger of the late ruler. The alteration of the painting undercuts the emotional tenor of the scene, but also captures the anxieties around gender and the boundaries that artists faced once they moved towards more realistic depictions of known persons.

The story of Bahram Chubina and the "robe of disrespect," and the visual interpretations it inspired, reflect patriarchal attitudes towards women and the gendered hierarchy of social and political power. Being forced into the position of a non-male was a punishment demeaning to the adult male. And yet, as the artists make very clear through his prominent beard, Bahram Chubina's punishment is temporary. While his dress distinguishes him from the men around him, his beard signals that he can return into the social fold with the simple removal of the women's headdress. This story demonstrates how the clothes do not always make the man, but beards do. In this case, Bahram Chubina is fooling no one with his cross dress and is saved from being received as an actual non-male by his facial hair. Though this story is clearly driven by patriarchal gender standards, the next example demonstrates that not all women in the Persian epic were so harshly received for their gender. It also demonstrates another instance in which facial hair is used to shore up the masculinity of a prominent character, reaffirming its importance as a gender marker.

[49] B.W. Robinson, Eleanor Sims, and Manijeh Bayani, *The Windsor Shahnama of 1648* (London: Azimuth Editions for the Roxburghe Club, 2007) 19.

Streaming Hair and Shining Face: Gender Conceal and Reveal of Gurdafarid and Suhrab

Though men feature more prominently in the *Shahnama* than women, the two genders share in their participation in cross dress. One of the best-known instances of gender conceal and reveal in the *Shahnama* occurs in the cycle related to Rustam's ill-fated son, Suhrab, and his failed rebellion against Kavus, the Iranian king that Rustam serves. As part of this uprising Suhrab attacks the White Fortress, an Iranian frontier outpost, and easily defeats its hero, Hajir, bringing great shame on the Iranians trapped inside, including a young woman named Gurdafarid. Enraged by this dishonor, Gurdafarid takes it upon herself to meet Suhrab in battle. She disguises her identity by donning chain mail and Roman helmet, tucking in her hair.[50]

نهان کرد گیشو به زیر زره　　بزد بر سر ترگ رومی گره

فرود آمد از دز بکردار شیر　　کمر بر میان بادپایی به زیر[51]

She concealed her tresses underneath her mail　　Secured her Roman casque upon her head

And came down, like a lion, from the hold　　With girded waist upon a wind-foot steed[52]

[50] Patryk Skupniewicz and Katarzyna Maksymiuk argue that Gurdafarid's Roman helmet connects her with the story the Amazon Penthesilea, who is slain by Achilles who in turn falls in love with her beauty. They suggest that Firdawsi was aware of this story and borrowed its framework, which also involves the discovery of the female warrior's gender through the removal of her helmet, for his telling of the battle between Gurdafarid and Suhrab. Patryk Skupniewicz and Katarzyna Maksymiuk, "Gordāfarid, Penthesilea and Athena: the identification of a Greek motif in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* and its possible association with Hellenistic art in the East," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 34, no. 2 (2019): 125-6, 128.

[51] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 2*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 132.

[52] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama of Firdausi*: *Volume 2*, trans. Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner (London: Kegan Parul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1906), 132.

The two spar, with Gurdafarid rising to meet Suhrab in both skill and strength. She, however, falters, and the narrative shifts from battle scene to romance when Suhrab snatches off Gurdafarid's helmet, revealing her hair, a face shining like the sun, and her true gender.

چو آمد خروشان به تنگ اندرش　　بپیچید و برداشت خود از سرش
رها شد ز بند زره موی او　　درفشان چو خورشید شد روی او
بدانست سهراب کو دخترست　　سر و موی او ازدر افسرست[53]

With loud cries, [Suhrab] jostled her,　　Turned and snatched her helm.
Her hair escaped from the constraint of her helmet　　Her face shone like the sun.
He realized: It is a girl,　　her head of hair is worthy of a crown.[54]

Although stunned to discover his opponent is a girl (دختر), the now smitten Suhrab lassoes Gurdafarid and she is only able to escape his clutches with a little trickery. She suggests Suhrab may be shamed in front of his army if they see she is a woman and promises to hand over the fortress if Suhrab allows her to return inside. He grants this and she returns to the castle but immediately reneges on her promise and taunts him from the walls, saying he will not conquer her. After razing the surrounding town in rage, Suhrab retreats for the day with a vow to return

[53] Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 2*, ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh, 133-4.

[54] Modified translation based on Firdawsi, *The Shahnama of Firdausi*: *Volume 2*, trans. Warner and Warner, 133.

the next, but under the cover of night, Gurdafarid and the castle inhabitants escape, leaving only an empty outpost for Suhrab and his army to conquer.

A Manly Spirit?

Gurdafarid's cross dress serves several important functions that break with the narrative norms of the *Shahnama*. To begin, it recasts the act of battle in erotic terms. Once Gurdafarid's helmet is removed, her face, hair, and gender are revealed, and Suhrab is not only stunned but smitten with his rival. The act of exposure, particularly of the woman's hair, clearly lends to the eroticism of the scene. But so too does the act of cross dress, a move that provides anonymity and new social license on Gurdafarid's part, allowing her to physically spar with the youth.[55] In a less tragic version of the story, their jousting could foreshadow a future romantic relationship, for example as it did in the battle of Humay and Humayun by Khwaju Kirmani (1260-1349? CE).[56] Gender concealment allows for a type of engagement that the two youths otherwise would not have had access to with one another, thus introducing sexual potential into an otherwise standard battle scene.

It also raises important questions about the perceived separation between genders, particularly regarding skills and behaviors. On the one hand, within the context of a patriarchal society, Gurdafarid's cross dress can be read not just as an act of concealment but also

[55] For more on cross dress as social license see Judith M. Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien: Women Dresses as Men in Late Medieval London," *History Workshop Journal* no. 17 (2014): 10.

[56] For a summary of the story, see Nahid Norozi, "The Verse Romance *Homāy o Homāyūn* of Ḫwajū Kermānī: A 'Love and Adventure Story' or an Allegory of a Spiritual Quest?" *Eurasian Studies* 17 (2019): 29-33. An illustrated version of this story from 1396 CE/ 798 AH survives in the British Library, BL Add. 18113. For more on this manuscript, see Blair, *Text and Image*, chapter 5.

masculinization that improves her being. Such was the perception of female cross dress in Europe where female-to-male cross dress was considered less reprehensible than a male in women's dress because to desire to be male was perceived as a form of "self-improvement" through which a woman could be become "more perfectly human."[57] Valerie Hotchkiss notes that for women such as Jeanne d'Arc and the legend of Pope Joan, "…the empowering force of male disguise reveals the limitations in medieval inscriptions of female identity since success—which is often attributed to the 'manly spirt' of the heroine—is contingent upon suppression of femaleness."[58] Through this lens, Gurdafarid's sartorial change and hiding of her hair not only masks but suppresses her femaleness and reinscribes her talents, such as her battle prowess, as exclusively masculine. This manner of interpreting female-to-male cross dress in a battle context, however, may have had less applicability in the Islamicate world, where women such as the Prophet Muhammad's widow Aisha who rode into battle not in male disguise, circulated in the popular imagination.[59] Such an example demonstrates female battle prowess and does not require the masculinization of the subject.

Gurdafarid's disguise can instead be interpreted as a more critical challenge of gendered assumptions. Rather than conveying a desire to take on a manly spirit, cross dress creates the conditions under which Gurdafarid can demonstrate her skill and, in doing so, suggests that battle prowess, intelligence, and chivalric behavior known in Persian as *javanmardi* are not the

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[57] Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic, and Alien," 5; Vern L. Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Ltd. 1996) 225; and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), 9.

[58] Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 4.

[59] Female battle prowess in an Islamicate context is well demonstrated by the case of the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha in the Battle of the Camel. Paintings of this scene show the widow in a hijab and face veil and riding in a palanquin on a camel. See for example Yale University Museum of Art, 1983.94.1.

exclusive purview of men.[60] To begin, Firdawsi does not use specifically gendered language to describe Gurdafarid. For example, when he recounts Gurdafarid's mental preparedness for battle, he uses two phrases that are often but not exclusively associated with male warriors: "with a girded waist" (*kamar bastan*) and like "a lion" (*shir*).[61] Elsewhere in the epic, he is also more explicit about pointing out gender in relation to a woman's skills. With the female hero and Bahram Chubina's sister Gurdiya, he frequently calls upon male standards of heroism and wisdom.[62] In one instance, when she speaks against the advice of Bahram Chubina's council, she says "I may be a woman, and much younger than my brother, but I give a man's advice."[63] Thus while Gurdiya is praised as chaste (پاکدامن) and wise (خردمند), her skills are specifically framed in gendered terms. In contrast, Firdawsi's presentation of Gurdafarid is more open-ended and does not draw such direct comparisons with gendered tropes.

An exception to this is, of course, when Gurdafarid herself speaks directly to the embarrassment Suhrab might face if his army sees he is struggling to defeat a girl. But here again, Firdawsi draws in an ungendered tactic to propel the narrative. Gurdafarid turns to "wiles and guiles" (*kayd*) to save herself after Suhrab has lassoed her. Such chicanery is a literary trope

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[60] Lloyd Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 2; Amanda Catarina Leong, "'I'd rather be married to someone I can control': Female *Javānmardī* in Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunnamah* as a Mirror for Princesses," *Iranian Studies* 57 (2024): 511-3.

[61] The phrase "tying/ girding one's belt" (بستن کمر) is used frequently throughout the *Shahnama* before a warrior, typically male, rides into battle. However, the phrase could also apply to other genders. Thomas Allsen cites that Hö'elün, the mother of Genghis Khan, was also described as tightening her belt to face a challenge. Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.

[62] Dick Davis argues that Gurdiya acts as a representative of tradition but since she is "a woman in a man's world" represents its decline. Davis, *Epic and Sedition*, 83.

[63] Firdawsi, *Shahnameh,* trans. Davis, 874. In another instance, a group of council members pledged their allegiance to her by saying, "You are more clever than a wise man, more intelligent than a knowledgeable vizier." Firdawsi, *Shahnameh,* trans. Davis, 909. She also proves herself ruthless, killing the warrior Tuvurg on the battlefield and, with the help of five other women, smothering her husband Gustahm in his sleep.

typically associated with women, although not exclusively and particularly not within the context of the *Shahnama*.[64] In his brief study of guile in the epic, Jerome Clinton points out that both men and women rely on trickery, including Rustam, the trickster hero *par excellence*, and that male heroes do not interpret trickery exhibited by women as a trope of all women.[65] The pervasiveness of guile in the story of Suhrab is such that Gurdafarid's duping of the youth foreshadows his fateful naivety, which will later cost him his life when Rustam tricks and then slays him in battle.[66] It is a literary feature that heightens the tragedy of the story, rather than a trope that demonstrates the deceitfulness of one particular gender, as seen in other forms of literature from the Persianate and Islamic world.[67]

To trick Suhrab, Gurdafarid does turn to a gendered trope, however, and uses it against him, when she warns him that he might be embarrassed in front of his men. Gurdafarid plays into the stereotype that women do not make as good of warriors as men and that Suhrab might wind up a laughingstock. Coming on the heels of their ferocious battle, the comment is ironic as Gurdafarid's battle skill nearly matched his, and ultimately, she is in the process of outsmarting the young warrior. Gurdafarid leverages Subrab's fear of criticism to lead him to fall into her trap, allowing her escape. In doing so, she calls attention not only to the ways in which looks can

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[64] Shalom Goldman, "Representations: The Wiles of Women Literature: Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph. Accessed 7 June 2021, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1872-5309_ewic_EWICCOM_0642; For a feminist reinterpretation of the "wiles and guiles" of women see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Reading--and Enjoying--'Wiles of Women' Stories as a Feminist," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 203-222.

[65] Jerome Clinton, "The Uses of Guile in the *Shāhnāmah*," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 223. For more on Rustam as a trickster hero, see Dick Davis, "Rustam-i Dastan," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 231-241.

[66] As Clinton notes, Gurdafarid's trickery is further validated by Rustam's use of it against Suhrab as well. Clinton, "Uses of Guile," 229.

[67] See for example Alexandra Hoffman, "Cats and Dogs, Manliness, and Misogyny: On the *Sindbad-nameh* as World Literature," in *Persian Literature as World Literature*, ed. Mostafa Abedinifard, Omid Azadibougar, and Amirhossein Vafa (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 137-152.

be deceiving through cross dress, but also how gendered assumptions mislead into ultimate failure.

Gurdafarid's talents and intelligence complicate perceived stereotypes around gender, unsettling assumptions about what is inherent to one gender or another. Valerie Hotchkiss points out in her analysis of the story of Zinevra from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1348-1353 CE), that the blending of gendered attributes in a female character, rather than demonstrating a woman's manly spirit, challenges the very notion of the separation of traits by gender or even their assumed inherent nature.[68] As Hotchkiss notes:

> Instead of creating a dual personality—a common trait of disguised figures—Boccaccio conflates male and female attributes to create a character that challenges gender difference. The signifiers of heroism remain masculine, but Boccaccio transfers them to his female protagonist, thereby reconfiguring the woman's cultural identity; by imputing masculine traits to her, he undermines the idea of biologically determined gender status.[69]

In much the same way as Boccaccio, Firdawsi also conflates the male and female attributes in Gurdafarid. Gurdafarid's skillfulness, though described and received in relation to masculinity, simultaneously demonstrate that such attributes need not be limited to a single gender. While Firdawsi relies on gendered stereotypes around behavior, he also calls into question their very validity, generating in Gurdafarid a warrior just as capable, if not more so, than her male counterpart. Gurdafarid's concealment of her identity provides the grounds through which she

[68] In the story, the wife of a merchant, Zinevra, is described by her husband as having all the most desirable attributes of a man, including loyalty and courtly manners, but when she is falsely accused of infidelity, he vows to have her executed. She escapes by posing as a man and serving in a sultan's court, where she demonstrates the admirable traits described by the husband and rises in courtly rank. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 89-92.

[69] Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 91.

can demonstrate her battle prowess and intelligence, which in turn calls into question whether such talents can be understood as exclusively masculine.

Gender Reveal I: Gurdafarid's Discovery

Illustrations of Gurdafarid are by no means as frequent as other scenes in the Suhrab cycle, such as the moment when Suhrab dies at his father's hand, but those that do exist depict different moments in the youth's engagement, including their battle, Gurdafarid's "unmasking," and her capture by Suhrab. The unifying feature of these paintings is the importance of hair in distinguishing the two characters. This is apparent in the most frequently depicted moment – when Suhrab is shown snatching off Gurdafarid's helmet and exposing her long locks (figs. 1.13-1.15).[70] The narrative importance of this moment is certainly one of the reasons it is so frequently depicted.

This moment of reveal also provides artists with a key opportunity to distinguish between the youths through Gurdafarid's long hair. Due to the prevalence of head gear, including turbans, crowns, and helmets, we rarely get a glimpse of bare heads, especially men's. Exceptions to this occur in bath scenes, punishments, and battle scenes in which slain characters are shown without their helmets. From such instances, we can see that it was typical for men, particularly warriors, to have a shaved or closely cropped hairstyle, thus making Gurdafarid's long tresses even more stunning in a battle context. This point is emphasized in a painting made in 1494 CE (fig. 1.13). It shows a stark contrast between the short hair of the soldiers in the foreground and Gurdafarid's

[70] For other examples, see British Library, Or. 12688, fol. 113v; New York Public Library, Pers. Ms. 3, fol. 89v; Staatsbibliotek zu Berlin, Diez Album, S. 42 Nr. 2; National Museum of Asian Art, S1987.122, fol. 72v; and Staatsbibliotek zu Berlin, Ms. Or. Fol. 4251, fol. 227r.

lively and thick flowing hair. In this context, Gurdafarid's long hair thus functions as a clear marker of gender difference in these paintings.

Although Gurdafarid is typically shown with flowing locks after Suhrab removes her helmet, one artist further demarcated her gender through a style of hair and veiling depicted with other female characters. An early fifteenth-century painting found in the Diez Album (figs. 1.16-1.17), depicts the moment when Suhrab lassoes Gurdafarid with his lariat. In this iteration the artist chose not to show her with hair flowing but instead pinned up in sections and mounted with a fabric circlet, a type of hairstyle associated with female characters. A more detailed view of this arrangement is visible in another contemporaneous painting found elsewhere in the Diez album (fig. 1.18). The specificity of this headgear to women is also affirmed within the painting itself, by the female witnesses in the upper right corner that watch the battle from Gurdafarid's castle and who wear the same hairstyles. In this case the artist adds onto the female warrior's hair presentation, styling it in a manner that conformed with contemporaneous gendered hairstyles to further demarcate her gender identity.

The relevance of head hair to Gurdafarid's identity is significant even in the case when she is still in disguise. In a painting from the deluxe *Shahnama* copied for Shah Tahmasp, Gurdafarid and Suhrab are shown in combat, before he has removed her helmet (figs. 1.19-1.20).[71] In this painting the young warriors are shown in nearly identical dress (albeit in different colors) and with extremely similar faces, conforming to the trope of the moon-faced beautiful youth, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Yet the artist has clued the viewer into which rider is Gurdafarid, by depicting wisps of hair that emerge from under her helmet and along the

[71] Another, more dramatic example of this, where long locks of Gurdafarid's hair stream out from under her helmet is also seen in a fifteenth-century manuscript now in the National Museum of Asian Art, S1987.122, fol. 72v.

sides of her face. The addition of this detail indicates a desire to avoid confusion between these otherwise extremely similar figures.

Gender Reveal II: Bearding Suhrab

The possibility of confusing the two characters is due in part to the general lack of differentiation in dress (they are both cloaked in armor) and an adherence on the part of the artists to beauty ideals that were shared between women and beardless young men. With a few exceptions, Suhrab is typically shown beardless, aligning with his youthful age, and therefore a beard does not delineate his gender, as it does for example in the paintings of Bahram Chubina wearing women's dress. Rather, Suhrab is, like Gurdafarid, shown as a youthful moon-faced beauty with a round face, small mouth, arched eyebrows, and no facial hair, as can be seen in several examples (figs. 1.14-1.16 and 1.19). The faces of the two figures are therefore extremely similar and it is only Gurdafarid's hair and narrative contextual clues that help distinguish between them.

Gurdafarid's depiction as a moon-faced beauty is not unexpected, as women were typically rendered in this manner in pre-modern Persianate painting. Only a woman who is elderly, of a lower class, or a witch is shown without a moon-face and instead often shown in profile (as opposed to three-quarter) and with a hooked nose. Even older women of the upper classes, such as Sindokht in the *Shahnama*, are shown with the same moon face as younger women. For women, then, such a face is their standard mode of representation. In contrast, male characters are represented with a greater facial variety depending on their class and age, in large part owing to the absence or presence of facial hair that marks out their age and social status. In

the case of Suhrab, his beardlessness signals his youth and thus his status as an *amrad*, a male youth who has not quite reached adult status and thus exists on a different social stratum than the fully bearded male.

There are, however, two instances in which Suhrab is not shown as a youthful moon-faced beauty and instead is depicted with facial hair: a 1494 CE commercial manuscript from Shiraz (fig. 1.13) and a seventeenth-century manuscript from Herat (fig. 1.21). Both instances the bearded Surab is shown removing Gurdafarid's helmet. In the earlier painting, the warrior has a full beard, while in the later work he is shown with a wispy mustache in the Shah 'Abbas-style discussed earlier. The inclusion of facial hair in these paintings is notable for the ways in which it breaks with standard depictions of Suhrab as a beardless youth, not only in paintings of his battle with Gurdafarid but also other key moments in his narrative, such as when he ropes his horse and battles his father. Most tellingly, in both manuscripts, the artists return to showing Suhrab as beardless in the paintings that follow, when he has been slain by his father.[72] Thus, the addition of facial hair is only deemed necessary in the instances when Suhrab is shown with Gurdafarid, pointing to a tension in the standard representation that the artists of these two paintings sought to resolve.

The break with typical representations of the youthful Suhrab through the addition of facial hair in his battle with Gurdafarid and then return to a beardless Suhrab in his death suggests that the artists felt an anxiety around his appearance as an *amrad* (read: non-male) in the former scene. That this anxiety is around gender is intimated by the presence and absence of facial hair in the paintings. While Gurdafarid's long hair reveals her gender identity, the addition

[72] In the case of the 17th century manuscript, the folio of Rustam slaying Suhrab appears to have some portions repainted, specifically Rustam and the attendant and horse in the bottom right corner. Suhrab, however, does not appear to have been modified.

of facial hair to Suhrab is used to also reveal his gender identity as a man, aging him in this scene beyond being a beardless youth (*amrad*) and allowing him to briefly enter the stage and patriarchal security of adult manhood.

The need to masculinize Suhrab in these paintings demonstrates two important points regarding hair. The first is that facial hair was perceived as a clear marker of manliness. The second is that head hair was not an entirely reliable indicator of femininity. In these instances, the artists perhaps felt that Gurdafarid's long hair was not enough to draw a gender difference between the two characters and had to be shored up with further hairy distinctions to avoid any confusion. As discussed earlier, long hair was sometimes acceptable for men, as can be seen for example in the case of the prophet Yusuf, introducing the potential for gender confusion, a point that will be explored further in the next chapter.

In this case, the motivation for altering Suhrab's appearance may have been to reify the gender hierarchy by emphasizing his masculinity and, at least in this moment, superiority over Gurdafarid. As shown earlier, an *amrad* or male slave might be considered less masculine due to their lack of beard and thus existed on a gender hierarchy below their bearded counterparts. The similarity of Suhrab and Gurdafarid, both visually and perhaps also due to their near match in battle skills, threatens a slippage between the two characters, where a young woman might rise above a young man in martial brawn and bravura. In their chose of moment to depict, the artists instead emphasize when Suhrab unmasks Gurdafarid and turns the tide of battle in his favor, thus demonstrating his success over the female warrior. In the case of these two paintings, they further stress his masculine identity through facial hair, visually re-establishing male superiority.

Such restoration is not wholly unexpected. As Hotchkiss writes in her discussion of female characters who cross dress in European literature, "The authors may admit that the

disguised women perform as well or better than men, but, ultimately, they integrate the characters—either as women or transformed men—into the gender hierarchy by placing them within conventional sexual relationships."[73] Integration often occurs through marriage, which in the case of Gurdafarid and Suhrab's brief encounter is not achievable but Firdawsi introduces the possibility of reintegration through Suhrab falling for Gurdafarid's beauty. In the instance of these two paintings, the artists impart their own form of integration through masculinization of Suhrab via facial hair, asserting Suhrab's manliness and position in the gender hierarchy above Gurdafarid.

The examples of Gurdafarid and Suhrab's battle re-emphasize the centrality of facial hair in gender iconography. They also introduce the relevance of head hair for marking out gender, though this seems to be a feature that was somewhat unreliable and needed further emphasis through additional gender markers, for example the addition of facial hair to the male character. The possibility of confusing the gender of the two main characters is due in part to shared features of youthful beauties, including the moon-face trope, a concept that will be explored further in the next chapter. These two examples, however, also point to an anxiety around Suhrab being interpreted as non-male more generally, a fear that was also traceable in the Bahram Chubina paintings. The instability of a masculine identity tied to facial hair is likely due to the impermanence of hair and the ease with which it can be removed. As discussed earlier this was indeed a form of social punishment, which marked the man out as a criminal but also brought him into alignment with non-males, such as eunuchs and *mukhannasun*. Yet in the narrative realm, disappearing facial hair could be positively deployed, as we shall see in the next case

[73] Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 124.

study, which also opens the potential for reading for new gender positionalities in Persianate painting.

A Mukhannas Masquerades: ʻAmr-i Umayya in the Khavarannama

Cross dress in the pre-modern Persianate world was not exclusively about masquerade and concealment as male or female but was also practiced by some individuals as a form of alternative gender presentation. Historical texts, including *hadith* and encyclopedias such the *Kitab al-Aghani* by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (897–967 CE), record figures with complex gender identities that were neither fully male or fully female. One such figure was the *mukhannas*, a term that had several different meanings but generally described a male-born person who displayed feminine traits and appearance, such as through plucking their beard. In this section I examine a painting in which a man dressed as a female dresser may recall the *mukhannas*, demonstrating the complexities of reading gender in pre-modern Persianate paintings.

The popularity of the *Shahnama* inspired other epics that borrowed from its meter and format, including the *Khavarannama* (Book of the East), written in the fifteenth century by Maulana Muhammad ibn Husam al-Din (d. 1470 CE), known as Ibn Husam.[74] In this text, the pre-Islamic kings and heroes of the secular epic are replaced with largely imaginative fabrications of the adventures of Imam ʻAli and his companions Saʻd-i Vaqqas, Abu al-Mihjan, Malik-i Azhdar, and ʻAmr-i Umayya in their efforts to convert non-Muslims in the vaguely defined lands of the *khavaran*, or east. Ibn Husam's religious epic would prove extremely

[74] Raya Shani, "The *Shahnama* Legacy in a Late 15th-Century Illustrated Copy of Ibn Husam's *Khavaran-nama*, the Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran, Ms. 5750," in *Shahnama Studies III: The Reception of the Shahnama*, eds. Gabrielle van den Berg and Charles Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 216.

popular, as more than twenty copies of the story survive today, including a luxuriously illustrated manuscript produced within twenty years of the *Khavarannama*'s completion, an indication of its popularity and relevance at the time.[75]

The painting that is the focus of this section (fig. 1.22) belongs to this lavish and now dispersed manuscript, the very same one that also contains the previously discussed depiction of the trickster hero 'Amr-i Umayya sneaking into the bedroom of the king of the east and shaving the beards of the guards to humiliate them. In the painting discussed here, the artist depicts a courtly scene where an enthroned king is attended to by servants and entertained by a dancing beauty and musicians. Yet all is not as it seems, for the outwardly female dancer, who is dressed like the female attendants and musicians, is actually the male warrior 'Amr in disguise, playing a trick on the non-Muslim king, Tahmas.

The painting captures a scene that occurs after 'Ali and 'Amr have entered the lands controlled by the powerful idolatrous king Tahmas. 'Amr sneaks into Tahmas's castle to spy on him and finds him asleep on his throne. Tahmas, however, wakes and is startled to see 'Amr, who quickly slips back into hiding. The king is understandably terrified and calls for music and dancing to sooth his mind. 'Amr slips into the disguise of a dancing girl:

نگه کرد عمر اندان زیر تخت　　بیاراست خود را بصد گونه رخت

برسم عروسان بپیراست تن　　بیرون آمد از پیش آن انجمن

'Amr watched from under the throne,　　Adorned himself with many pieces of clothing,

[75] Julia Rubanovich, "*K̲ĀVARĀN-NĀMA* i. The Epic Poem," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, accessed 28 February 2022, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/khavaran-nama-1.

Like the custom of brides, embellished his body [and] appeared in front of that group.[76]

He performs for Tahmas, who is besotted and commands that everyone leave the room so that the two can have privacy. Recognizing he is in danger of discovery, ‘Amr tries to escape but Tahmas grabs his skirt. ‘Amr convinces the king to let him go by claiming he needs to go put on more rouge, which he does so slowly that the king falls asleep again and ‘Amr is able to escape.

The Disappearing Beard

In the painting, we are shown ‘Amr’s performance for Tahmas. Within this interior court scene, ‘Amr-i Umayya, wearing a purple buttoned robe over a yellow, longer robe and a sheer veil that covers his long hair, strikes a dynamic dancer’s pose with one arm raised and the other lowered. His dress, aside from color, is identical to that of the other female attendants in the scene, who all wear several layers of garments and a sheer veil descending from a fabric crown. Their hair is styled in two loops that descend along the side of the face, and each has a round face with arched eyebrows and a small mouth that aligns with the trope of the moon-faced beauty. There is nothing about ‘Amr-i Umayya’s appearance that alludes to his actual identity. Rather, the artist provides few clues to the fact that the figure in purple is ‘Amr-i Umayya, aside from that he is dancing.

While we might attribute the thorough masking of ‘Amr’s gender to the artist’s reliance on existing typologies of dancers and the formulaic depiction of the female subject, as seen in the

[76] Translation my own. Thank you to Shadi Shafiei for reviewing my work.

consistent rendering of all the musicians and attendants in the scene, such a reading fails to account for the possibility that the depiction was meant to capture the relevance of gender play and add to the humor of the scene. It is in part a visual conundrum meant to challenge the viewer, hiding the hero in plain sight (an idea that will be explored more in Chapter Three). His appearance therefore relates to his status as a trickster, and perhaps also serves as a reference to historical cross-dressed dancers.

To begin, the image is notable for the ways in which it deviates from the visual program of the manuscript as whole through ‘Amr’s depiction. ‘Amr-i Umayya is one of the most easily recognizable characters in the *Khavaranama* (fig. 1.8).[77] He is consistently depicted in a tall conical hat decorated with a feather and a short sleeve pointed tunic over a long sleeve shirt and short skirt that leaves the lower parts of his legs exposed. He is always shown with a beard, a signal of his masculinity, and sometimes carrying an axe, a symbol of his trade. The axe and specificity of this clothing helps to relate him to a type of footman (*shatir*), a figure known from the Mongol period but who continued to play a role in court life up to the nineteenth century and is seen throughout Persian painting.[78]

The painting of ‘Amr as a dancer is the only instance in which he is not shown in his characteristic costume, which is even represented in other instances where he is in disguise, such

[77] In two 17th-century Punjabi manuscripts ‘Amr-i Umayya is also completely disguised as a female dancer. See British Library, Add. 19766 and IO Isl. 3443.

[78] Artists likely developed this type of figure from real life, as the Venetian envoy to the court of Shah Tahmasp, Michele Membré, provides a description of the *shatir*’s dress as a short skirt over trousers and a plumed cap, as well as bells fastened to their belts. Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)*, trans. A.H. Morton (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1999) 24. For the roots of this footman in Mongol tradition, see Sheila Blair, “A Mongol Envoy,” in *The Iconography of Islamic Art: Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, ed. Bernard O’Kane (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 50, 56. Over the succeeding centuries and the decline of Mongol political power, the form of the *shatir* remained but the specificities of his dress and his courtly role changed. By the time of the mid-fifteenth century, ‘Amr-i Umayya’s dress served as a more generalized marker of his class as sub-royal member of the court, in this case that of the imagined court of Imam ‘Ali.

as when he is depicted as masquerading as another race.[79] The absence of both his iconic dress and facial hair in the dancing scene would have thus been a striking deviation to anyone viewing the manuscript. That these character traits, such as the beard and costume, are missing is suggestive of their visual relevance to signaling ‘Amr’s masculinity, and thus necessary to conceal in this moment. From what is concealed, we can understand that both were considered key visual markers in the iconography of gender within this manuscript.

The question remains as to why the artist felt compelled to mask his gender in this way, rather than hinting at ‘Amr’s true identity. One possibility is that ‘Amr’s thorough disguise added to a viewer’s enjoyment of the painting by suggesting his advanced skill as a trickster, or *‘ayyar*. In romances and epics, the *‘ayyar* was a particular type of hero, typically associated with a lower class, known for his or her chicanery, particularly through disguise but also drugging people.[80] It was not unusual for ‘*ayyaran*, such as the titular hero in the 12th-century *Samak-i ‘Ayyar* to dress as a different gender to achieve their goals.[81] In literature, the *‘ayyar*, perhaps

[79] See Chester Beatty Library, Per.293.6. For the purposes of this discussion, I have focused my analysis on gender. ‘Amr’s crossing of race requires further research that is outside the scope of this chapter. Furthermore, it is worth noting that ‘Amr’s typical clothing as well as his dress as a dancing girl both indicate his sub-royal status, indicating that class was also an important factor in the character’s identity.

[80] The noun *‘ayyar* is a complicated one, with associations that vary based on context. Scholars initially identified it as a derivative of the Arabic root *‘ara* meaning “to wander,” and thus associated with the vagabond or highwayman. More recently, however, scholars have argued for the Persian roots of the word as “*ay yar*” or “oh friend,” and have pointed to historical Sasanian sources that identify the *‘ayyaran* as associates of the king, responsible for his security. This latter definition more closely aligns with the role that ‘Amr plays in the *Khavarannama*. The term has both negative and positive connotations depending on the context in which it is used. Descriptions found in historical documents from the ninth century onwards tend towards the negative, describing *‘ayyaran* as ruffians who disturbed the order of cities and harassed others in periods of civil strife. In epics and romances, however, the *‘ayyar* takes on a more positive role and a more expanded gender scope, including both men and women. Roxanne Zenhari, *The Persian Romance of Samak-i ‘ayyār: Analysis of an Illustrated Inju Manuscript* (Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2014), chapter 3, and C. Cahen and W.L. Hanaway, Jr., “’Ayyār,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, article published 15 December 1987; last modified 18 August 2011. https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ayyar.

[81] In the Injuid paintings of these scenes, Samak is shown in a chador and face veil that conveniently mask his face. The artist of the *Khavarannama* painting was unable to follow this same solution to masking his character’s true gender because dancing girls would not have appeared in such modest dress.

due to his or her lower class, has a more expanded range of heroic skills than kings and warriors, including trickery and disguise. Thus, whereas Imam ‘Ali achieves his successes through feats of strength, battle prowess, and summoning divine intervention in the *Khavarannama*, ‘Amr can convincingly alter his appearance to win the day. Rather than a lack a creativity, then, the artist may have felt compelled to fully mask ‘Amr’s gender to convey his skill and ability as an *‘ayyar* in the service of ‘Ali.[82]

Inviting the Mukhannas In

Looking beyond the confines of the manuscript, however, we can see that ‘Amr’s depiction also relates to the significant historical institution of the cross-dressed dancer, a connection that would have likely been recognizable to the audience of the *Khavarannama*.[83] As discussed in the introduction, from the time of the Prophet there was a class of male singers and dancers known as *mukhannasun*, who wore women’s jewelry and henna, and played instruments

[82] The visual may be seen as enhancing the overall objective of the narrative within its own distinct historical context. Ibn Husam wrote the *Khavarannama* in a period of sectarian transition within Iran. He completed the text in 1426-7 CE in Quhistan, which was then under the control of the Sunni Timurid dynasty (c. 1370-1507 CE). Unlike the Timurid elite, Ibn Husam was a Shi’a and his text clearly demonstrates his support for ‘Ali. Like the goal of his characters, Ibn Husam’s text can be understood as a proselytizing endeavor meant to encourage support for Shi’ism. The *Khavarannama* was intended to celebrate the successes of ‘Ali and his companions but, as indicated by its fanciful elements, also do so in an entertaining manner, perhaps to not only celebrate but also encourage more Muslims to join the Shi’ite cause.

[83] Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 no. 4 (1991): 671-693; Everett K. Rowson, “Gender Irregularity as Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad,” in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages,* ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003) 45-72; Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2008) 284-6; Anthony Shay, “The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia,” *Dance Research Journal* 38 (2006): 137-162. For more on the culture of music and dancers, see Amir Hosein Pourjavady, “Music Making in Iran: Developments between the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” PhD diss., (The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2019).

more commonly associated with women.[84] While the term *mukhannasun* had a broader use, referring to men who displayed a blend of gender traits and by extension implied a passive male sexual partner, it also continued to denote cross-dressed male born dancers well into the pre-modern period.[85] The *mukhannas* was a distinct gender presentation, one that was socially maligned for their conscious rejection of masculinity, for example through the plucking of their beards, but that also found acceptance as entertainers, including in courtly contexts.[86] In some instances they were specifically employed as a form of gendered humiliation, for example when a group of captive soldiers was brought in the eleventh century to Bukhara they were met by a group of *mukhannasun*, who danced with tambourines (an instrument typically played by women) and spindles (a tool associated with women), inverting the traditional honorific reception in which guests were met with dancers brandishing more appropriate, masculine implements, such as spears and swords.[87] As entertainers they were known for their wit and humor, implying that they sometimes held a more jester-like role.

The *mukhannas* complicates and expands the possibilities of reading gender in the painting of ʻAmr and Tahmas. Should we understand that ʻAmr is imitating a woman? Or might we better understand his masquerade as that of the much more specific *mukhannas*? In the text

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[84] Rowson, "Effeminates," 673-4; Rowson, "Reveal or Conceal," 121-2; Rowson "Gender Irregularity," 50-1.

[85] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 19, 22; Rooijakkers, "Luscious Locks of Lust," 43.

[86] As Everett Rowson writes, these men were seen as lacking dignity and sank to a low status in society because "they had voluntarily given up the distinctive gender markers of manliness, and joined the ranks of the not-male – boys, who would grow out of this status and women, who could not help it." But, as Rowson goes on to state, this also allowed them to take a different role in the court as amusing entertainers. Rowson, "Gender Irregularity," 63. As entertainers, the *mukhannasun* relate to Turkish *köcek*s and Egyptian *khawal*s. See Dror Zeʻevi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 142; Rowson "Gender Irregularity," 46; and Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) 104 and 188.

[87] Rowson, "Reveal or Conceal," 127. Rowson lists other instances when *mukhannasun* were used to humiliate people but also employed as entertainers.

‘Amr is described as adorning himself in the custom of a bride, language that might suggest the former reading. However, the term “bride” (عروس) and other things “bride-like” were also applied to beardless youths in lyric poetry and the epitome of beardless male beauty, the prophet Yusuf. Furthermore, Ibn Husam uses two verbs to describe the ‘Amr’s process of transformation: *arastan* and *pirastan*. The former translates to “to adorn, decorate or embellish,” while the latter has a similar meaning but also alludes to embellishment through removal, such as cutting or trimming hair.[88] Thus, ‘Amr is described as both putting on and removing things to take on his disguise. Ibn Husam’s description of ‘Amr embellishing himself in the latter sense (*pirastan*) as a bride perhaps alludes to depilation, a pre-consummation practice. This allusion would explain the disappearing beard and perhaps also humorously hint that ‘Amr has depilated his whole body, a process of removal that further brings the trickster into line with the figure of the *mukhannas*. The language around ‘Amr’s cross dress is semiotically open-ended allowing for deeper readings into the gender performance at play in this scene and represented in the painting. While the *mukhannasun* were known for displaying a blend of male and female characteristics, the representation of ‘Amr in fully female dress combined with the viewer’s knowledge of his true identity achieve this gendered play and obfuscation.

Thus, with the benefit of historical contextualization, we can understand that ‘Amr’s representation may go further than just an adult man dressed as a woman, recalling another gender positionality—namely that of the *mukhannas*. While reception is subjective and depends on cultural knowledge, given the long-standing tradition of the *mukhannas* in the Islamic world,

[88] Francis Joseph Steingass, “ārāstan,” in *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, accessed 28 January 2025, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?qs=آراستن&searchhws=yes&matchtype=exact; Francis Joseph Steingass, “perāstan,” in *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, accessed 28 January 2025, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?qs=پیراستن&matchtype=default.

it is likely that some viewers of this 15th-century *Khavarannama* manuscript would have made a connection between ‘Amr’s cross-dressed dancer and its real life parallel. For a contemporaneous viewer of the painting, such cultural associations may have been immediately apparent, and ‘Amr’s disguise, Tahmas’ attraction to him, and the representation of this gender play in the painting may have all been part of the fun and entertainment. Indeed, the acceptable social position that these cross-dressed figures were allocated in society was the space of entertainment and ‘Amr’s performance as a woman for Tahmas would have been a natural setting in which to find a *mukhannas*.[89]

Whether read as a woman or a *mukhannas*, the sexual politics of the scene remain the same. The humor and humiliation lie in Tahmas’s lusting after the wrong person, a (typically) bearded man. ‘Amr’s disguise not only gives him access to the king, whom he later humiliates by stealing his crown, but also further disgraces the king through the potential for sexual impropriety.[90] The king’s desire to be alone with ‘Amr in the guise of a dancing girl casts doubt on his sexuality and suggests that, if allowed to proceed, he might desire sexual relations with another adult man, an activity that was generally condemned. The nuances of this particular form of humiliation would have been apparent to a contemporaneous viewer but require historical contextualization for our own understanding.

The painting of ‘Amr dressed as a dancer allows for multiple gender presentations to be possible in a single figure and opens up the range of visual representation beyond a binary of

[89] Rooijakkers, “Luscious Locks,” 54.

[90] There was a long association between performers and sexual availability, and it is likely that a viewer of this painting may also have assumed that the dance was a prelude to a sexual encounter of some kind. That these women are also meant to be part of Tahmas’ harem enhances this association. For more on the performers and sex, see Anthony Shay, *The Dangerous Lives of Public Performers: Dancing, Sex, and Entertainment in the Islamic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 33-34.

male or female and brings to the fore the spectrum of gender possibilities that existed in the pre-modern period. With ‘Amr and the *mukhannas* in mind, we can begin to attend to the nuances of gender and the multiple iterations it could take. Such open-endedness in the gender of a given subject should give us pause when attributing a particular identity to a subject, particularly with more complex material such as single page paintings.

For example, the painting first addressed in the introduction that depicts a youth with long hair lounging in a garden setting is a visual enigma as far as gender goes (fig. 1.23). Elements of the figure’s appearance, including the long hair, trousers and necklace are typically found in representations of women in this period, while the pointed cap above their head and style of robe are more commonly found with men.[91] Others have noted that Safavid paintings of seductive women typically emphasized their breasts and showed more skin but this example shows the figure fully clothed, perhaps suggesting they are male. Sheila Canby proposes that they may be a specific type of male youth, noted by foreign travelers, who worked in coffeehouses, wore feminine hairstyles and clothing, and performed dances.[92] We can add to this interpretation by suggesting that the figure may be a *mukhannas*, a figured interpreted by foreigners as a feminine presenting male but who in fact represents a distinct gender positionality in Persianate society. As with the case of Amr-i Umayya then, gender presentation in this painting is multi-layered and open to multiple interpretations.

Without a clear context and viewed through the distance of time and cultural separation it is impossible to say with certainty who this figure is, but certainty may not have been the point in

[91] Canby, “Demimonde,” 75.

[92] Canby, “Demimonde,” 76 and Rudi Matthee, *Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 169-170.

representations such as these. In fact, it is possible that the point and the pleasure was viewing a gender ambiguous subject. This was certainly part of the attraction with the *mukhannas* and the female cross-dressed dancers known as *ghulamiyyat*, discussed in the introduction. Such figures manipulated the boundaries of gender as a form of entertainment. It is likely that these figures made their way into Persianate paintings but as we can see are more difficult to isolate and identify. What the painting of ʻAmr as a dancer demonstrates is that the iconography of gender is only legible through historical and social contextualization, and even then can prove opaque, particularly if the artist sought to add affective layers, such as humor, to the experience of the painting.

The difficulty does not, however, diminish the importance of considering such gender positionalities and reading for gender outside the boundaries of a male-female binary, particular when gender was often considered within a much more expansive framework of male- non-male. Lest we rush too quickly to gender a subject, these two paintings remind us-that binaristic readings of gender in paintings can only go so far and do not account for the wider range of gender presentations that existed in pre-modern Iran. Reading for gender requires a special attention to the social context in which the image was produced and, ultimately, may never provide a stable answer.

Teasing out the Tresses: Conclusion

Cross-dress provides a particularly illuminating realm through which to explore how gender is represented. As the above examples demonstrate, different factors, including the requirements of the narrative, compositional traditions, and artistic preference impact how a

moment of cross dress is depicted, and which elements are considered relevant to representing gender. In the case of the last three case studies, we can see the centrality of hair (or its absence) to communicating gender identity. In representations of Bahram Chubina's punishment artists found it imperative to represent the general's beard to signal his true gender identity despite the feminine clothes he is forced to wear. In at least two cases, facial hair is also employed to establish the masculine identity of the youthful warrior, Suhrab. The absence of facial hair, meanwhile, points to the non-male identity of the subject, either as an *amrad* in the case of depictions of Suhrab, a woman for Gurdafarid, or a *mukhannas* for Amr-i Umayya. Long hair also helps to mark Gurdafarid and Amr-i Umayya as feminine figures. Yet the appearance of bearded Suhrab's and Amr-i Umayya's disappearing bead also point to the easy malleability of hair and its representation.

The case studies also demonstrate that no single factor can be relied upon as a consistent indicator of gender throughout time and place. Rather one must attend to various elements, including the historical, social and narrative context of a painting, to understand what is being depicted, and capture the complex range of gender presentations that existed in specific cultural contexts. Even then a gender identity may prove allusive and ambiguous, perhaps as part of the pleasure and fun of viewing the work. The visual challenges that persist, particularly in single page paintings, are a reminder of gender's intricacy and its remoteness across time. Nowhere is this notion of gender ambiguity more pertinent than with the moon-faced beauty, where a concept non-gender differentiated beauty generated a productive play with gender found in both literature and the visual arts. It is this next topic to which we turn in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 Mapping the Moon-Face: On Beauty Affinities and Gender Erotics

A frequently noted, though rarely analyzed, feature of Persianate figural painting is the trope of the moon-face, which is defined by its roundness, almond eyes, arched eyebrows, and a small mouth. This manner of representation is visible in the earliest surviving manuscript paintings, but also earlier non-manuscript painted works, such as figural twelfth-century mina'i ceramics and thirteenth-century lustre ware ceramics from Kashan.[1] Faces with these generalized features endure, if not dominate in their prevalence, and, though slight variations do occur, the moon-face is striking for the ways in which the same basic elements are maintained across time and place. Furthermore, this type of face is used across genders, from kings and queens to warriors, maidens and servants. Only a limited set of elements, including beards and veils, interrupt an otherwise standardized form to signal a person's gender. Indeed, the prevalence of the moon-face is one of the reasons that it is so difficult to tell some figures apart, as seen with some of the examples of Suhrab and Gurdafarid.

The trope of the moon-face is one among several, such as "cypress-bodied," that is used to describe beautiful people.[2] In this chapter I examine the moon-face to demonstrate that these tropes are not differentiated by gender but rather coalesce to form an idealized notion of beauty

[1] The moon faces of the featured figures, as well as a lack of a narrative context for the figural scenes on these types of ceramics, contribute to the difficulty of identifying depicted subjects. A prime example of this is a bowl in the National Museum of Asian Art (F1941.11), which has long perplexed scholars. See Grace D. Guest and Richard Ettinghausen, "The Iconography of a Kāshān Luster Plate," *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 25-64.

[2] Cypress-statured figures are a trope found throughout Persian literature to describe slender beloveds. Annemarie Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 164.

that transcends the gendered body. I begin by reviewing the limited art historical scholarship on this typological mode of representation, before turning to the source closest to the paintings, namely the literature in which it is embedded, and the wider context of lyric poetry and the romance to consider the relationship between the literary and visual in terms of beauty. I respond to scholarly interpretations of non-differentiated beauty as androgynous and ambiguous, arguing that the beauty ideal cannot be read through the gender binary. Rather, as Zayde Antrim has argued, such descriptive similarity establishes an "erotics of sameness," where the very similitude of two lovers is prized as most suitable for their union.[3] Beauty is upheld as an ideal that two lovers share regardless of their gendered bodies. From here I return to visual material to demonstrate the applicability of Antrim's idea of the "erotics of sameness" through illustrations from 'Abd al-Rahman Jami's (d. 1492 CE), *Yusuf and Zulaykha* (Joseph and Potiphar's Wife).

It is clear from both the visual and literary material that there is a standard of ideal beauty that is shared across media, from lyric poetry and narrative romances to visual figural representation. In this chapter I will show that this concept of ideal beauty is not differentiated by gender. Rather, represented bodies conform to a notion of beauty that transcends the material. As we will see, beauty thus provides a space where gender distinction breaks down and blends, offering a counterpoint to the patriarchal norms of Persianate society. A closer examination of the moon-trope as a visual trope embedded within a particular literary context also affords the opportunity to consider how the function of poetic metaphor could extend into the realm of the visual, imbuing a seemingly rote feature with complex meaning.

[3] Zayde Antrim, "*Qamarayn*: The Erotics of Sameness in the *1001 Nights*," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28 (2020): 2.

Gazing on the Moon: The Moon-Face in Art

From manuscripts to sculptures, ceramics to metalware, moon-faced beauties have long challenged art historians' ability to identify the gender of depicted subjects. For help, scholars have looked to other features, such as clothing, accessories, context, and, at times, gendered assumptions to arrive at a best guess.[4] In many instances, when the issue of gender is not vital to interpreting the object, identification is sidestepped through the use of gender-neutral language such as "person" and "figure" instead of "man" or "woman."[5] A figure or figures' gender, however, can be vital to deciphering what is represented and illegibility can serve as a roadblock to interpreting an object, as seen in the various interpretations of a thirteenth-century bowl in the National Museum of Asian Art that features several moon-faced figures in an enigmatic configuration.[6] The issue is particularly acute in art from the Seljuk period where both men and women wore their hair long, and men are frequently represented beardless.

The beauty of the moon as a celestial body makes it a rich source for poetic metaphorical comparisons with the beautiful face, a subject that will be explored in depth in the next section. The moon is also central to the Islamic imagination, through time keeping, Muhammad's

[4] For example, in their analysis of a pair of early 12th-century stucco sculptures with moon faces, a team of scholars determined the pair must be male based upon their sabers and crown-like headgear. Stefan Heidemann, Jean-François de Lapérouse and Vicki Parry, "The Large Audience: Life-Sized Stucco Figures of Royal Princes from the Seljuq Period," *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 41. See also Martina Rugiadi's catalogue entry on the sculptures, which describes the different interpretations assigned to the figures, including royal guards, princely figures, and a Nestorian priestess, in Sheila Canby, Deniz Beyazit, Martina Rugiadi, and A.C.S. Peacock, *Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuqs* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 41.

[5] See for example the catalogue entry for a bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection (32.52.2) published in Maryam D. Ekhtiar, "75. Bowl (Charger) and 76. Tile," in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Maryam D. Ekhtiar, Priscilla P. Soucek, Sheila R. Canby and Navina Najat Haidar (New York and New Haven: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2011), 117-8.

[6] See National Museum of Asian Art, F1941.11.

splitting of the moon, and its role as a stand-in for the face of God.[7] As such, there have been numerous depictions of the moon in objects that draw on celestial and astrological themes. Determining the gender of humanized representations of the moon itself, however, is equally as challenging as that of the moon-faced beauty. The most frequent depiction of the moon is as a seated figure holding a circle around their face.[8] Except in instances where the figure wears a particular kind of clothing primarily associated with women, there is little of the visual presentation of the moon to clarify its gender.[9] Rather, a given representation's gender identity is determined by context. Francesca Leoni notes that the moon was generally associated with the cool, humid, and dark parts of the day, linking it to the feminine, whereas the sun was viewed as masculine, embodying warmth and strength.[10] Despite this wider association of the moon with the feminine, its personification could also be read as male. Richard Ettinghausen notes that depictions of the moon as a seated figure in cosmographical works from the thirteenth century onwards were meant to represent a vizier or heir apparent to the king, who was represented as a Sun, thus making each male.[11] The moon as the source for the moon-face trope does not provide

[7] Walid A. Saleh, "From Timekeeper to Dimmed Sun: The Moon's Long Shadow in the Qur'an and Islamic Literature," in *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Toronto: The Aga Khan Museum, 2019) 16.

[8] Francesca Leoni, "The Moon in Islamic Portable Arts," in *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Toronto: The Aga Khan Museum, 2019), 31.

[9] One such example is a painting in a ca. 1582 CE copy of the *Matali' al-sa'ada wa manabi' al-siyada* (Ascension of Propitious Stars and the Sources of Sovereignty), where the moon's robe has long sleeves typically worn by women. Reproduced in Ünver Rüstem, "From Auspicious Ornament to State Symbol: The Crescent Moon in Ottoman Art and Architecture," in *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Toronto: The Aga Khan Museum, 2019), 45.

[10] In addition, the sun actively emits light whereas the moon receives the sun's light, imparting an active and thus masculine role to the former and a passive and feminine role to the latter. Leoni, "The Moon," 31. See also Christiane Gruber, "40. The Moon," in *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Toronto: The Aga Khan Museum, 2019), 158.

[11] Richard Ettinghausen, "Hilal," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Glossary and Index of Terms*, accessed 1 February 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_ei2glos_SIM_gi_01586. The pairing of

a particular gender association and instead points to the general abstraction of beauty through its pairing with a natural form.

In an attempt to anchor the moon-face in the material body, scholars frequently attribute it to Turkic beauty standards, suggesting it implied a particular ethnic appearance.[12] A.S. Melikian-Chirvani has ventured a more specific analysis of the trope and its associations with East Asian Buddhist art in his study of the *unicum* manuscript of 'Ayyuqi's (11th century) *Varqa and Gulshah* (11th century), produced in the thirteenth century, most likely in Anatolia.[13] Throughout the manuscript, the two young lovers are depicted extremely similarly to one another with the aforementioned moon-faces, long hair, and loose robes. As a young man, Varqa is shown beardless, contributing to the similarity to his beloved Gulshah. Occasionally the artist provides distinctions in their costume. For example, Varqa is depicted wearing a turban (fig. 2.1), but these details do not carry through in every depiction. Rather, the characters are distinguished by small captions with their names written above each's head. The inclusion of the captions demonstrates that the similarity of the two figures could be confusing and required

the vizier with the moon and the king with the sun may derive from Yusuf Khass Hadjib's eleventh-century mirror for princes text *Kutadgu Bilig* ("Wisdom of Royal Glory"). R. Dankoff, "Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥādjib," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, ed. P. Bearman, accessed 1 February 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8049. Thank you to Cameron Cross for bringing this to my attention. For another seated moon figure interpreted as male (though without explanation), see Willy Hartner, "The Vaso Vescovali in the British Museum: A Study on Islamic Astrological Iconography," *Kunst des Orients* 9 (1973–1974): 112 and fig. 5.

[12] See for example Stefan Heidemann, "62. Princely Figure with Winged Crown and 63. Princely Figure with Jeweled Crown," in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, 102.

[13] Oya Pancaroğlu, "Conditions of Love and Conventions of Representation in the Illustrated Manuscript of Varqa and Gulshah," in *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World*, ed. Christiane Gruber (London: Gingko, 2019), 72-83; A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Le roman de Varqe et Golšâh: Essai sur les rapports de l'esthétique littéraire et de l'esthétique plastique dans l'Iran pré-mongol, suivi de la traduction du poème," *Arts Asiatiques* 22 (1970): 1-264.

clarification. Their likeness, however, is an accurate reflection of their similar description in the text.

In his analysis of the manuscript, Melikian-Chirvani notes that the two young lovers are also referred to as *bot*, often translated as "idol" but derived from the word for Buddha, which he suggests may be the origin for the moon-face trope, sometimes called *bot-i mahruy* ("the moon-faced Buddha").[14] Melikian-Chirvani argues that early Persian poets derived the trope of the moon-face from Iran's pre-Islamic Buddhist art, which used a common facial type with a full, almost perfectly round profile, half-closed almond eyes, strokes of black makeup to extend the eyes, eyebrows painted high above the eyes, and a small mouth.[15] He points to Gandharan Buddhas in Central Asia as a closely associated surviving visual example, and argues that Persian literature's emergence in Eastern Iran put it in proximity with Buddhist art that demonstrates this placid facial type and may have been the source for the poetic trope in Persian literature.[16] Such a connection remains a hypothesis and has yet to be firmly substantiated by further evidence.

The aesthetic impact of Buddhist art on Iranian art is visible in some instances. For example, in her study of Islamic Chinoiserie, Yuka Kadoi similarly points to *Varqa and Gulshah* as an example of the westward spread of East Asian beauty ideals, primarily citing Melikian-Chirvani's work but also demonstrating the impact of Buddhist art on Persian art through the

[14] A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Aesthetics of Islam," in *Treasures of Islam* (London: Sotheby's/Philip Wilson Publishers, 1985), 22.

[15] Melikian-Chirvani, "Aesthetics of Islam," 22-3 and "The Buddhist Heritage in the Art of Islam," in *Mahayanist Art After A.D. 900*, ed. William Watson (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1971), 58. For more on the interchange between Iranian and Buddhist motifs, see David Alan Scott, "The Iranian Face of Buddhism," *East and West* 40 (1990): 50-4.

[16] Melikian-Chirvani, "Le Roman," 43 and "Buddhist Heritage," 61.

growing use of East Asian-inspired ribbons in the latter.[17] The relevance of gender in this exchange, however, is difficult to attribute to one single source. Buddhist art has undergone its own complicated and evolving engagement with gender representation that is only now being studied.[18] According to Robert Brown, in the mid-fifth century sculptures of Buddha within India developed a more gender-neutral appearance with a softer body and face, and without visible genitalia, that then spread to China and Southeast Asia.[19] Brown argues that the gender ambiguity of the figure was purposeful, though the exact reasons are unclear and he provides several possible explanations, including the desire to move away from aggressive, masculine kingly imagery towards a more non-threatening stance and appearance akin to that of mothers and wives.[20] The trope of the placid face that Melikian-Chirvani points to as a source of inspiration for the Persian moon-face, is perhaps undifferentiated by gender due to a belief in a single karmic stream from which a given person was reincarnated, but little work has yet been done to explain such non-differentiation within the Buddhist tradition.

While the origin of the moon face in East Asian art is plausible, this does not, however, explain why different genders were depicted in the same manner in a Persian context. Melikian-Chirvani builds the connection between the moon-faced beauty and Buddhist art in part via the word *bot*, but does not explore the expanded use of the word in Persian poetry where it became a

[17] Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 125-6.
[18] Ashwini Lakshminarayanan, *Gender in Gandhāran Art: Representations and Interactions in the Buddhist Context (1st – 4th centuries CE)* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, forthcoming).

[19] Robert Brown, "The Feminization of the Sārnāth Gupta-Period Buddha Images," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 16 (2002): 170.

[20] Brown, "Feminization," 170 and 177.

metaphor for the beloved.[21] While he does writes that the term is applied to both genders, he does not delve into the reason this occurs.[22] Other Islamic art historians have similarly noted but not examined this lack of gender differentiation. For example, in his discussion of a copy of the *Kitab suwar al-kawakib al-thabita* (Book of the Images of the Fixed Stars; Bodleian Library, Marsh 144), Ettinghausen points out that among the features of a "Samarran" style of illustration, was "a bisexual attitude that had led to the near disappearance of sex differences…."[23] The non-differentiation of beauty has been recognized but remains unexplored in the field of Islamic art history.

To answer the question of what influenced the use of non-gender differentiated tropes in paintings, we must look further afield. Turning from the visual to the literary fleshes out the context in which these paintings were produced and provides insight into the broader discourse around beauty that likely influenced artists. The proximity between Persian poetry and romances and the paintings that illustrate them establishes a firmer ground to understand possible influences and see overlaps between approaches to gender. Through a comparison of literary and visual material we get a clearer sense of what may have motivated the similarity of differently gendered figures.

Setting the Terms: Beauty in Lyric Poetry

[21] Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 120.

[22] Melikian Chirvani, "Buddhist Heritage," 60.

[23] Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva: Skira, 1977), 53. Kadoi also attributes the appearance of these figures in this manner to the influence of East Asian aesthetics on Persian art. Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie*, 125.

The Metaphorical Body

Poetry pervaded medieval and pre-modern Persian society and provides a fruitful starting point for considering the wider milieu in which artists imagined and executed their works, many of which were made to accompany such poems. Poets demonstrated their skill, eloquence, and erudition through their creative use of imagery, metaphor, simile, and other rhetorical devices.[24] Key among these for our concerns is metaphor (*majaz*, *isti'ara*), which encapsulates expressions such as "moon-faced" and "cypress-bodied." A simile draws comparisons between things, seen for example in Abul-Qasim Firdawsi's (d. c. 1020 CE) description of Gurdafarid in the *Shahnama* with a face shining "like the sun" (درفشان چو خورشید شد روی او), with the operative word here being چو or "like." The metaphor, however, creates a firmer connection between compared objects. *Isti'ara* means "to borrow," suggesting that there is an exchange or transfer amongst the connected terms.[25] When a youth is described as "cypress-bodied" (بالای سرو), the language used does not make the youth's body *like* a cypress but instead suggests a *becoming*, at least in part, the borrowed thing by drawing equivalences between qualities. The qualities of the cypress, tall and slender, are the qualities of the youth's body. Annemarie Schimmel describes the metaphor in Persian poetry as a "living relationship" between the compared objects, capturing the depth at which it can operate to signal connections and affinities.[26]

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[24] A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Introduction: Persian Rhetorical Figures," in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1. In some instances, this was also a means to discuss the body without violating rules around modesty. Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 172.

[25] The Greek origin of the word "metaphor" means to "transfer," furthering this idea of exchange. Seyed-Gohrab, "Introduction," 8; Ch. van Ruymbeke, "Kāshifī's Powerful Metaphor: The Energising Trope," in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 67 and 70.

[26] Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 38.

Metaphors create complex meaning (*ma'ni*) through form (*surat*). As Shahab Ahmed writes, "metaphor, by way of form, enables the generation of meaning beyond form…."[27] It is through metaphor that poets could imbue their works with deeper meaning, a feature that seems to have become particularly transformative in the development of the romance in the eleventh century.[28] As Nahid Norozi shows in her analysis of the romance of *Humay and Humayun* by Khwaju Kirmani (d. c. 1349 CE), a romance may appear on its surface to address earthly love but by engaging with mystical-erotic metaphors can become an allegory through which to contemplate the divinity and beauty of God and creation.[29] For example, after seeing the portrait of Humayun, with which he is immediately smitten, Prince Humay is encouraged by the angel Sorush to imagine from the design (Humayun's beauty), the Designer (or God).[30] Norozi argues that for a fourteenth-century audience, familiar with the mystical-erotic *ghazal*s, such themes would have been readily apparent, indicating that readers would have been attuned to contemplating the deeper meanings created by metaphors.[31]

The role of metaphor to build such a bridge between the earthly and divine is particularly pronounced in Sufi poetry, which like the "mirror for princes" genre, provided edifying lessons on morality, ethics, and, in the case of Sufi texts, mystical devotion through poetry rich with

[27] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 390.

[28] Cameron Cross, *Love at a Crux: The New Persian Romance in a Global Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), 34.

[29] Nahid Norozi, "The Verse Romance *Homāy o Homāyūn* of Ḫwājū Kermānī: a 'Love and Adventure Story' or an Allegory of a Spiritual Quest?" *Eurasian Studies* 17 (2019): 23-48.

[30] Norozi, "The Verse Romance," 39.

[31] Norozi, "The Verse Romance," 45.

allegory and metaphor.[32] Sufi love theory and its related poetry, as well as the ritual practice of "love play" (*ʿishq bazi*) emphasized loving beautiful people, primarily beardless males, as a means to train the novice believer in a higher form of love for God.[33] As Matthew Thomas Miller summarizes, "According to this school of thought, earthly love (*ʿishq-i majazi*) is a 'metaphor' (*majaz*) for 'real' or 'divine' love (*ʿishq-i haqiqi*) and it functions, as it is often said, as a 'bridge' (*qantara*) to 'The Real' (*al-majaz qantarat al-haqiqa*/ metaphor is the bridge to 'The Real')."[34] Poets drew upon famous lovers to illustrate this point. For example, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) explained such love play through the example of Yusuf and Zulaykha, writing:

> Consider it a gift from God that you have experienced afflictions in love's quarters!
>
> Pass beyond 'metaphoric' (*majazi*) love—the final destination of love is God. The fighter gives his son a wooden sword
> So he will become a master of it and then take the sword into real battles. Love for humans is the wooden sword—
>
> When you become entangled at the end of love's path, that love will be transformed into love for God.

[32] Chad Kia, *Art, Allegory and the Rise of Shi'ism in Iran, 1487-1565* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 30.

[33] Matthew Thomas Miller, "Embodying the Beloved: Embodiment, (homo)eroticism, and the Straightening of Desire in the Hagiographic Tradition of Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 21, no. 1 (2018): 2, 5.
[34] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 5. Miller's argument seeks to push against scholars who "straighten" Sufi love poetry by emphasizing the abstraction of the beloveds that appear as the subjects of such poetry to erase their physical existence, including their gender. I agree with Miller's efforts to correct these misinterpretations, while also seeking to show that poets and artists partook in an idealized notion of beauty, one that did not stand at odds with real bodies but was layered over them. That later scholars have used such idealization to ignore or mask homosocial realities is an unfortunate and dangerous misunderstanding of the material they study, and one which Miller cogently addresses in his article.

In the beginning, for years, Zulaykha's love was for Yusuf,
but in the end it became love for God and it made her turn away from Yusuf.[35]

Romantic love is an exercise for humans to condition themselves into a higher form of love, one for God. Spurred by his earthly beauty, Zulaykha's love for Yusuf allows her to ascend from the earthly to the divine.

Earthly love described through metaphor was not, however, entirely abstracted from the body. Miller argues that such an interpretation, as is frequently adopted by scholars analyzing Sufi poetry, tends to ignore the realities of the sex-gender system in which the poetry was conceptualized and erases the beloved as living person.[36] Rather, Miller argues that metaphor (*majaz*) was both metaphorical and embodied, evocative of the Divine but also rooted in experience.[37] For example, Miller argues that the work of Sufi poets such as Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi (d. 1289 CE) that describe his love of a male youth are not just abstracted metaphors but also embody real life experience and a Sufi-inflected sexuality, which harnesses "sexuality's potency for spiritual ends."[38] Though the texts I will be addressing do not address historical people in the same manner that poets such as 'Iraqi did, it is worth remembering that the metaphor could purposefully hold the tension between the embodied and the divine, the physical and the intangible. Thus, while I later discuss a concept of ideal beauty that moved beyond the gendered body, this is not to erase or diminish the realities of form but to instead point to a distinct meaning of beauty that prioritized particular forms (similarity) over others (gender difference).

[35] Reproduced in Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 6.

[36] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 4.

[37] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 8-9.

[38] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 17.

Turning back to the moon as a metaphor of beauty, we can better understand that the poetic trope held multiple layers of meaning embedded within its form. As mentioned above, the moon carried particular associations within Islam due to its role in time keeping and connections with the Prophet Muhammad. It was also invoked for its radiance and celestial importance, alongside the sun, and to establish a formal comparison between its fullest extent and the roundness of a face. The individual components within the face provided another layer through which to imbue the face with meaning. The arched eyebrows and eyelashes were sometimes compared to weaponry, such as arrows and bows, that could pierce the heart of a lover, but also evoked religious associations, for example recalling the arched shape of a mihrab or the letters used to compose the Qur'an.[39] Other facial elements were likened to the natural world, such as rubies for the mouth and gazelles for the eyes.[40] This process of linking together beautiful things through metaphor establishes a network across creation, one that consistently reiterates the beauty of God's design and the presence of divinity in all elements of the world.

The use of the moon metaphor was particularly evocative, such as when Jami, in his famous rendition of the romance of Yusuf and Zulaykha, which will be analyzed in the last section of this chapter, describes the former as "To his (Adam's) eyes, Yusuf came as a moon/ Not a moon. A sun on high" (به چشمش یوسف آمد چون یکی ماه / نه مه خورشید اوج عزت و جاه).[41] The poet establishes a bridge between the prophet's body and the lunar and solar bodies, physically linking the prophet to the celestial realm, a divine creation of the ultimate source of beauty,

[39] Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 57 and 90; Aida Shahlar Gasimova, "Eyebrows," in *Islamic Images and Ideas: Essays on Sacred Symbolism*, ed. John Andrew (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., Inc, 2013), 169-183.

[40] Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 74, 135, 156 and 193.

[41] English translation my own. Persian text from Jami, "Chapter 14. The Story of Adam Witnessing the Beauty of Yusuf in the Other World and His Heart Burns like a Moth from the Radiance," Ganjoor, accessed October 9, 2024. https://ganjoor.net/jami/7ourang/7-5-yusof-zoleykha/sh14.

God.[42] Metaphor here operates not as a form of rhetorical embellishment but instead as a gateway to a deeper understanding of the elevated and exalted status of Yusuf's beauty in a grander cosmological context. Just as the sun and moon are beautiful and created by God, so too is Yusuf, pointing to a bond between all three shared through the qualities of their radiance and import, to name just a few aspects that are implied.[43]

Like many rhetorical devices, metaphor is context dependent, and the example of Jami's Yusuf and his bodily connection with the divine is extremely specific to the beauty the poet sought to convey. Not every reference to the moon in relation to beauty holds such connotations, even within Jami's poem. Elsewhere, he describes a royal retinue containing moon-faced beauties, figures which while beautiful certainly do not compare to Yusuf's spiritual elevation and his embodiment of this.[44] Though evoking the same metaphorical form, the moon, the meaning is more limited in the case of the unnamed beauties and instead evokes of a broader conception of idealized beauty. Such is also the case, for example, in *Khusraw and Shirin*, where Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209 CE) uses the expression "moon-figured" (ماه‌پیکر) to describe the servants of Shirin.[45] Instances of the moon applied to more specific characters, for example, when Firdawsi uses the expression "moon-faced" (ماه رخ/ ماهرو) to describe the doomed Siyavush and the young princess Maniza, likely held more meaning and require further analysis to parse the many layers of meaning behind the form.

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[42] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 7.

[43] Jami makes the connection between God and Yusuf even more explicit when he writes, "When the Absolute wishes to assume a contingent form, he veiled his real nature in the appearance of Yusuf." In Jami's poem, Yusuf's body is not only reflective of God's beauty but a vessel of God. Hakim Nuruddin Adurrahman Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha: An Allegorical Romance*, trans. David Pendlebury (London: The Octagon Press, 1980), 12.

[44] Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 31.

[45] Nizami, "Chapter 18. Shapur describing Shirin and Shabdiz," Ganjoor, accessed 7 October 2024. https://ganjoor.net/nezami/5ganj/khosro-shirin/sh18.

As is apparent, however, the moon was an important and widespread trope for beauty in Persian poetry across genre and time but when and why the moon became a trope for beauty is unclear. The moon is frequently referenced as a metaphor for beauty in earlier Arabic poetry such as *'udhri ghazal*s written in the seventh to eighth centuries and epigrams, providing one potential source of inspiration.[46] Melikian-Chirvani suggests that Persian literature "appears with its full array of cliches and metaphors," that were inherited from an earlier literary tradition influenced by Buddhism.[47] Yet such a claim has yet to be explored by literary scholars and without solid evidence of the transmission of forms remains unconvincing. More importantly for the purposes of this discussion are the ways in which a metaphor of beauty was applied to any beautiful person, regardless of gender. Instead, the way in which beauty is metaphorized in Persian poetry through references to nature and other beautiful objects and living things highlights that notions of beauty are better understood in the context of their relationship to God's creation or non-human forms of beauty than gender or the human body. Gender is de-prioritized in relation to the beauty of the subject.

Indeed, the non-differentiation of such beauty metaphors is one contributing factor to the difficulty of identifying the subject of poems. As discussed in the introduction, the Persian language does not distinguish by masculine or feminine pronouns. This factor has had a major impact on the literary tradition by allowing for a degree of subject ambiguity, as with the trope of the beloved in Persian lyric poetry whose gender often remains illegible unless marked by other culturally specific clues. As recent scholarship has shown, dissecting such indeterminacy holds

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[46] For examples of the moon applied to female beauty, see Jokha Alharthi, *The Body in Arabic Love Poetry: The Udhri Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), chapter 4, especially 91-3. For examples of male beauty, see Thomas Bauer, "Male-Male Love in Classical Arabic Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tukhanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 110.

[47] Melikian-Chirvani, "Buddhist Heritage," 61.

major relevance for interpreting Persian literature, including clarifying meaning, authorial intent, and notions of desire.[48]

The Ambiguous Beloved

One of the most frequently discussed subjects of beauty in lyric poetry is that of the beloved. Yet the identity of the subject, particularly their gender identity and the resultant impact this has on the sexual dynamics of a given poem, is often difficult to pin down. Scanning for key traits of the body that might clarify who the beloved is only rarely yields results, for example in those cases where the first signs of a downy beard (*khatt*) on a young male are mentioned. That this is the case is because many of the features of the beloved's body that are praised -- round moon-like face, dark eyes, white teeth, rosy cheeks, arching eyebrows, beauty marks, and a small mouth with a cypress-like body, sometimes with the additional description of fleshy hips and buttocks – are ideal features that are not definitively associated with a particular gender.[49] For example, *Anis al-ʿushshaq* (A Companion for Lovers, c. 1350 CE) by Sharaf al-Din Rami (14th century) is a manual of poetic idioms to describe the beloved that includes nineteen chapters on different parts of the body, none of which are specifically attributed to a single gender.[50] Such repeated tropes instead construct an idealized notion of beauty, undifferentiated by gender.

[48] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 46. It is also relevant for Arabic and Turkish, see Bauer, "Male-Male Love," 107-124; Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of the Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), especially chapter 5.

[49] The fragments of the body are compared to the sun and moon, arches, mihrabs, bows, gazelles, and any number of flora. For examples, see Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*; Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 9-10.

[50] Shahzad Bashir, "The Mediation of Hair: Ṣūfī, Ḥurūfī, and Poetic Usages in Persian Texts," *Al-Masāq*, 30:1 (2018): 103-4.

The often-elusive identity of the beloved points to the ways in which the described body fails to clarify the subject's gender identity. It is a telling example of how the body, particularly the beautiful body, was understood in pre-modern Persianate literature and its unreliability as a source for gendering subjects. In lyric poetry, descriptive and contextual subtleties may indicate a subject's gender identity but more often than not they are left open-ended so that multiple registers of meaning, and multiple gender identities, can be drawn from the text, just as with metaphor. For example, as Fateme Montazeri shows, *khatt* could refer to the budding facial of a youth, but in later centuries was given a more esoteric interpretation through relation to *barzakh*, or the place of limbo between death and resurrection.[51] Poets deployed such ambiguity to creative ends to display their wit and skill, and like many subjects, gender is a point of intellectual and literary play. As Domenico Ingenito writes, Persian poetry is characterized by a "a playful mediation between gender abstraction and gender specification."[52]

A poet might, for example, build associations between different gendered subjects to emphasize their shared qualities, invoking famous lover such as Shirin or Layla, with the intended association meant to confirm not gender (that the beloved is female) but rather to emphasize a shared position as beloveds and as beautiful people.[53] Additionally, certain features that we might associate exclusively with a particular gender, such as breasts and veiling as markers of femaleness, are also unreliable and can be used to describe multiple genders.[54] As

[51] Fateme Montazeri, "Who Says Only Men Have a Beard? Revisiting the Question of Gender Ambiguity in Persian Poetry," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 138.

[52] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 197. Ambiguity was not limited to gender but also found in other instances of perceived difference, such as between secular and religious. Poets often blurred distinctions and utilized ideas around difference to embed multiple layers of meaning into a single line or poem.

[53] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 79.

[54] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 75.

Domenico Ingenito summarizes, "This correspondence [between male and female lovers] provides the evidence that Persian lyric descriptions of ideal human beauty do not offer the ready clear-cut distinctions between the portrayal of male and female bodies."[55]

A prominent example is the description of the veiled beauty of the prophet Yusuf, which is an oft-repeated trope. Ingenito points out that our contemporary assumptions about female and masculine beauty are frequently challenged by pre-modern descriptions, for example Rashid al-Din Maybudi's (second half of the 11th century - second quarter of the 12th century) twelfth-century exegetical description of Zulaykha dressing Yusuf and presenting him to the women of Memphis.[56] In this text, Zulaykha adorns Yusuf's hair with pearls and covers it with a black veil of silk, applies musky scents to his body, and then has him lift the veil at the opportune moment to prove his beauty to the women who criticized her lack of self-control. In this instance, the descriptive features attached to Yusuf, which we might describe as normatively feminine, cannot be received as such and instead point to a different understanding of beauty, unsaddled from gender.

Tricky Translations, or Who is the Beloved?

Paired with the absence of grammatical gender differentiation in the Persian language, this lack of distinction in descriptions of beautiful people has vexed many translators and literary scholars, particularly in the realm of lyric poetry where the subject is often detached from a narrative framework. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century translators tended to interpret

[55] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 79.

[56] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 78-79.

the beloved as "she," in part due to contemporaneous heterosexual social norms that saw it as more natural that the beloved praised by a male poet be female. Yet, as more recent scholarship has shown, the beloved was, in its own time, frequently meant to be understood as a young male.[57] In some cases this is made explicit through the mention of *khatt*, the first signs of a downy beard.[58] Such odes, which see the darkish/ greenish cast of newly developing facial hair as the peak of youthful male beauty and simultaneously mourned as a sign of the beloved's departure from the realm of socially acceptable object of desire, are a clear exception to the non-differentiation of beauty by gender.[59] Yet they represent one subset of ideas around beauty, which does not negate the broader usage of undifferentiated terms of beauty.

Differences in facial hair also seem to matter. Fateme Montazeri argues that facial hair may not have exclusively signaled a male identity in poetry. She points to the term *'izar*, which she translates as "the line of a beard" or "sideburns," as an instance in which a masculine form of facial hair is applied to describe a female character. She cites Jami's description of the female wet nurse Absal in *Salaman and Absal*, in which he writes, "On her *'izar* [was] an alluring cerulean line/ Splendour like the Nile to the Egypt of her beauty."[60] *'Izar*, however, has multiple translations, including face, cheek, and even beardlessness, opening up the physical possibilities

[57] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 70-74; Julie Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 245-6.

[58] Thomas Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty: The Beard in Classical Arabic Love Poetry," in *Barbe et Barbus: Symboliques, Rites et Pratiques du Port de la Barbe dans Le Proche-Orient Ancien et Moderne*, ed. Youri Volokhine, Bruce Fudge and Thomas Herzog (Bern: Peter Lang, 2019), 131.

[59] In classical Arabic color theory, green and blue are considered a single color that is associated with darkness. Thank you to Cameron Cross for bringing this to my attention. See Kristina Richardson, "Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamicate Middle Ages," *Annales islamologiques* 48, no. 1 (2014): 16.

[60] Montazeri, "Who Says," 141.

of Jami's description.[61] It is possible that Jami, in his reference to the cerulean line on her face, may be referencing only the sideburns, a feature Montezari does not sufficiently demonstrate is a masculine marker, or equated the same status of the beard. As can be seen for example in numerous sixteenth-century paintings, including one that Montazeri provides, both male and female figures are shown with hair along the sides of their faces. Rather, sideburns are another feature of undifferentiated beauty, a point that Montazeri later concedes, despite using it as the foundation for her argument that female characters were also described as possessing beards.[62] The form of hair therefore matters when parsing for meaning.

In cases where facial hair is not mentioned, the beloved has more recently been interpreted as a beardless youth. This is due to an acknowledgment that prior translations and readings from the nineteenth century to the present day were heavily influenced by contemporaneous heterosexual norms rather than the historical conditions and social practices in which the poems were composed. Historically, men of the pre-modern Islamicate world operated in a predominantly homosocial environment, one in which the beardless youth was an acceptable object of desire and therefore the most likely subject of lyric poetry. Furthermore, as several scholars have noted, there were stringent social rules around exposing a woman, particularly one of high-class to public attention, for example by confessing one's love for her in a poem.[63] A further contributing factor was the influence of Neoplatonic conceptions of love through which

[61] Francis Joseph Steingass, "'iẕār," in *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, accessed 28 January 2025, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?qs=عذار&matchtype=default.

[62] Montazeri, "Who Says," 143.

[63] This was a practice earlier on in the Islamic world but it seems to have become taboo by the 9th century. See Franz Rosenthal, "Male and Female: Described and Compared," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J.W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 27. For more on this in an Ottoman context, see Andrews and Kalpaklı, 54. Schimmel describes ambiguity as a "veiling tactic" that was necessary since poets were unable to discuss a feminine beloved. Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 11.

hierarchies of love emerged, and male-male relationships were favored as a form of spiritual refinement.[64] In Sufi circles, this was supported through a practice of gazing upon beautiful young men (*shahid bazi*).[65]

An example of such a retranslation is the case of the drink bestowing beauty who provides Sa'di of Shiraz (d. c. 1291 CE) with cold water in the *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden). Sa'di, who is walking in the heat of midsummer, seeks refuge in the shade of a street, where he is met by a beauty who offers him a drink.

> A beauty the most eloquent tongue would be incapable of describing appeared like dawn rising in a dark night of like the water of life issuing from the black void. In his hand he held a goblet of ice water into which he had poured sugar and mixed with liqueur. I do not know whether it was perfumed with rose water or whether several drops from the rose of his face had into it. In short, I took the drink from his lovely hand, drank it, and was refreshed.

یعنی جمالی که زبان فصاحت از بیان صباحت او عاجز آید، چنان که در شب تاری صبح بر آید یا آب حیات از ظلمات بدر آید، قدحی برفآب بر دست و شکر در آن ریخته و بعرق بر آمیخته، ندانم بگلابش مطیّب کرده بود یا قطره‌ای چند از گل رویش در آن چکیده. فی الجمله شراب از دست نگارینش بر گرفتم و بخوردم و عمر از سر گرفتم.[66]

[64] Andrews and Kalpaklı, *The Age of the Beloveds*, 56-7.

[65] Nasrollah Pourjavady, "Stories of Ahmad al-Ghazali 'Playing the Witness' in Tabriz (Shams-i Tabrizi's Interest in *shāhid-bāzī*), *Reason and inspiration in Islam: theology, philosophy and mysticism in Muslim thought: essays in honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 204; Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 111-7.

[66] Persian and English from Sa'di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Sa'*di, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Bethesda, Maryland, 2008), 114.

Nineteenth-century translations of this passage consistently identified the beauty as a woman, while a more recent translation by Wheeler Thackston (reproduced above) uses masculine pronouns.[67] Sa'di's story is just one among many examples in which the subject's identity is now being reconsidered in light of further research into the social dynamics of their respective periods and more open mindedness towards same sex desire. Intriguingly, this is not, however, just a modern or textual translation issue but also produced different interpretations in pre-modern paintings. In a 1427 CE edition of the *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) penned for the Timurid prince Baysunghur (1397-1433 CE), Sa'di is met at the door by a young woman, identifiable by the styling of her hair (figs. 2.2-2.3).[68] In contrast, a later 16th-century Ottoman copy of the Persian text shows the poet met by a young man in a turban, sleeveless robe and sheer silk undershirt (figs. 2.4-2.5). Just as readers might imagine the beloved in this instance as a gender of their choosing, so too did artists sometimes decide how to interpret their subject.

Scholarly interpretations frequently categorize the language used to describe the beloved as ambiguous and androgynous, each term pointing to the mystery of the subject. What is the value of such terms for understanding how the beauty of the beloved was understood? The latter is bifurcated along the lines of the binary, derived from the Latin for man (*andro*) and woman (*gyno*), and thus implying that masculine and feminine traits are legible without interrogating why a trait is exactly masculine or feminine.[69] Tracy Hargreaves points out in her study of

[67] For nineteenth-century translations see Sa'di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan or Rose Garden*, trans. Francis Gladwin (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 282-283; Edward Rehatsek's 1888 translation, Sa'di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan or rose garden of Sa'di*, trans. Edward Rehatsek and ed. David Rosembaum (San Bernadino, CA: Omphaloskepsis Books, 2010), 149-150. For a more recent translation see Sa'di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan*, trans. Wheeler Thackston, 114.

[68] This is similar to the hairstyle of Gurdafarid discussed in the preceding chapter.

[69] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "androgynous," accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/androgynous. Furthermore, there is a tendency to read for gender harmony in androgyny, for

androgyny in literature that "the androgyne (or more generally, androgyny) is always bounded by the binary categories it also seeks to challenge."[70] In relation to beauty features, which are not differentiated by gender, the term therefore assumes difference where there may be none. If the physical features of the beloved, including terms such as "moon face" or "cypress body" are not clearly assignable to a particular gender, they cannot be considered androgynous. Rather such beauty descriptors invite us into a more gender-neutral understanding of beauty, which is lost with the term "androgynous."

Ambiguity provides a more fertile ground for examining the beloved. Ambiguity served a vital purpose in Persian poetry that poets exploited and succinctly captures the status of the subject in many poems addressed to the beloved, as well as a broader mindset around gender in the pre-modern period.[71] As Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı write about Ottoman poetry addressed to the beloved, "This ambiguity signals a very important point, one that we will raise again and again. Gender roles in early-modem societies are not simple binaries, as we are accustomed to expect. One cannot say, for certain, that this or that behavior, this or that role, is strictly a male or female thing."[72] Ambiguity generates a space in which gender is more complex

example that a character displays the "right amount" of male-to-female traits to be androgynous, again reinforcing an idea that certain traits must be inherently one or the other. Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University, 2018) 215 and 284, note 19.

[70] Tracy Hargreaves, *Androgyny in Modern Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 9. Contemporary usage of the term can subsume a range of gender identities, including non-binarism. However, in this case I have chosen to see non-binarism as a more specific and accurate interpretation of beauty tropes in Persian literature than the much broader "androgyny," which can reinforce the binary.

[71] Meisami*, Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 245-6; Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 3 and 11. For a broader discussion on ambiguity in the pre-modern Islamic world, see Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

[72] Andrews and Kalpaklı, *The Age of the Beloveds*, 39.

than the two poles of a binary allows, and suggests it does not necessarily need to be delineated, indeed, it may prove more useful to a person's intent if it is not.

An example of this can be seen in translations of the opening scene to the story of Bizhan and Maniza in the *Shahnama*. Firdawsi begins his story by describing a night in which he wakes in terror and is joined by a "kind one" (*mihrban*) who then proceeds to tell him the story of Bizhan and Maniza. In Firdawsi's description of the kind one who comforts him, he uses tropes such as "moon-faced" (ماهروی) and "cypress one" (سرو), terms which hint of the beauty of the kind one but do little to clarify gender.[73] In his translation of the *Shahnama*, Dick Davis identifies the figure as a woman.[74] In response, Hamid Dabashi points out that Firdawsi's language is intentionally unspecific and instead argues for the gender neutrality of the figure. Dabashi writes, "It could be a male, a female, or just a figment of Ferdowsi's poetic imagination, or what I propose to be simply a narratological trope. By falsely gendering it we rob the metaphor of its poetic potency."[75] Dabashi alludes to the rich tradition of intentional ambiguity in Persian poetry, one that was exploited by poets such as Firdawsi to create complex scenes in which the gender identity of the subject is purposefully open-ended. Our contemporary desire to specify gender may be at odds with a pre-modern tendency to do just the opposite.

Returning to Andrews and Kalpaklı, despite the authors' admission that gender in the pre-modern period was more complex than a binary allows, they attribute the use of ambiguity to the

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[73] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 3*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 305.

[74] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 332-3. Cameron Cross points out that this is a reasonable translation given historical context and the fact that such nightly tales are typically associated with women. Cross, *Love at a Crux,* 55 and fn. 118.

[75] Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 82. See also Cameron Cross, "Poetic Alchemy: The Rise of Romance from a Persian Perspective: Dedicated to Julie Scott Meisami, 1937–2021," *Medieval Encounters* 30, nos. 5-6 (2024): 586-637.

impropriety of directly referencing women in poetry and their sequestration in society more broadly. They then reassign the attributes of the beautiful beloved to the young man, which in some cases, is used to mask a female subject.[76] Rather than see that beauty also does not adhere to "simple binaries" they re-categorize the previously ambiguous terms as that of the young beardless male. While the beloved has been rightly recontextualized in the homosocial environment in which it was initially conceived, we risk an overcorrection to male-male relationships. As Montazeri points out, such "an excessive interpretation of the rhetorical in correspondence with a presumed sociohistorical reality," does not align with "non-literal language of Persian lyric poetry."[77] While I disagree with Montazeri's interpretation of sideburns as a masculine trait, as discussed above, I do agree with her argument that ambiguous descriptions of the beloved should be left open to multiple levels of interpretation.

A return to the very open-endedness of gender identity allows for more productive considerations of the relationships between gender, desire, and beauty.[78] Indeed, the push towards identifying the gender of the beloved, and therefore the sexual and erotic dynamics at play in a given poem, has overtaken a more intriguing facet, namely shared features of beauty amongst different genders. In terms of bodies, ideal beauty was conceived as a set of traits that transcended distinctions between the sexes. Beautiful bodies adhere to an ideal of symmetry (here used in the sense of likeness), one that is distinct from our contemporary notion of highly

[76] As they write, "The beloved is most often male—a young male—and constitutes an ideal of male beauty. Where female beloveds are intended, or where a poem is addressed to a female, there is little, if any, gendered difference in the description of the looks or behavior of the beloved." Andrews and Kalpaklı, *The Age of the Beloveds*, 54.
[77] Montazeri, "Who Says," 133 and 134.

[78] Thomas Bauer argues that ambiguity is fundamental to an entire genre of love poetry that he calls the "apologetic epigram on the beard's growth" in which adult male poets lament the loss of a love whose beard has grown and argue for a continuation of the relationship. Bauer, *Culture of Ambiguity*, 196.

distinguished and binaristic bodies.[79] A closer look at romance, where the subjects' gender identities are known but they are described with the same undifferentiated tropes used in lyric poetry, demonstrates such non-differentiation of the beautiful body.

Love and Beauty: Affinity in Romance

From approximately the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the romance emerged as a vital literary genre in Iran, western Europe, Byzantium, the Caucasus, and the Arab world.[80] In Iran, courtly verse romances focused on love as a journey that elevated its hero and served as a vehicle for disseminating ethics.[81] In romances such as Fakhraddin Gurgani's (11th century) *Vis and Ramin*, Nizami's *Khusraw and Shirin*, and *Layli and Majnun*, we are provided with tales of lovers who struggle to unite, and in this struggle develop as moral individuals. Embedded within these contexts are characters' physical descriptions, which utilize the same terms and tropes found in lyric poetry. In contrast to lyric poetry, however, the identities of the subjects, both gender and otherwise, are more apparent given their placement within a narrative. Beyond providing the necessary details to differentiate subjects, the romance also provides further clues to perceptions around beauty and a preference for similarity, in body and character, between lovers.

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[79] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 74. The discourse on beauty is, of course, full of different opinions, particularly due to the popularity of debate literature where people debated for the merits of one subject over another, for example the greater beauty of one gender of another. See examples in Rosenthal, "Male and Female," 24-53.

[80] Cross, "Poetic Alchemy," 3.

[81] Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, chapters 3-5.

A noted feature of the romance is affinity (*munasaba* or *mujasana*) between the two lovers, which can manifest in multiple ways including physical similarity, class, or even blood relation.[82] The lovers are congruous with one another in a particular manner that attracts them to each other, often at first, and cements their bond through the trials and tribulations that unfold over the course of the story. The idea of affinity between lovers is rooted in antiquity, particularly Aristophanes' discourse in Plato's *Symposium* in which he describes that humans were once spheres that Zeus split in two and love is rooted in our desire to recognize our other half and reunite. As Cameron Cross summarizes, this concept of love is "the Self recognizing itself in beholding the Other" and it is fundamental to the romance genre in Greek novels, Arabic love stories, and Persian romances.[83] This concept also worked itself into broader Muslim conceptions of love.[84] For example, in Khwaju Kirmani's *Humay and Humayun*, Humay states that Humayun "is his own soul," drawing on the Sufi idea that the beloved and lover share the same soul.[85]

In stories such as *Vis and Ramin* and *Varqa and Gulshah* this manifested in descriptions of the lovers as halves of the same thing. For example, in the former story, when Vis's nurse tries to convince her to love Ramin, she says they are like an apple cut in two.[86] Later, when Vis first sees Ramin, she is described as recognizing her soul in him.[87] Unsurprisingly, lovers are also

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[82] Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 69-70.

[83] Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 69-70.

[84] As Joseph Norment Bell writes, "By the late second/ early ninth century at the latest, affinity or similarity (*munasaba, mushakala*, *mujanasa*, *tashakul*, etc.) together with the corollary motif of the mingling of lovers' souls, seems to have become the most widely agreed upon element in Muslim definitions of love." Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979) 109.

[85] Norozi, "The Verse Romance," 42.

[86] Fakhr al-Din Gurgani, *Vis and Ramin*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) 95.

[87] Gurgani, *Vis and Ramin*, 115.

portrayed as great beauties with similar descriptive terms, as with lyric poetry, such as cypress statured or compared with celestial bodies such as the sun and moon. In some instances, physical similitude is such that the lovers are described as twins. As Cross points out, ‘Ayyuqi takes this even in his further in his *Varqa and Gulshah*, employing the non-differentiation of Persian pronouns to replicate affinity in his description of their bodies in such a manner that he “flattens them into interchangeable ideal figures whose only match is their mirror image.”[88]

> They were like two cypresses in the orchard, swaying to their beloved’s delight: one with moon-like face, one with tulip cheeks, one with silver arms, one with cypress height. They lived together in one place, for this was the uncle’s son, and that the uncle’s daughter. By the passage of divine decree and the turning of the sphere, love took hold even in their childhood.[89]

Thus, a key feature of affinity is the way in which it “runs across (and despite?) the lines of gender…,” tracing an ideal that exists beyond the relevance of the physical body and gender differentiation.[90] The beautiful bodies of the lovers are similar because they are a material reflection of their appropriateness for one another. Their physical similarity, however, also clarifies the non-differentiation of beauty that was expressed in lyric poetry. Rather than youthful males as the ideal beauty that is then transferred to women, the romance points to beauty that transcends gender.[91] As we shall see later, this has parallels in painted representations of lovers who appear extremely similar to one another.

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[88] Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 72.

[89] Cited in Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 72.

[90] Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 70.

[91] Montazeri, “Who Says,” 142.

Viewing Two Moons: The Case of Qamar al-Zaman and Budur

A direct understanding of the implications of affinity on the physical body and formulation of shared beauty across gender lines is evident from an Arabic story found in the earliest known copy of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The story of Qamar al-Zaman and Budur is rife with examples, including the ability of the heroine Budur to pass as Qamar al-Zaman, eventually marrying a princess under his guise and becoming a king. One of the most compelling scenes occurs in a nocturnal tryst facilitated by the *jinniyya* Maimuna and an *'ifrit* named Dahnash, who kidnap the youths in their sleep and bring them together as part of a debate about which of them, and by extension which gender, is more beautiful. Once in proximity with one another, the two young lovers are described several times as being identical in loveliness, like twins, and "equally matched in beauty and grace," leaving Maimuna and Dahnash at an impasse.[92]

The two summon a second *'ifrit*, Qashqash, to break the tie, and he responds "If you want the truth, I have to say that these two are an exact match in the splendour of their beauty, grace and perfection, and they cannot be separated on the grounds that one is male and the other female. I have another idea, which is to wake each of them in turn without the other knowing. Whichever then burns with love for the other must be the less beautiful."[93] Ultimately, Budur fails the test, giving into her desire and kissing and caressing Qamar al-Zaman in his sleep. As

[92] *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights, volume I*, trans. Malcolm C. Lyons and Ursula Lyons (New York: Penguin, 2010) 707-8, 711.

[93] *The Arabian Nights*, 712.

Zayde Antrim points out in her study of the tale, the debate is thus not resolved in terms of one body triumphing over another but rather gendered behavior and a default to the pervasive trope of women's insatiable sexual appetites.[94] Qamar al-Zaman is able to control his lust for Budur, while Budur is not and therefore the latter's beauty is determined to be superior.

Antrim's analysis of the story of Qamar al-Zaman and Budur raises important points for considering the relationship between desire, beauty, and gender. Antrim argues that the scholarly focus on same-sex dynamics obscures the consistency with which the bodies of young men and women are described as similar. In a move that shifts away from a focus on homo-/hetero-sexual dynamics, she seeks to untangle eroticism from notions of sexual difference and instead argues for an "erotics of sameness, in which bodies are described in ways that stress their similarities, regardless of gender."[95] In this case, Budur and Qamar al-Zaman are considered particularly well suited for one another due to their similarities in appearance, parallel status as members of the same royal social class and their youthfulness.[96]

These elements are not exclusive to the pair, however, as later in the story Budur, disguised in Qamar al-Zaman's clothing, is offered the hand of a princess, Hayat al-Nufus, who is described as matching her in beauty and loveliness.[97] They marry and are described as "two moons that had risen at the same time or two suns that had met."[98] We can assume that the lovers

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[94] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 15, 26.

[95] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 2.

[96] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 16,17. When difference does emerge in this story, it is in terms of gendered behavior. Although genitalia are mentioned, this occurs only briefly and not within the context of contributing to either character's beauty.

[97] *The Arabian Nights*, 753.

[98] *The Arabian Nights*, 753.

are only distinguishable to the court as male and female based on their dress, pointing to the importance of costume but also the deceptiveness of bodies in terms of their reliability in marking out gender. As Antrim points out, "…the ease with which characters cross-dress convincingly in several stories [in the Thousand and One Nights] suggests that bodies were imagined to be either so similar or so variable as to provide little visual evidence of sex or gender beyond what clothing was understood to convey."[99] The sexual difference of bodies, particularly between youthful royal lovers is once again downplayed here. It is made further irrelevant when Qamar al-Zaman arrives as Budur's court, and after some gender-bending trickery on her part, she finally reveals her identity to him, the pair are reunited as wife and husband, and Budur suggests Qamar al-Zaman marry Hayat al-Nufus, thus creating a trifecta of youthful, beautiful lovers.

The story of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman, and in particular Antrim's interpretation of it, provides a new lens through which to consider ideal beauty and its non-differentiation via the body. As we have seen with lyric poetry, scholars have often read this non-differentiation as ambiguity. While it is certainly true that ambiguity plays an important role in Persian literature, allowing for many layers of meaning within a single description, interpreting gender undifferentiated notions of beauty only in this manner suggests that the body can be clarified if we can just we get the right clue. Instead, as Antrim shows through her analysis of the story of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman, the erotics of beauty in the romance is a space in which gender is diminished and sameness is not only appreciated but *preferred*.

[99] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 11.

Indeed, Antrim argues that this story demonstrates that erotic embodiment in the form of the beautiful person was not conceived in terms of a binary construction of sex.[100] Rather, beauty provides a space to consider the ways in which our contemporary perceptions of gender based on a binaristic divide, articulated in gendered terms such as "handsome" and "pretty," break down. As this tale demonstrates, there was a conception of beauty that transcended the sexed body and favored a notion of desire and compatibility based in sameness. As shown by Cross, this trend was not limited to the Islamic world but derived from Greek romances.[101] It is also found in European courtly romances, such as *Floire and Blancheflor*. Hotchkiss notes in her study that, "Descriptions of beauty in courtly epic not only transcend sexual identity but also admit the similarity between the sexes. Beautiful men and women are said to resemble one another in several portraits of celebrated couples in medieval romances."[102] This phenomenon thus was not isolated but extended beyond the Persianate realm to Europe.

The diminishing of the gendered body leads one to question whether beauty then transcends other materializations of the body, for example ethnic distinctions. In her analysis of the tale of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman, Wendy Doniger argues that the lovers are described as coming from distinct ethnic backgrounds, with the former likely Persian and the latter Chinese. Hayat al-Nufus, as the daughter of the king of the Ebony Isles, is possibly a dark-skinned

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[100] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 1.

[101] Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 71.

[102] Valerie Hotchkiss uses this to clarify that the women who cross dress were not "defeminized," since "medieval notions of male and female beauty are compatible." Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, Chapter 7, 120. Later she writes, "…in the context of courtly fiction, the body does not always exhibit sexual differences. Since the vocabulary for portraying beauty differs little for the sexes and, moreover, the heroes and heroines of courtly romance often look alike, we can conclude that the courtly concept of beauty hints at androgyny…. Gender is expressed, first and foremost by clothing; beauty, however, transcends gender markers. In courtly tales of disguise, a woman passing as a man conforms to the social code, thanks largely to the unisexuality of physical beauty." Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 122.

woman.[103] Yet, in this tale ethnic difference, like sexual difference, is not emphasized. Elsewhere in the *Thousand and One Nights*, racial difference does play a role in scenarios in which a couples' pairing is meant to be seen as incongruous, either for comic effect or as a point of derision, suggesting that the "erotics of sameness" may also transcend the racialized body.[104] There is an abundance of Persian lyric poetry that speaks to a racial hierarchy of beauty, for example that which draws on the trope of the Hindu and Turk.[105] Although one might lust after the Hindu, it was the Turk that was superior in beauty.[106] This may, however, have more to do with the pairing of opposites for poetic effect, such as tropes of the moth and the flame or the nightingale and the rose, than demonstrating a broader beauty ideal. Rather, the relevance of race and ethnicity in the "erotics of sameness" seems therefore to be a matter of context and the degree to which a poet sought to demonstrate the affinity of the two lovers.

Within the romance, nobility of character, rather than race, was of far more importance in determining a character's beauty. In alignment with the genre's emphasis on the development of a hero's moral character, a final condition of beauty is its relationship to and reflection of the inner self. As Julie Meisami writes, "In medieval thought, beauty is a moral, and not merely a

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[103] Wendy Doniger, "The Rings of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman," in *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner (New York: New York University Press, 2013) 115.

[104] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 19. This is also the case in Persian lyric poetry, for example Sa'di's moralizing poem about the elderly man who sees a young white woman embracing a black man and breaks up the pair but then is harassed by the woman for his interference. See Sa'di of Shiraz, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned: the Būstān of Sa'dī*, trans. G.M. Wickens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 182-3.

[105] The former was commonly associated with dark skin (sometimes black) and slavery, while the latter was defined by white skin, as well as narrow eyes, a slim waist, and tall stature, and could be described in contradistinction to the Hindu as a warrior or ruler. As Dominic Brookshaw points out, however, "Turk" was a complicated term that could also allude to a passive young male. Annemarie Schimmel, "Turk and Hindu: A Poetical Image and Its Application to Historical Facts," in *Islam and Cultural Changes in the Middle Ages*, ed. Speros Vryonis, Jr. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 107-126; Dominic P. Brookshaw "To be Feared and Desired: Turks in the Collected Works of 'Ubayd-i Zākānī," *Iranian Studies* 42:5 (2009): 725-744.

[106] Brookshaw, "To be Feared and Desired," 739.

physical, quality: outward beauty is the reflection of the soul's inner light."[107] Lovers are meant to possess noble characters, a feature that was understood to contribute to their physical appearance and thus can also be read as a contributing factor in the shared beauty ideal.[108] Islamic ethical and eschatological texts similarly expound this idea as well. For al-Ghazali, the highest form of external beauty was a reflection of the internal perfection of the self, while it was believed that the inhabitants of Paradise would be recognizable by their beautiful, shining faces.[109] The corruption of character could also be seen in the body, a topic I analyze with *div*s in the next chapter. Physical decline in relation to moral decline is particularly relevant in Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, as we will see in the next section, where the titular Zulaikha slips into blindness, poverty and old age due to her moral decline. Once she expresses humility and devotion to God, she is however restored to youth, beauty, eyesight, and wealth, returning her to physical affinity with Yusuf.

As a final point, the similarity of lovers did not override gendered social norms, where patriarchal standards still held. [110] In real terms, as Antrim writes of Everett Rowson's study of

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[107] Meisami, 150. Meisami cites for example, the famous bathing scene in Nizami's *Khusraw and Shirin*, where the semi-nude Shirin's nobility and beauty is on display while Khusraw's own identity is cast in doubt due to his disguise but his beauty and later chivalrous behavior confirms his royalty.

[108] In some instances, noble character also reflected noble class. Many of the lovers of Persian romances are part of nobility, either as princes and princesses or children of the highest-ranking members of their tribes, and, at least for the male characters, their moral development through love often helped to develop them as rightful rulers. This is also found in the context of European literature, in some cases overriding gender as a defining feature of a person's identity. For example, Masha Raskolnikov argues that, in the gender bending romance of Silence, nobility played such a large role in defining Silence's identity and that "nobility 'wins' over masculinity or femininity as Silence's dominant trait." Masha Raskolnikov, "Without Magic or Miracle: The 'Romance of Silence' and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 185.

[109] Richard Ettinghausen, "Al-Ghazzāli on Beauty," in *Art and Thought*, ed. K. Bharatha Iyer (London: Luzac and Co., Ltd., 1947), 161 and Christian Lange, "'On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black' (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in the Arabo-Islamic Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 4 (2007): 432.

[110] As Cross points out this is a key tension in Vis's struggle between Self and Other. Cross, *Love at a Crux*, 75.

Abbasid-era literature, "…difference structured *all* normative sexual relationships, but power difference, expressed in terms of gender, age, religion, or legal status, mattered more than difference derived from the sexed body."[111] While the sexed body may not be the source of difference, the gender hierarchy conditioned what was considered a socially appropriate pair of lovers. The normative pairing in romance is the youthful male and female. The romance of Mahmud and Ayaz, as well as numerous lyric poems in which an older male desires a beardless youth point, to the acceptability of this pairing. Meanwhile, romantic or erotic love between two elite (bearded) men was socially condemned and does not find expression in narrative literature.[112] Romantic affinity thus had its social limits that were based in appropriate gender pairings.[113]

From a practical standpoint, painted bodies can and do point to distinctions of gender, as we have seen in Chapter One, for example with the presence and absence of hair. When it comes to ideal beauty within lyric poetry and romances, however, the similarity of lovers was both normative and preferred. While scholars have attributed the lack of gender distinction between beautiful subjects to androgyny, this ignores the more pervasive fact that the attributes of a beautiful person, be it their cypress stature or moon face, were not assigned to a particular gender. Rather they demonstrate an ideal that existed beyond the material body and only refers to it in abstracted terms. Re-approaching the lover and the beloved through the lens of the "erotics of sameness" provides a new angle for reading visually similar bodies in Persianate paintings. In

[111] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 5.

[112] Antrim, "*Qamarayn*," 5 and Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty," 133.

[113] It is due to such social rules that the *amrad* can be understood as a distinct gender. Beardless male youths were not considered fully male and thus operated by different rules in their given societies. Bauer, "Ambivalent Beauty," 132.

the next section I will examine paintings from manuscripts of Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaykha* to demonstrate how such similarity manifested in the visual arts.

Visualizing the "Erotics of Sameness:" Yusuf and Zulaykha

One of the most frequently invoked beautiful people in Persian literature is the prophet Yusuf.[114] The tale of Yusuf appears in the Qur'an (as well as the Jewish and Christian Bibles) and took on numerous variations and expansions over time, including through *tafsir* and *Qisas al-Anbiya'* (Stories of the Prophets).[115] The versified iteration penned by Jami in 1483 CE transforms the story into a romance and emphasizes the relationship between Yusuf and Zulaykha, providing detailed background and embellishment to each of the characters, and tracing their love quest. Drawing upon Sufi mysticism, Jami crafted a version of the story in which Yusuf is the penultimate beloved and Zulaykha is the lover who overcomes challenges to unite with him, in the process gaining awareness of the higher reality of God's beauty and love.[116] As Yohannan summarizes, Zulaykha becomes "a prototype of the Sufi mystic enthusiast whose worship of beauty and love must pass from the realm of the senses to a sort of Platonic

[114] For examples and discussion, see Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 64-68.

[115] For a broader discussion of the tale and its many manifestations around the world, see John D. Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature: An Anthology of the Story of the Chaste Youth and the Lustful Stepmother* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1968); Gayane Karen Mergeurian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 490. The name *Qisas al-Anbiya'* was applied to several different texts recording the lives of important prophets in Islam, including Yusuf. For more on this genre of text and particularly its evolution, see Rachel Milstein, Karin Rührdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of* Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999) 7-10.

[116] In contrast, in the *Qisas al-Anbiya'* Zulaykha is not emphasized. Milsten, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets*, 124.

realm of essences."[117] As such, Jami's text is rich with metaphor and was approachable on multiple levels by a savvy reader.

Jami develops Zulaykha as a fully fleshed protagonist, providing an opportunity to examine how beauty is depicted between the lovers and to examine the "erotics of sameness" in a Persian visual context.[118] Yusuf's depiction, which many scholars have described as effeminate or androgynous, instead demonstrates the highest standard of what a beautiful youth, regardless of gender, should look like. Though Yusuf and Zulaykha are not described as twins, as other lovers are, they are described in related terms through tropes such as moon-faced and cypress-bodied, sharing in an idealized form of beauty. Paintings of the lovers also show them as similar, with faces that are nearly indistinguishable from one another, and which require the viewer to look to clothing and hair to differentiate between them. The narrative details of Zulaykha's physical and spiritual transformations over the course of the tale also demonstrate the role of noble character in determining one's physical appearance, and through her movement away from and back to the beauty ideal reveal how similarity was depicted.

In Jami's telling of the tale, Zulaykha dreams of Yusuf before ever seeing him in person and falls madly in love, becoming singularly obsessed with finding him, rejecting the many marriage proposals that come her way. Through the dreams, however, she learns that he is the vizier of Egypt, so agrees with her father that she will marry the vizier, only to find his is not Yusuf but another man. Yusuf is in Canaan with his father Jacob and his brothers who despise him and conspire against him, leading to his eventual entrapment in a well, where he is left for

[117] Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, 162.

[118] Chad Kia states there are 108 illustrated manuscripts of *Yusuf and Zulaykha*. Chad Kia, "Joseph iii. In Persian Art," In *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* online edition, article published 15 June 2009. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/joseph-iii-in-persian-art.

dead and only saved by the grace of God and help of the archangel Gabriel. He is rescued by a passing merchant, who sells Yusuf at a market in Egypt, where Zulaykha finally finds him, purchases him and transfers him to her household. Then begin her attempts to seduce him, including by famously building a pleasure palace that depicts their coupling.

Though tempted, Yusuf consistently rebuffs Zulaykha's advances in part because she is a married woman but also due to her worship of idols. Embarrassed by his rebuttals, Zulaykha accuses him of sexual assault, but Yusuf is cleared by a speaking infant. Yusuf is ultimately imprisoned but eventually freed thanks to his prophetic gifts, which gain him an audience with the king and eventually the position of vizier. In this time Zulaykha has continued to love Yusuf, spending all her money on news of him and becoming a pauper, as well as advancing into old age and losing her eyesight from the burden of love. The process of suffering leads Zulaykha to abandon idolatry and commit to God, which in turn allows her to finally encounter Yusuf and explain her intense love for him. In his empathy, Yusuf grants her wish to be restored to youth and eyesight, and, after receiving the blessing of the archangel Gabriel, the two marry.

The conflicts and tensions of the romance are undergirded by asymmetries that exist between the two lovers. Yusuf is initially a slave to Zulaykha, but then she wastes her fortune and ends up destitute while Yusuf takes on the political role of her deceased husband as vizier. More importantly, in an Islamic context, Zulaykha is spiritually lacking due to her worship of idols and therefore unsuitable as a partner for Yusuf. The fulfillment of their love hinges on Zulaykha's spiritual and moral improvement, by devoting herself to God (it also depends on the very practical matter that eventually her husband dies and she is once again free to marry). Her physical appearance mirrors these shifts, as her lovesickness drives her to poverty as well as old age and blindness. Once she spiritually purifies herself, she is cured and restored to youth. By the

end of Jami's story, the affinity of class, spiritual devotion, and physical appearance of the two lovers is established and they can be wed.

Picturing the Prophet and the Piner

Despite such asymmetries, in visual representations of the tale the two youths are typically shown as similar (figs. 2.6-2.13), except for when Zulaykha is destitute. Zulaykha's appearance as a youthful beauty is typological, following the trope of the moon face, and with little to particularly distinguish her from other female characters except for the occasional inclusion of a crown and narrative context. The standard representation of Yusuf in paintings is as a beardless youth with a slender body and the features of a moon-face. He is shown with a flaming nimbus to mark out his holy status and frequently with long hair that is sectioned or braided in two plaits that descend on either side of his neck.[119] In some instances, he is also shown with beauty marks on his face and neck. Although Yusuf ages in Jami's story and eventually rises in political power as the vizier, he is not shown with a beard, as would be expected of an adult male, and is instead consistently shown as a beardless youth.[120] As such, Yusuf and Zulaikha are only distinguishable from one another through their dress, narrative details, and the presence of Yusuf's halo. Their faces and slender bodies tend to be highly similar to one another, as well as that of the other youthful beauties that surround them, including maidservants and young male attendants.

[119] For examples, see Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.5.3; The David Collection, 53/1980; British Library, Or 4389 and Or. 4122; Bodleian Library, MS. Elliott 418.

[120] A rare exception from a 19th-century manuscript shows Yusuf with a white beard upon his death. New York Public, Pers. Ms. 36, fol. 159r.

This is well demonstrated in the painting of Yusuf tending his flock (figs. 2.6-2.8) from the luxurious *Haft Awrang* produced for Sultan Ibrahim Mirza (1540-1577 CE), dated to 1556-65 CE.[121] Here, Yusuf is shown leaning on a staff and watching over his flock while Zulaykha sits in a tent nearby, gazing upon him. In between them is another young female with a child, while in the background an elder bearded man is shown carrying sticks.[122] Excluding hair and jewelry, the faces of the two beauties are nearly identical (figs. 2.7-2.8), with only the addition of a few more beauty marks on Zulaykha's face. The young woman between them has a similarly rendered face, indicating that all three of these people align with a beauty ideal that seemingly diminishes their individuality, in the same way that the widespread use of the literary metaphors for "moon-faced" beauties do.

That the youthful beauties' similar depictions are the result of an intentional decision on the part of the artist, and not the result of repetition caused by the artist copying or a lack of creativity is reinforced by the older man in the background (and similar figures throughout the manuscript) who is more realistically rendered with wrinkles and sagging skin to reflect his age, status and non-adherence to a concept of idealized beauty. His presence heightens the similarity of the three beautiful youths and the artistic intentionality in rendering them this way, signaling that they partake in a form of idealized beauty that creates a sameness between them and diminishes individuality.

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[121] For more on this manuscript see Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's Haft Awrang: A Princely Manuscript from Sixteenth-Century Iran* (New Haven and Washington, D.C.: Yale University Press and Smithsonian Institution, 1997).

[122] The young woman and child may have been included as an allusion to the fact that Zulaykha convinced the Vizier to adopt Yusuf as a son. The paintings in this manuscript, however, are loaded with scenes of daily life that deviate from the narrative they depict, and the woman and child may simply be one more such addition.

Such similarity is visually reinforced in a 1560-1599 CE painting of Yusuf and Zulaykha seated in the pleasure palace she builds that is decorated with scenes of the lovers together (figs. 2.9-2.11). Jami describes the palace in detail, including that decorative renderings of the couple in embrace and that there was nowhere in the palace that they were not visible.[123] In this late sixteenth-century painting, the artist captures this description by showing the lovers rendered on the wall above their heads, in pairs of painted doors, and tiled wall panels. While the real-life couple faces each other in the center of a room, they are surrounded by their amorous doubles who play out Zulaykha's lust. Though less finely rendered than the central couple, their decorative doppelgangers reiterate the appearance of the main Yusuf and Zulaikha, including their similar faces, in miniature. The multiples visually reaffirm the affinity of the two lovers.

Scholars such as Dick Davis and Afsaneh Najmabadi have argued that the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha is primarily about male homoeroticism and a presumably male reader's "desire for a supremely beautiful young man."[124] The similarity of Yusuf and Zulaykha in paintings, however, suggests that both subjects are available as objects of desire. The erotic potential of both Yusuf and Zulaykha is apparent in a pair of paintings from a manuscript produced in Bukhara in 1683-4 CE (1095 AH).[125] The first painting shows Zulaykha's failed seduction of Yusuf, when she grabs the back of his garment as he flees, tearing it (fig. 2.12). Here the two lovers both have round moon faces framed by dark hair and adorned with beauty marks.

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[123] Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 78.

[124] Najmabadi, "Reading—and enjoying," 204.

[125] The style of these paintings suggests that the artist, Muhammad Rafi, was trained in India and Kjeld von Folsach suggests he might have been among the artists forced to leave India during the Great Mughal Awrangzeb. In order to maintain a manageable corpus of works, I have not addressed paintings from India in this study but have made an exception in this instance due to the manuscript's production for a Bukharan patron. Kjeld von Folsach, *Art from the World of Islam in the David Collection* (Copenhagen: The David Collection, 2001), 47-8.

Difference is marked by their dress and Yusuf's round halo, which is subtly painted. In the second painting, the lovers are reversed, with a seated Yusuf grasping the hem of Zulaykha's dress (fig. 2.13). Though in both paintings the erotic potential is meant to be between the two youths, Yusuf gazes directly out of the frame in both instances, as he does throughout the manuscript, drawing the viewer into their relationship in a clear form of visual seduction. While Zulaykha is not shown with such a direct gaze (instead she is focused on her beloved), the role reversal shows that she can be both lover and beloved, not only for Yusuf but also the viewer. Reframing beauty as neither particularly masculine or feminine reshapes the dynamics of how we understand the reception of such paintings and the story. The similarity of the lovers makes them both available for the viewer to gaze upon and desire, thus suggesting that a range of erotic pairings is available through the story, its visual interpretations, and the audience engaging with it.

Yusuf's depiction as a slender bodied beardless youth with long hair has led some scholars to label him as androgynous and effeminate.[126] The latter term assumes that the features that make Yusuf beautiful can be clearly attributable as feminine, while androgyny assumes that his appearance is a combination of definitively male and female traits. Yet, as we have seen, the features of Yusuf's beauty, such as his moon-face and slender body were not fixed to one gender. Even long hair, which was often associated with women and could serve to distinguish the gender identity of a character in a particular context, such as Gurdafarid, is not fully determined

[126] For example, in her analysis of four nineteenth- and twentieth-century art objects that depict Yusuf, Claudia Yaghoobi makes a case that Yusuf's beauty challenges normative assumptions about masculinity and male beauty thus "queering" the notion of the latter. Her argument, however, relies on contemporary assumptions about gender to frame what was considered "normative" and despite briefly acknowledging that human beauty was described "with less concern for gender distinction" continues to rely on the binary to interpret Yusuf's depiction, including arguing that he is emasculated and feminized by the gaze of Zulaykha and the women of Memphis that witness his beauty. Claudia Yaghoobi, "Yusuf's 'Queer' Beauty in Persian Cultural Productions," *The Comparatist* 40, no. 1 (October 2016): 253 and 257.

as feminine. As discussed in the previous chapter, men also wore their hair long at various times, including the Prophet Muhammad who had shoulder-length hair plaits. Furthermore, hair's mutability meant that the same hairstyle could signal different things, depending on context.[127] While we can determinedly use head hair as a marker of Gurdafarid's gender identity this is due in large part to the narrative context that Firdawsi provides. In the context of Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, it is instead one more marker of Yusuf's beauty, rather than his gender.

Misreadings of Yusuf's long hair have caused some scholars to misidentify him as Zulaykha, for example when he is shown bathing.[128] An early sixteenth-century painting (fig. 2.14) draws a direct visual equivalence between Yusuf and another female beloved, Shirin from Nizami's *Khusraw and Shirin*, by copying the famous and oft-repeated composition of the female beloved bathing (fig. 2.15).[129] The painting depicts Yusuf washing in a body of water, his chest bare and a blue cloth wrapped around his waist, his long hair descending over his shoulders, exactly as Shirin is shown. He is even accompanied by a horse, a detail not included in Jami's tale but certainly based upon depictions of Shirin with the famous horse Shabdiz. Yusuf is also watched by a male figure, who in paintings of Shirin is meant to be Khusraw, but here may be the Aziz.[130] Both Yusuf and Shirin are shown seated in the river in a blue textile, with moon faces, slender bodies and long hair. That this is Yusuf and not Shirin is made clear by

[127] Bashir, "The Mediation of Hair," 91-2.

[128] For example, in his catalogue of manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, B.W. Robinson identities folio 24v of Ms. Elliott 418 (1595 CE/ 1004 AH) as Zulaykha bathing in the Nile, when it is in fact Yusuf. B.W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Paintings in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) 133.

[129] Intriguingly, this is not the only instance of a male figure shown bathing in the same manner as Shirin. For an example of Khizr bathing, see Cambridge University Library, Add. 3139, fol. 374r.

[130] In more typical depictions of Yusuf bathing in the Nile, he is frequently shown watched by others, but usually there are groups of men, rather than a single figure. See for example British Library Or. 4122, fol. 73r and British Library Or. 4389, fol. 59r.

the flaming nimbus and a turban placed above, on the tree's branch. The recycling of such a famous composition for a male beauty is the visual equivalent of the literary tactic discussed above in which poets would cite a famous lover like Shirin not to evoke gender but equate their beauty and status as a beloved. Rather than an example of Yusuf's femininity or androgyny, this painting is a compelling demonstration of the interchangeability of beautiful people, regardless of gender.

Lover's Affinity: A Spiritual Journey

Yusuf and Zulaykha's beauty is also conditioned by the spiritual, reflecting their proximity to internal perfection through their external appearance. Over the course of Jami's story, Yusuf's beauty is consistent, while Zulaykha's fluctuates, marking her spiritual progression. As a prophet, Yusuf's representation and beauty are framed within the realm of the sacred, most clearly through his nimbus. Prophets like Yusuf and saints were widely considered particularly beautiful amongst humans.[131] Furthermore, he is described in the Qur'an and in Jami's text as not a human but an angel, imbuing him with a divine otherworldliness.[132] Yusuf is guided by the archangel Gabriel in Jami's story, including when he is rescued from the well and before his marriage to Zulaykha, providing opportunities for artists to depict the prophet alongside an angelic being and create a clear parallel between the two of angelic beauty.

One such instance is found in the 1556-65 CE *Haft Awrang* produced for Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, when Yusuf is saved from the well (fig. 2.16). The busy scene shows the bustle of the

[131] Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), 64.

[132] Qur'an 12:31 and Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 94 and 100.

merchant's camp, with numerous figures engaged in different activities, including caring for the pack animals and preparing food. Isolated from the activity and framed by a rock well in the bottom right corner, Yusuf is shown stepping into a basket lowered for him by a man above. Assisting him is the archangel Gabriel, who is rendered in a manner typical of angels in this period, with a feathered or leaf-covered cap secured with a pearl chain and multi-colored wings (fig. 2.17). Though distinct in scale from one another (Gabriel is larger), the archangel and Yusuf share not only flaming halos but a placid moon-face with arched eyebrows and elongated eyes, framed by loose strands of long hair. Their proximity emphasizes their similarity. Furthermore, while the halos certainly signal their sacred status, the moon-faces provide a bridge between earthly and divine beauty, extending beyond the pair to appear on several figures throughout the painting. Yusuf, Gabriel, and the other moon-faced beauties contrast with the bearded and square-jawed adult males who are also present, creating a landscape not divided by gender (there is one woman amongst the former group) but adherence to an idealized notion of beauty. The artist shapes a scene in which beauty pervades even the mundane activities of camp.[133]

Another example, dated to 1540 CE (947 AH), extends this visual parallel between Yusuf and Gabriel to Zulaykha (fig. 2.18). Here Gabriel descends from the heavens with blessings for the marriage of Yusuf and Zulaykha, after the latter has been restored to beauty, youth, and sight. There is a clear compositional alignment between the three figures as Gabriel's angled body and flaming bowl draw our eye to Yusuf, who in turn gestures to Zulaykha. All three are shown with a moon-face, though the skin tone of the angel is slightly ruddier. As with the painting of Yusuf

[133] It also introduces erotic elements into the scene, as several of the beardless youths are positioned alongside bearded figures in a manner that suggests possible lustful engagement. For example, in a white and light orange tent at the center of the composition, a bearded man forms a physical bridge between two beardless youths, resting his hand on one youth's thigh while he pulls the other towards him.

tending his flock (fig. 2.6), the three figures are triangulated as ideal beauties that exist in comparison with a fourth figure, a bearded older man seated with a staff. His presence heightens the similarity of the three moon-faced beauties that take up the center of the composition.

Zulaykha is, however, not always shown as a beauty, as Jami's recounting of her hero's journey to refine her character and overcome challenges to be united with her beloved also includes her physical decline. Zulaykha's lovesickness but also lying and idol worship eventually cause her to fall into poverty and to become infirm and blind. It is only after she has renounced idolatry and converted to Islam that she is absolved by Yusuf and restored to her former youth, beauty, and high class.

The paintings of Zulaykha in poverty provide a helpful counterpoint to the scenes of Yusuf and Zulaykha as youthful beauties and reinforce the features that constitute a beautiful person. In the former, Zulaykha is no longer shown moon-faced with a tall, slender body but, following the trope of elderly and poor figures, hunch backed with a hooked nose and often a chador covering her hair (figs. 2.19-2.20). Instead of her beloved, her appearance mirrors that of the elderly poor woman described and depicted earlier in the story, who bids on Yusuf with a few skeins of yarn (figs. 2.21-2.22), visually presaging Zulaykha's poverty.[134] In addition to marking her out as old and impoverished, Zulaykha's appearance also becomes more feminized through the addition of the chador, a garment specifically associated with women. Though Yusuf and Zulaykha are typically shown with distinct headgear in paintings where they are still youthful, and Zulaykha's can be described as feminine, the chador is a more consistent and

[134] Their similarity also demonstrates a common visual trope for the representation of impoverished and/ or elderly figures to be shown in profile, rather than three-quarters view. A rare exception to this is a painting in a seventeenth-century manuscript in the British Library (BL Or 11916, fol. 117v) where Zulaykha's face is still shown in three-quarters view.

blatant feminine marker that also evokes female piety and propriety, emphasizing her social and spiritual position in this moment as well as the physical difference between her and Yusuf. Zulaykha's physical transformations are an important reminder of her role as a "a prototype of the Sufi mystic enthusiast," as Yohannan describes her, providing visual affirmation to Jami's text.

Readers of Jami's story would have recognized it as more than just a love story, knowing to read through the narrative, metaphors, and allegories to the mystical knowledge embedded within it. What the paintings of Yusuf and Zulaykha's beauty do then is imbue the visual trope of the moon face with specific meaning through metaphor (*majaz*). Within the context of Jami's poem, infused with Sufi allusions, the trope is a visual metaphor for the internal beauty of the characters and a bridge between the visual and the divine.[135] Thus, when we view the two lovers, particularly in a painting such as the moment before their marriage (fig. 2.18), their forms (*surat*) carry complex meaning (*ma'ni*), becoming artistic interpretations of how divine beauty might manifest in a body. Though the trope may seem repetitive, it hides within itself layers of significance that likely would have stimulated a viewer's thoughts about both earthly and Godly beauty. Whether or not every rendering of a moon-face beauty in a painting could elicit such a response is unlikely, but within this context is probable, as the viewer would have been pre-conditioned by the text to seek out the meaning behind the form. That the form is a painting does not detract from its ability to communicate the metaphorical potential of the body. Indeed, the

[135] Another scholar who has argued for the relevance of allegory and metaphor in Persian painting is Chad Kia, who contends that the enigmatic figures that appear in paintings from the late fifteenth century onwards, for example in the *Haft Awrang* produced for Ibrahim Mirza, are Sufi allegories. Kia, *Art, Allegory and the Rise of Shi'ism*, 18-19.

idea of the beloved being a lovely painting or statue was a widespread poetic trope, suggesting that visual representation was readily associated with pondering beauty in its many forms.[136]

The paintings of Yusuf and Zulaykha create a space in which, to borrow from Miller, we can develop a thicker translation of the moon face in Persian painting. The trope is one that can be employed, in the right context, to carry deeper metaphorical meanings, such as alluding to divine beauty. And most importantly for our purposes, it is a face that is not confined to a single gender but bridges them, opening the door to a distinct conception of beauty that transcends the physical body. For lovers like Varqa and Gulshah, Budur and Qamar al-Zaman, and Yusuf and Zulaykha such similarity is the physical manifestation of their appropriateness as lovers. Artists made this particularly explicit in paintings such as those of Yusuf and Zulaykha's consummation (fig. 2.23), a moment in which the "erotics of sameness" is pointed. As in the story of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman, a viewer, like Maimuna and Dahnash, would be hard pressed to determine which is the more beautiful of the pair.

Closing Closeness: Conclusion

Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaykha* sheds light on the ways in which artists represented beautiful people to look similar through tropes such as the moon-face and the cypress body. More than that, the paintings that accompany this tale present a context in which the visual trope becomes loaded with additional meaning, connecting with literary metaphor to convey deeper meanings behind the visual form. Whether the tropes are wholly conditioned or simply influenced by literary notions of beauty and love as affinity is unclear, but it is certain that both subscribed to

[136] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 270.

an idealized notion of beauty undifferentiated by gender. A glance across the field of Persian painting shows that this notion extended beyond just lovers to apply to a range of people who could be beautiful, including court attendants and personifications of astrological signs. It also extended beyond media, manifesting in ceramics, textiles, and sculpture.

Equipped with a deeper understanding of the ways in which beauty was conceptualized we can revisit the visual material discussed earlier to make sense of the ways in which female characters and beardless youths shared extremely similar faces and are often only distinguishable from one another by their clothing, and sometimes by hair style and halo. For example, in the case of ʻAmr-i Umayya dressed as a dancer, the artist leveraged similitude to completely mask the masculine figure. With Gurdafarid and Suhrab the typical depiction of the two as moon-faced beauties aligns with their age and heightens the romantic elements of the scene by suggesting an "erotics of sameness" between them, typical of lovers in a romance. In these pre-modern paintings, beauty manifested in tropes that undercut gender differentiation, just as poetic tropes did in the literature in which these paintings are embedded.

As we have seen, however, there were instances in which difference was re-established. The two instances in which Suhrab is shown without facial hair moves the lovers away from affinity, emphasizing difference through Suhrab's enhanced manliness, perhaps to instead accentuate the battle context. Some earlier Persian paintings also seem to have undergone a process of differentiation through later alteration. For example, a mid-fifteenth century painting of Zal and Rudaba from the *Shahnama* once showed the lovers as youthful moon-faced beauties (fig. 2.24), with Rudaba dressed in a red long-sleeved robe and a "cock's comb"-like headscarf typical of women's dress in this period and a beardless Zal shown with a small cap and short-

sleeved robe.[137] A later viewer, perhaps at some point in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, sought to distinguish between the two by adding facial hair, though was confused enough by what they saw that they added it to Rudaba instead of Zal. Other instances of alteration have been less directly interventionist but no less impactful, including when scholars misgender the subject, as for example in the misidentification of Yusuf as Zulaykha.

More complicated examples of undifferentiated beauty appear in Safavid single page paintings where we do not have the benefit of narrative context. One such example is the Riza ‘Abbasi painting of a kneeling figure offering wine (fig. 2.25), which is currently identified as a man but, as will be discussed in the next chapter, displays a mixture of features associated with both male and female dress, as well as the moon-face. In light of the idea of undifferentiated beauty, enforcing a particular gender identity on the figure seems at odds with the intent of the artist to depict a beautiful person, particularly as these figures were meant to be received as types rather than specific portraits. Reading for gender specificity moves us away from seeing with a period eye that was likely first and foremost attuned to the beauty of the figure, which in turn would have elicited further associations with lyric poetry and the romance. Idealized and abstracted beauty certainly has its limits, for example in understanding the real-life Sufi practices of *shahid-bazi* and their earthly sexual manifestations. However, in the realm of representation, both literary and visual, it was a prevalent and key manner of conceiving of human bodies, one that transcends the rigid gender hierarchy that operated elsewhere in the Persianate world and

[137] B.W. Robinson, *Persian Paintings in the Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1998), 9.

across Islamicate societies.[138] As such, it offers an alternative view of how gender was conceived and operated in the pre-modern period.

Of course, not everyone was a moon-faced beauty in Persian painting, and, as we saw with the older men sometimes shown alongside Yusuf and Zulaykha, Zulaykha's impoverished state, and the poor woman who bids on Yusuf, these examples served as visual counterpoints to the beauties. While beautiful people were often depicted with similar bodies, difference was emphasized with the uncomely, particularly through the exposure of genitals. For example, in an 18th-century painting from India the poor woman who bids on Yusuf is shown with her breasts visible.[139] In the next chapter, I will discuss how exposed genitals and breasts were primarily markers of alterity, used not only for poor or criminal humans, but also among depictions of *div*s and witches. I will demonstrate how it is not until the mid-seventeenth century that breasts become significant markers of gender identity, while genitals remained a multivalent symbol until at least the nineteenth century.

[138] Miller, "Embodying the Beloved," 4.

[139] This work is in the National Museum, New Delhi. "Zulaykha bidding for Yusuf," Google Arts and Culture, accessed October 9, 2024. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/zulaykha-bidding-for-yusuf-unknown/EgG0i9Tg6TLxLw?hl=en

Chapter 3 From Other to Erotic: Nudity and Gender in Early Modern Persian Painting

In her seminal 2005 book, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi examines the relationship between gender, sexuality, and nationalism in the formative era of the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925 CE). As part of her study Najmabadi reiterates one of her earlier arguments that this period witnessed the culmination of the eroticization of the breast, and expands upon it to suggest that bare-breasted women came to replace young beardless boys as objects of desire in paintings of this period.[1] Through oil paintings of the nineteenth-century in particular, Najmabadi exhibits how in modern Iran, nudity, and especially the breast as a female gender marker, helped to establish hetero-eroticism as the social norm, eventually masking and then superseding the prior traditions of homo-eroticism.

Najmabadi's study is compelling and an important contribution to the fields of gender and sexuality studies, though many questions remain. How was the breast represented and received prior to its eroticization and feminization? If the nineteenth century was the culmination of this transformation, is it possible to identity an origin for these changes? In this chapter, I study how nudity was used in Persian painting for several centuries prior to the Qajar dynasty, examining what role genitalia and the breast had in establishing both gender and erotic potential.

[1] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 41. See also Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Reading for Gender Through Qajar Painting," in *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785-1925*, ed. by Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar (Brooklyn and New York: Brooklyn Museum and I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 76-89.

Like the body in general, nudity is open to a range of meanings and did not only signal sexuality but also social inferiority, non-humanness, and humiliation.[2] For medieval European painting, Sherry C. M. Lindquist writes: "In fact, like any representation, the nude embodies, manifests, personifies, *objectifies* the ideas and attitudes projected upon it by its creator(s) and/or viewer(s)."[3] As I will demonstrate, the nude body evolved from being a social aberration, one that was largely associated with alterity and punishment in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, to an emerging site of erotic potential in the mid-seventeenth century. This coincides with a reimagining of the breast, which had previously been visually shared between genders, in a more accentuated form associated with the female body.

I begin by briefly laying out key medical, juridical, and religious discussions around genitalia and nudity to establish the wider social context in which paintings including these subjects were conceived and received. Primary among the concepts discussed is the idea of *'awrat*, or the portions of the body that a Muslim should keep covered.[4] Literary scholars have noted how the idea of *'awrat* had an impact on the formation of Persian poetry and what was considered appropriate to discuss in verse and what should be expressed through euphemism. I argue that such an idea was equally at play in visual representations. Thus, most humans are shown modestly clothed, and their beautiful bodies are idealized through metaphor, as discussed

[2] On the diverse possibilities of nudity and eroticism in medieval European art, see Sherry C.M. Lindquist, "The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: An Introduction," in *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, ed. Sherry C.M. Lindquist (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 1-46; Sarah Salih, "Erotica," in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ruth Evans (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 181-257.

[3] Lindquist, "Meanings of Nudity," 7.

[4] Birgit Krawietz, "Body, in law," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, eds. K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas and D. J. Stewart (Leiden: Brill, 2012), accessed 1 December 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23722; İrvin Cemil Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants of Dress and Personal Appearance in Southwest Asia," *Khil'a* 3 (2007-9), 36; Fuad I. Khuri, *The Body in Islamic Culture* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 41.

in the previous chapter. Nude or semi-nude individuals are often portrayed as shameful types such as criminals, deviants, *div*s, and non-Muslims. Eroticism is expressed through allegory and subtle gestures, such as figures grasping one another's belts. Only later do artists relax their adherence to rules around protecting *'awrat*, and the nude or semi-nude body comes to engage with the erotic. At the end of this chapter, I turn to another example of gender conceal and reveal from Abul-Qasim Firdawsi's (d. c. 1020 CE) *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), the story of the youth hiding in the shah Nushin Ravan's harem, to spotlight this pictorial evolution, which never fully abandons the notions of otherness and punishment associated with nudity but demonstrates the introduction of the eroticized nude body and the feminized breast in the mid-seventeenth century.

Mapping Exposure: Medical, Juridical and Theological Approaches to Genitalia

The role of the body in sexual difference is most directly discussed in medical treatises, which considered a range of anatomical, biological, and religious features relevant for establishing distinctions between bodily types. The foundations of the Islamic medical knowledge are rooted in Greco-Roman medical treatises, which Muslim scholars translated, adapted, and expanded. One of the most influential ideas adopted into Islamic medicine was humoral pathology, developed in the Hippocratic corpus of medical texts around the mid-fifth century B.C. and popularized by Galen of Pergamon (129- c. 216 CE). Galen added to the basic conception of humoral pathology, in which the health of the body is maintained through the balance of the four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile), by linking them to four qualities (wet or dry, cold or warm), four elements (earth, wind, fire, water) and four major

organs (heart, brain, liver, spleen).[5] Humoral pathology established the groundwork from which physicians diagnosed and treated illnesses, and served as the basis for explaining sexual difference.[6] Men were considered hot and dry, while women were cold and wet, and the difference in these two states contributed to physical and personality distinctions. Physicians also recognized that variations in diet and environment impacted not only an individual's physical well-being but, in rare cases, could impact sexual difference and thus generated a spectrum of sexual presentations, rather than two-distinct poles, that included intersex people, women with penis-like clitorises, and men with breasts.[7]

While contemporary scholars of medical history agree that physicians of the pre-modern Islamic world generally accepted a sex spectrum, the details of this spectrum are debated. Some historians like Dror Ze'evi, influenced by the work of Thomas Laqueur, have expanded upon Galen's impact in the Islamic world on sex differentiation to also include his views on genitalia.[8] Galen considered the female sexual organs to be the same as the male sexual organs, but turned inwards and of an inferior form, like the eyes of a mole take the form of, but are lesser than, the eyes of other animals. This inferiority is tied not to form, but to a lack of heat, which prevents the women's organs from descending from their bodies.[9] In his study of European medieval conceptions of sexual difference, Laqueur argued that Galen's idea fostered a "one-sex" model,

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[5] Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, Press, 2007), 10.

[6] Pormann and Savage-Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, 49.

[7] Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 42; Ahmed Ragab, "One, Two, or Many Sexes: Sex Differentiation in Medieval Islamicate Medical Thought," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (2015): 24.

[8] Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 23-24; Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[9] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 28.

where male and female organs were believed to be the same but the latter's were lesser due to their failure to descend. Ze'evi adopted Laqueur's model and argued that Galen's ideas were predominant in the Islamic world, though he further argues that the term "one-sex" is a misnomer for this context and instead should be called the "imperfect man" model to emphasize the medieval belief in the biological inferiority of women.[10]

As other contemporary scholars have shown, however, the "one sex" model fails to account for the range of opinions that existed around sex differentiation in the Islamic world and Europe. [11] For example, Sherry Sayed Gadelrab demonstrates that while there was an acceptance of the "flexibility of barriers between the sexes" and inferiority of the female body, there was not an ideological consensus amongst medieval physicians and scholars regarding sexual difference.[12] She challenges the idea that Galen was the predominant source of medical knowledge, and the Muslim world's inheritance of number of sources from antiquity, including those by Hippocrates and Aristotle, were equally influential.[13] The diversity of inherited opinions was further multiplied by Muslim physicians including Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE), Ibn al-Nafis (d. 1288 CE) and Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. c. 925 CE), who reworked antique texts and added their own commentaries on sexual difference.[14] One of their unifying features was their agreement on the inferiority of women to men in the hierarchy of God's

[10] Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 23.

[11] For a summary of the various criticisms of Laqueur's "one-sex" model see Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013), specifically her introduction.

[12] Sherry Sayed Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences in Medieval Scholarly Islamic Thought," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 66, no. 1 (2010): 43.

[13] Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences," 52.

[14] Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences," 57, 61-75; Ragab, "One, Two, or Many Sexes," 432-2, 447.

creations, at which man stood at the top.[15] Furthermore, multiple knowledge systems in gender conception, including the medical, philosophical, and orthodox religious realms, informed each other in the conception of sexual difference. The result was an intellectual landscape that produced "multivalent views of male and female bodily differences."[16] The distinction between sexes was not reliant upon genitalia alone but included other markers such as the presence and placement of hair (especially facial hair), pitch of voice, ability to menstruate, joint and muscle shape, fertility, sexual preferences, and the size and shape of genitalia.[17] The medieval genderscape was thus dependent on a broader range of factors than the genitalia privileged in the "one-sex" model.

This is apparent, for example, in legal debates around the gender of the *khunsa*, a person who did not possess a single dominant set of genitalia or whose genitalia changed over the course of their lifetime.[18] Cases regarding inheritance, prayer, slavery, and marriage accounted for the gender of those involved to come to a ruling or opinion, for example apportioning more

[15] Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences," 62.

[16] Gadelrab, "Discourses on Sex Differences,"44.

[17] Ragab, "One, Two, or Many Sexes," 452.

[18] The term "khuntha" shares the *kh-n-th* root in Arabic, with "mukhannath" (I have chosen to use the Persian transliteration *mukhannas* and *khunsa* throughout this dissertation), pointing to their shared conceptual origins. Saqer Almarri, however, points out the distinction between the two is that the *khunsa* referred to an ambiguous body, while the *mukhannas* identified "a male person's transgression of heteronormative and gender-normative practices." Saqer A. Almarri, "The Khunthā and the Community: A Study in the Medieval Islamic Understanding of the Body and a Critical Edition of 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Isnawī's Īḍāḥ al-Mushkil fī Aḥkām al-Khunthā al-Mushkil," PhD diss., (Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2019) 24. In contemporary terminology, the *khunsa* might be known as intersex, a term used to describe genitalia ambiguity in humans but that also encompasses non-visible sex ambiguities such as chromosomal anomalies. In the past, the term *khunsa* has been translated as "hermaphrodite," but this term is no longer accepted in describing humans because it implies a biological impossibility in our species, which is the possession of fully developed male and female reproductive organs. See for example, Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender,* eds. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 74-95. For more on the term "intersex," see Iain Morland, "Intersex," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1-2: 111-15.

inheritance to brothers than to sisters.[19] Instances where the gender of the subject was unclear due to their genitalia demonstrate how the body of the *khunsa* presented a challenge to the gendered hierarchy of Islamic society.[20] To establish the gender of the *khunsa*, jurists relied on several processes, including tests based on urination, counting ribs, and waiting until puberty and judging based on facial hair or the appearance of breasts.[21]

Paula Sanders argues that the *khunsa* was "an unsexed, ungendered, and therefore unsocialized being," which needed to be fit into society through gendering as male or female.[22] In her study of juridical texts written between the eighth and eighteenth centuries regarding the status of the *khunsa* in society, however, Indira Falk Gesink argues against Sander's notion that the *khunsa* was ungendered and jurists' reliance on gendering through a binary, instead demonstrating that jurists recognized the *khunsa mushkil* as a medial gender position that was neither fully male or fully female.[23] For example, several jurists determined that the best location for a *khunsa* to pray was in between the lines of men in the front and women in the back, socially

[19] Saqer A. Almarri, "You Have Made Her a Man among Men: Translating the *Khuntha*'s Anatomy in Fatimid Jurisprudence," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (November 2016): 579.

[20] Indira Falk Gesink, "Intersex Bodies in Premodern Islamic Discourse: Complicating the Discourse," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (July 2018): 156. Gesink points out that not all jurists defined the *khunsa* as a person possessing both male and female genitalia and lists that a number of conditions could lead to a person's categorization as a *khunsa*, including underdevelopment of the penis, overgrowth of the clitoris, and emergence of secondary sexual characteristics of the other sex after puberty.

[21] Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body," 79, Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 155 and 157, and Almarri "You Have Made Her," 582-3.

[22] Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body," 79. She argues that establishing the sex of the individual body was necessary for the health of the social body, as each person's status related to their gendered position in relation to others.

[23] Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 153 and 156. As Gesink points out, the word *mushkil* is difficult to translate into English without losing the nuance of the original Arabic. Possible translations include "problematic," "ambiguous," "mixed," and "complex." Gesink opts to use this last translation for *khunsa mushkil*, as it captures that the position was "a complex of male and female," and conveyed the legal difficulties around this "complex sex." Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 156.

and physically positioning the *khunsa* between genders.[24] In addition, even in cases where a *khunsa*'s gender was legally determined as male or female, they still remained *khunsa*, indicating that the status is one that a person could always hold.[25] The *khunsa*, therefore, marked a distinct gender status that could be conditioned by the binary but always maintained a medial position.

In addition to providing a glimpse of the ways in which gender was perceived as a spectrum in the pre-modern Islamic world, cases involving the *khunsa* also reveal how genitalia were recognized as an unreliable indicator of sexual difference. While genitals were typically the first indication of a person's sex in such cases, the very ambiguity of genitalia exemplified by the *khunsa* destabilized their authority and highlighted other features as stronger indicators of gender. For example, a seventeenth-century case involved a man who had both female and male genitals, urinated and ejaculated from a hole beneath his penis, and had grown a beard. The mufti determined that the man was male due to his beard.[26] The relevance of the penis is below that of the beard in this case, demonstrating a hierarchy of gendered markers. The failure of the genitals to clarify necessitates other parts of the body to take on the role. The examination of genitalia also represents extreme cases and cannot be recognized as the common means by which gender was established in Islamic-Persian society, which would have relied mainly on hair and dress.

The separation of sexes, however, complicated juridical processes of determination since men were not permitted to look at the genitals of women, and vice versa.[27] Genitalia was

[24] Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 165.

[25] Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 160. Gesink concludes that "a khuntha's fundamental sex remained khuntha even after the person's legal sex and gender performance changed to male and female, indicating that a person could be at one time both khuntha and male or female."

[26] Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 169.

[27] Gesink, "Intersex Bodies," 155.

considered *'awra* (Arabic) or *'awrat* (Persian), the intimate parts of the body that should not be exposed. A synonymous term used throughout the Qur'an is the Arabic word *farj*, which can refer to multiple things, including the body, genitalia, nudity and adornments.[28] For example, sura 24:30-31 advises, "O Prophet! Tell believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts (*farj*). That is purer for them. Surely Allah is All-Aware of what they do. And tell believing women to lower their gaze, guard their chastity (*farj*), and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears."[29] Though the various juridical schools debated (and still debate) what constitutes *'awrat*, it was generally considered between the navel and knee for men and the whole body except for the face and hands for women.[30] An Islamic notion of purity and modesty therefore demanded that such parts be kept covered in public.

Some jurists even advised against exposure of one's private parts in same sex spaces, such as bathhouses. For example, al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) says the exposure of the area between the navel and knee was prohibited amongst men in the bathhouse, as well as exposing the thighs to a male bath attendant and reaching below the waistband.[31] He does not mention women but it can be assumed that he would have advised the same, perhaps in accord with a hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad said that a man should not see another man's private parts and a woman should not see another woman's private parts.[32] Societal norms, therefore dictated that genitalia

[28] Khuri, *The Body in Islamic Culture*, 37.

[29] "Surah An-Nur," Qur'an, accessed 1 December 2024, https://quran.com/24?startingVerse=30.

[30] Krawietz, "Body, in law,"; Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants," 36; Khuri, *The Body in Islamic Culture*, 41; Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 172.

[31] Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 197-8.

[32] Jami` at-Tirmidhi, "43 Chapters on Manners," Sunnah, accessed 1 December 2024, https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2793

be kept covered, in some instances even in settings where they might be naturally exposed such as while bathing. The lived reality of this proscription likely varied over time with some individuals more strictly adhering, and others did not.

Notions of modesty and appropriateness influenced by the covering of *'awrat* also extended to the creative realms, including poetry. Jurists such as al-Ghazali advised against direct mention of parts of the body considered *'awrat* and instead promoted euphemism and figurative speech to address these regions.[33] The directness with which a poet discusses the body served in part as a dividing line between acceptable and obscene poetry (*hazl*) .[34] The courtly ghazal "canonized and idealized 'high' reflection of desire," defined against the obscene that more directly attended to the physical body, indeed made it the center of its genre.[35] As Domenico Ingenito summarizes:

> Therefore, we may see obscene poems and courtly ghazals as the two opposite poles of an *'awrat*-centric spectrum in which lyrical representation of the body corresponds to a process of euphemization of the mere mention of the beloved's private body parts. The further we move away from the depiction of the *'awrat*, the more the non-*'awrat* parts of the body undergo a process of erotization that culminates with the *fetishization* of the beloved's face, finally reaching the point in which all possibility of sensuality is sublimated into the manifestation of divine beauty."[36]

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[33] Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology pf Forbidden Literature* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1995), xiii-xiv; Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 172.

[34] Sprachman defines the obscene in poetry as "revealing what cannot be revealed," and Ingenito points out that the line between genres was not always clear and what was considered obscene could be found in courtly "high" poetry, for example providing a register in which to disparage an enemy by exposing his *'awrat*. Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, vii-viii; Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 173-4.

[35] Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, xxix; Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 175.

[36] Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 176.

Thus, the metaphors employed to describe the beloved discussed in the previous chapter, such as "moon-faced," "pomegranate-breasted," and "cypress-statured," among others, serve to describe and adore the body in a manner that does not violate the rules of *'awrat* while simultaneously shaping an idealized notion of beauty that transcends the gendered body.

In the following examination of paintings, I will demonstrate how the protection of *'awrat* also influences when and where nudity appears on a visual level. In contrast to the idealized bodies discusses in the previous chapter, here I will address bodies with exposed genitals to reveal individuals' social non-conformity. Through the "obscene" in painting, genitalia and breasts carried particular social significances that outweighed their relevance in gender representation. Instead, nudity in pre-seventeenth-century painting was reserved largely for conveying humiliation, shame, and alterity.

Nudity and Alterity in the Monstrous Other

Demons, witches, and other not-quite human figures appear throughout epics and romances, providing instances of wonderment and inventiveness as well as narrative devices to emphasize the ethical and moral standards that set humans apart from these lesser counterparts.[37] For example, *div*s (demons) are the earliest foes of humankind in the *Shahnama* and provide a

[37] The word "monster" derives from the Latin *monstrum*, further related to verbs for "revealing" and "portending," and frequently holds a negative context. I use the term here not in a negative or pejorative manner but as a broad category of beings that was considered different from and challenging to the normative human form. I draw upon Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's idea about the expansive possibilities of monsters, that they "tell us there are other worlds—eschatological, magical or extraterrestrial," which is a definition that captures the wonder that monsters were understood to convey in the Persian and Arabic traditions. Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book that Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023),159; Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory," *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 2 and 20.

stark comparison to the civilizing development of the humans.[38] In the case of *div*s and witches, such monsters also exhibited negative behaviors and were scapegoats for men, "something to curse for their own failures and most perverted aspects."[39] As such they served as character foils to humans, particularly in hero's journeys to self-refinement, which often included defeating demons.

Philosophical and theological understandings of the ordering of the universe, seen for example in cosmologies such as *Kitab 'aja'ib al-makhluqat wa ghara'ib al-mawjudat* (Book of the Wonders of Creations and Oddities of Existing Things) by Zakariyya bin Muhammad al-Qazvini (1202 -1283 CE), established a hierarchy of creation that placed monsters such as demons well below humans due to their base behavior and hybridity.[40] Proximity to God was based in part on the ability of a being to refine their self through ethical behavior, thus angels were closest in proximity to God, with prophets then other humans next, followed by various creatures (mythical and real), plants, and minerals.[41] All of creation could evoke a sense of wonder, or perplexity that could lead to curiosity and greater knowledge, but demons and

[38] I have chosen here to use the more common translation of *div* as "demon," though the nature of the *div* shifted slightly over time. Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Dīv," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. article published 15 December 1995; last modified 28 November 2011, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/div; Francesca Leoni, "The Revenge of Ahriman: Images of *Dīv*s in the *Shānāma*, ca. 1300-1600," PhD diss., (Princeton University, 2008), 3-4. For an in-depth discussion of the term and its evolution from pre-Islamic times onwards, see Leoni "Revenge of Ahriman," chapter 2.

[39] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 137. For example, Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mill summarize this idea in their study of monsters in medieval Europe, "the monstrous is constitutive, producing the contours of both bodies that matter (humans, Christians, saints, historical figures, gendered subjects and Christ) and, ostensibly, bodies that do not (animals, non-Christians, demons, fantastical creatures and portentous freaks)." Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, "Introduction: Conceptualizing the Monstrous," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 2.

[40] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 86-7; Stefano Carboni, *The Wonders of Creation and the Singularities of Painting: A Study of the Ilkhanid London Qazvīnī* (Edinburgh: Edindurgh University Press, 2015), 15; Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*.

[41] Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, 162.

witches were also associated with wickedness, a feature that separates them from sirens, which I will return to below.[42]

Intriguingly, the authors of such epics and romances rarely provided precise physical descriptions of *div*s, instead focusing on their ill character and generally calling them "ugly" (*zisht*). Paintings of such figures are therefore a reflection of the artists' interpretations and cultural understandings of otherness, impurity, and repellency that such figures are meant to embody.[43] Witches are described in some detail, though artists often took artistic license with their appearance, while sirens are accompanied with a limited description. Artists, therefore, likely drew on their imaginations and other artworks in order to generate the images that will be discussed below. In general, *div*s, witches and sirens are often shown with highly exposed bodies (either semi-nude or fully nude) and, for the first two, bodies that could be considered excessive in their scale and features, including overly large phalluses, colorful skin, sagging breasts, and hairiness. They are also notable for their great variety and the imaginativeness of the artists in combining these features to present creatures that stands in stark contrast to the normative and moderated human bodies—bodies that reflected a moral uprightness in their beauty and integrality.

Excessive Bodies: The Div and the Witch

[42] Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, 118. Demons' power, however, was limited and always subject to God's will and might. Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, 109.

[43] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 4.

*Div*s play a prominent role in the narrative of the *Shahnama*, particularly in the exploits of Rustam (a hero who is himself partially descended from demon lineage), and as such were frequently illustrated. Though generally humanoid in form, their non-humanity was emphasized through features such as claws, spotted skin, fur, tusks and horns, expressive faces, hairiness, and exposed bodies, often wearing only small skirts and jewelry such as bracelets, anklets, armbands, and bells (figs. 3.1-3.8).[44] Their scale is often larger than the humans with which they are shown, and in addition to their semi-nudity, their physical exposure also includes a lack of headgear unlike respectable humans.[45] In a sixteenth-century painting of Siamak attacked by the Black Demon from the *Shahnama* (figs. 3.1-3.2), the artist succinctly captures this human- non-human dichotomy, as a large horned and semi-nude demon bears down on the smaller, beardless Siamak, who is both crowned and dressed. The bestiality of the *div* is clear not only from his claws, horns, fangs, and flaming eyes, but his nudity, which emphatically contrasts with the surrounding figures.

Another prominent feature of many *div*s that evolved over time and, which Francesca Leoni argues culminated in the sixteenth century, is the prominence of phalluses, not only in

[44] Depilation was an important part of purity practices in Islam, though it tended to focus on pubic hair and armpit hair. The presence of hair points both to the *div*'s bestiality and impurity. On depilation and bodily purity, see Schick, "Some Islamic Determinants," 28. Bells were often used in public punishments to attract the attention of onlookers. For example, the sixteenth-century Venetian envoy to Persia, Michele Membré records that Shah Tahmasp punished some members of his court by having them ride backwards on donkeys with bells on through the town square. Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)*, trans. A.H. Morton (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1999), 35.

[45] Their lack of clothing is part of their "subhuman status." Francesca Leoni, "Picturing Evil: Images of *Div*s and the Reception of the *Shahnama*," in *Shahnama Studies II*, ed. Charles Melville and Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 103. Infrequently artists chose to include clothing, some of which helps to indicate gender, for example in a painting in the Windsor *Shahnama*, where an orange colored *div* is shown with diadem-like headgear typically seen on female characters, suggesting this *div* may be female. See Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, RCIN 1005014.p.

frequency of appearance but also scale.[46] As will be discussed later in this chapter, it is extremely uncommon for male human genitalia to be shown, but when it is, it is generally proportional to the human body, unlike in instances of *div* genitalia, which is exaggerated. Indeed, the length and girth of their phalluses is such that they appear almost as additional appendages. This is clearly seen in a painting from the luxury *Shahnama* created for Shah Tahmasp (1514-1576 CE) in which a semi-nude demon is led away from a castle and his penis prominently extends down his thigh (figs. 3.3-3.4). This is repeated in another painting of a bound *div* from the same manuscript (figs. 3.5-3.6), pointing to the close association of nudity and punishment to convey social alienation. In one painting from a sixteenth-century *Shahnama* (figs. 3.7-3.8), the prominence of both a phallus and scrotum were sufficiently offensive enough to one viewer to merit its partial erasure.

The amalgamated bodies of *div*s, which combine "the most problematic and despised elements of both [human and animal] groups," is a sign of their impurity and wickedness, in part derived from Qur'anic proscriptions against hybridity but with individual features serving as stand-ins for negative behaviors. For example, the presence of the overlarge phallus may be explained as a reflection of advisements to control sexual appetite and the inability of the *div* to do so. As Francesca Leoni writes, "*Dīv*s' extra-sized and unsheltered genitals are a comment on their improper use, a synecdoche for all the lascivious behaviors that can be carried out through

[46] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 102, 110 and 147, and Leoni "Picturing Evil," 104. There are paintings of demons with exposed phalluses that may date earlier, to the 15th century, that are attributed to Muhammad Siyah Qalam. However, I agree with Francesca Leoni's assessment that the debate around Siyah Qalam's paintings, including their impact on Persian painting, is fraught and I have therefore chosen to maintain her dating of the emergence of the phallus to the 16th century. See Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 30-35. An earlier example of *div*s with phalluses, in a *Khamsa* of Nizami dated to 13 Dec. 1513 CE (14 Shawwal 919 AH) is held in the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait, LNS 45 MS, fol. 218v.

them, and against which men have been warned repeatedly in all sorts of textual sources."[47] Returning to the *'awrat*-centric spectrum, noble humans who modestly cover their harmonized and proportional bodies exist at one end, while *div*s with their excessive and highly exposed bodies exist at the other.

And yet, *div*s are never shown in sexual acts and their sexualization remains a matter of interpretation of what genitals meant to a given viewer.[48] Genitalia are thus open to interpretation, initially signaling alterity due their visibility and contrast with humans, and then bearing the range of connotations that a viewer may bring with them to the painting, which could include but was not limited to sexualization. For example, as a violation of protecting one's *'awrat* it both signals that the demons defy social rules and indicates their shamefulness, even inhumanity. As certain features of beauty, such as the moon face, reflect a person's internal refinement and nobility, the excessiveness, hairiness, and oddity of the *div* body is a material reflection of their baseness and lower status in a hierarchically ordered cosmos.

The question remains whether the *div*s' phallus should also be marked as an important part of the demon's gender when it appears.[49] Conceptually, the *div* is not gendered but is frequently inferred to be male due its appearance in largely male narrative contexts, such as battles. As noted above, textual descriptions of *div*s physical appearances were limited and artists provided their own glosses, making the phalluses artistic interventions. It is possible that some

[47] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 186.

[48] Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 186.

[49] Firuza Abdullaeva says *div*s are not sexually differentiated but that artists made them male, a contradiction pointed out by Leoni. Firuza Abdullaeva, "Divine, Human and Demonic: Iconographic Flexibility in the Context of a Depiction of Rustam and Ashkabus," *Pembroke Papers* 5 (2006): 208; Leoni, "Revenge of Ahriman," 59. Leoni does not directly address gender but does argue that the *div* body is sexualized through the phallus, as discussed above.

artists included the phallus to mark out the maleness of a particular demon. In many instances where the phallus appears, the *div* is also shown with a clear beard, shoring up their masculine identity (figs. 3.2, 3.4, and 3.8). The uneven appearance of the phallus across their representation, however, and the unlikelihood that every demon without a visible phallus was female suggests that genitalia to gender was less an artistic concern than its role in signaling alterity and inferiority to the human form.

Another common feature of the *div* body was the presence of more defined breasts than those of humans (figs. 3.6 and 3.8). Though it is tempting to infer that this contributes to their gendering, prior to the mid-seventeenth century breasts were similarly rendered across genders, indicating that they were not considered highly relevant to depicting gender. Instead, the larger breasts seem to align with the general excessiveness of their bodies, which in turn is meant to signal their otherness. This is reaffirmed by representations of another closely related outsider figure who is clearly described as female: the witch.

Witches (جادو زن, literally "magic woman") appear in the *Shahnama* in the seven trials of both Rustam and of Isfandiyar, where the witches, attracted by music playing, appear in disguise as young maidens but then have their true identities revealed and are slain.[50] Unlike with the *div*s, Firdawsi provides some details about the witches' appearances, describing their skin as black (a marker of their sinfulness) and, in the case, of the witch in Isfandiyar's trial, with a head

[50] Though largely similar there are differences between the two stories. In the case of Rustam, the hero is not forewarned of the witch's existence and is surprised to discover her true identity when she turns black from hearing the name of God. In contrast, Isfandiyar seeks out the witch after learning of her existence and uses a lasso to capture her, at which point she turns into a lion, and then an old woman. For the story of Rustam, see Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 2*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 29-31; Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama of Firdausi*: *Volume 2*, trans. Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner (London: Kegan Parul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1906), 50-2. For the story of Isfandiyar, see Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 5*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 236-241; Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama of Firdausi*: *Volume 5*, trans. Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner (London: Kegan Parul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1906), 129-131.

and hair the color of snow, another sign of abnormality seen elsewhere in the *Shahnama* with the character Zal.[51] As with the *div*s, Firdawsi also describes the witches as wicked. This is a necessary and important framing because magic is not the reason for the witches' sinfulness. Magic is used throughout the *Shahnama*, including by the Persian kings, and took on both licit and illicit forms. For example, the magic of the Simurgh bird is used by Zal, Rustam's father, to ensure his safe delivery.[52] Laurie Pierce notes, however, that magic is negatively viewed in the *Shahnama* when employed by women, suggesting the audience of the *Shahnama* would have already viewed a "magic woman," i.e. a witch, undesirably in this context.[53]

Artists' interpretations of the two witches are varied, even within a single manuscript.[54] Some depict the witches in a fully human form as a young maiden drinking with the heroes or, deviating from the narrative, still in human form but lassoed.[55] Other artists chose to depict the

[51] As will be discussed later in this chapter, blackened skin is a sign of shame. See footnote 91.

[52] Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Magic ii. In Literature and Folklore in the Islamic Period," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, article published on 20 July 2005, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-ii-in-literature-and-folklore-in-the-islamic-period. Magic also had an accepted role in Muslim tradition, for example through using the Qur'an to answer questions and prognosticate the future. For more on magic in Islam see Johann Christoph Bürgel, *The Feather of the Simurgh: The "Licit Magic" of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) and Francesca Leoni, *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2016).

[53] Laurie Pierce, "Serpents and Sorcery: Humanity, Gender, and the Demonic in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 360. Women beyond the confines of the *Shahnama* do successfully deploy magic to aid the heroes of stories. For example, the nurse in the romance of *Vis and Ramin* makes Vis' husband impotent through a talisman so that Vis does not lose her virginity to him. This may not have been received positively by all male readers, but it does help to prepare for the later union of Vis with her true love Ramin. Fakhr al-Din Gurgani, *Vis and Ramin*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 72-75.

[54] See for example, The Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN 10005013 where the witch killed by Rustam is shown clothed and still with a maiden-like appearance (fol. 53r), while the witch killed by Isfandiyar is completely nude and aged (fol. 189r).

[55] Examples of clothed human-like witches include Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN 1005014, 92v; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Supplément Persan 489, fol. 72v; John Rylands Library, Persian MS 9, fols. 78r and 393r, Persian MS 909, fol. 64r, Persian MS 910, fol. 288r, and Persian MS 978, fol. 31r; National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 333, fol. 569r; Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 270.26, fol. 2v; and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. Or. Fol. 4251, fol. 478v.

captured witches as *div*s (figs. 3.9-3.11).[56] Still others maintained the human-like appearance of the witch but not as a maiden and instead shown as a fetid old person (گنده پیری), as aligns with Firdawsi's description, and shown either semi-nude or fully nude (figs. 3.12-3.14).[57] These last two groups provide a point of comparison for the *div*s to explore how breasts are deployed by artists.

In paintings where the witches appear as *div*s they similarly wear short skirts and gold jewelry, have fur and horns, and are typically shown semi-nude.[58] And like many *div*s, their breasts are larger than those of humans and often hairy. Given that this occurs with most *div*s, including those with large phalluses, we should not read this as a clear marker of the witch's gender. Rather, as argued above, this bodily feature functions in the same manner as it did for the *div*s, marking an excess of the body and standing in contrast to the proportional human body, thus signaling the witches' alterity and distance from both humans and God.

The irrelevance of the breast to the gender of the witch is particularly apparent in two of the earliest paintings of the Rustam's trial. In one example from 1330 CE (731 AH), the witch is initially shown on the left side of the painting as a beautiful moon-faced maiden but, following her capture at right, is transformed, with dark skin, semi-nudity, and a face shown in profile, a

[56] In figure 3.11, Isfandiyar's face and sword hand have been removed and the former hastily repainted. It is possible that a viewer felt antipathy towards the character as an enemy of the hero Rustam. Several figures have had their faces removed throughout the manuscript, such Kay Kavus on his flying throne (fol. 109b). B.W. Robinson and Eleanor Sims speculate that the removal of his face was done by pious viewer who took offense at the king's hubris. The authors do not provide a theory on why Isfandiyar's face was removed. B.W. Robinson, Eleanor Sims and Manijeh Bayani, *The Windsor Shahnama of 1648* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2007), 39 and 89. Additional examples of witches as *div*s, Musee d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 1971-107/369a; Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 104.35; Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 2153, fol. 103v; British Library, London, Add. 18188, fol. 92r; and Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Ouseley Add. 176, fol. 69r.

[57] Additional examples of the unclothed human-like witch, include Musee d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 1971-107/369a.

[58] In only one instance is the witch captured by Isfandiyar depicted as a wild cat, as described in the text. See Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per. 104.35.

compositional feature typically used for representing the elderly, poor, or wicked (fig. 3.12). The witch's chest is notably absent of any markings to suggest breasts. Such is also the case in a painting produced three years later, where the witch is shown entirely nude but with neither breasts or visible genitals.[59] While in later centuries, pronounced genitalia became an important marker of the *div*s alterity, in this earlier moment we can see how breasts and genitals had also not yet emerged as a relevant marker of otherness for the witch, much less features necessary to convey her gender.

Only later do we start to see the appearance of excessive body parts, such as the examples of the witch as *div* discussed above, and a 1585 painting (figs. 3.13-3.14). In the latter example, the witch still has a largely human form but is shown with dramatically elongated breasts and a wrinkled body. The primary work of these details is to emphasize the witch's difference from the youthful beauty Isfandiyar, a bodily manifestation of her wickedness.[60] The breasts certainly help to visually gender the witch but their oddity suggests they are intended first and foremost as symbols of otherness.

Indeed, the relevance of the gender of the witch is called into question by an intriguing 1489 CE painting, which depicts Isfandiyar on the verge of cleaving the witch, but the artist has chosen to render the latter as a male with a beard (fig. 3.15) in a clear deviation from Firdawsi's specification of the "magic woman." The gender of the witch, then, is perhaps something that was considered malleable or secondary to the larger point that this is a wicked being deserving of

[59] See National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 329, fol. 46r.

[60] They also imply an age gap between the two figures, which provides an additional level of difference, and in the realm of Persian painting, alterity since older figures are much less commonly depicted than youthful figures. As discussed in the previous chapter with Zulaykha, elderly women were often depicted in profile (as opposed to the canonical three-quarter view), with a hooked nose, and bent posture. Artists sometimes included greater detail such as wrinkles. These features single the elderly out in a world that is largely envisaged as the purview of youthful beauties and bearded men.

execution. Certainly, the artistic interpretations that emphasize the otherness of these witches through nudity, dark skin, and sometimes fully demonic appearances push the viewer towards that reception.

The bodies of *div*s and witches, then, are first and foremost conditioned by their character as wicked beings. Artists made this apparent through features that drastically deviate from the bodies of heroes, including hairiness, large scale, and, in later centuries, abnormally visible and large phalluses and breasts. In contrast to representations of humans, the *div* and witch body presents us with a rare space in which artists actively deployed nudity, genitals, and breasts. Though the latter two may have been used to infer gender in some instances, this messaging was secondary to the prominent emphasis on the demon's social alterity and distance from the more refined human body. Furthermore, this is often coupled with the theme of punishment, such as the two captured demons in the Tahmasp *Shahnama* and many of the examples of the witches before their death. This pairing of nudity and punishment is paralleled in depictions of humans, a topic that will be taken up again shortly. First, however, I turn to a different function of nudity as part of wonderment and an entry point to the erotic.

Sirens: Opening the Door to the Erotic

The story of the sirens (عروسان آبی, literally "water brides") occurs in the *Iqbalnama* (Book of Fortune) in the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209 CE), the second of his poems abouts the exploits is Iskandar, known in the West as Alexander the Great, in which the hero

embarks on a world journey of knowledge and spiritual refinement.[61] In the tale, Iskandar travels to the Black Sea where he learns that sirens with long hair emerge from the water nightly to sing and play music that strikes human listeners unconscious. Intrigued, Iskandar pitches a tent by the shore to witness their emergence and song, which makes his blood boil and causes him to both laugh and cry. Unlike with Firdawsi's descriptions of the *div*s and witches as evil creatures, Nizami presents the sirens as beautiful, including comparing them to the moon and sun.[62] Within the context of Iskandar's travels in the *Iqbalnama*, which draws heavily on the "wonders" (*'aja'ib*) genre, the sirens thus are an example of an astonishing creature, one that inspires amazement more than fear.[63]

More wondrous than demonic, the sirens offer an important point of visual comparison for the monstrous beings discussed above, providing artists an opportunity to depict bodies that are less repellant and representative of wickedness. Mer-people were a common feature of folk tales as well as scientific catalogues, such as the "wonders" texts, where they were not confined to a specific gender as they seem to be in Nizami's description as "water brides."[64] Early representations of the sirens from Nizami's story are fantastical, often showing the beings with feathered or possibly finned body parts, including collars and arms (figs. 3.16-3.17).[65] Their

[61] Nizami likely based his version on the Greek *Alexander Romance*, which includes a similar tale. Haila Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition: History, Myth and Legend in Medieval Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 148.

[62] Nizami, "Section 35, Iskandar's Second Passage to India," Ganjoor, accessed 5 December 2024, https://ganjoor.net/nezami/5ganj/kheradname/sh35.

[63] Manteghi, *Alexander the Great*, 129.

[64] For a concise overview of primary texts discussing mer-people, see Grace D. Guest and Richard Ettinghausen, "The Iconography of a Kāshān Luster Plate," *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 47-50.

[65] There are two paintings from c. 1400 that depict the sirens as creatures like Buraq, the Prophet's fantastical hybrid steed, composed of a human head and horse-like body. One of these paintings, currently in the Khalili Collection (MSS 564, fol. 3r) was pasted over text in a *Khamsa* of Nizami but the text does not relate to the image and the

upper bodies are usually shown bare and partially covered by long hair that descends over their shoulders, while their groin areas are modestly covered with leaves, not unlike depictions of Adam and Hawwa (Eve).[66]

Like the *div*s, however, the sirens also take on a more human-like in appearance in the late fifteenth century, shedding their feathers or fins and become progressively more exposed, with their groins no longer covered by leaves, and more figures shown fully nude, even when in the water (figs. 3.18-3.28).[67] Unlike the *div*s and witches-as-*div*s, however, the bodies of the sirens are more subdued, particularly after they become more human-like. Like nude humans, the sirens' breasts are schematically rendered with single lines providing vague outlines but without the exaggeration or furry definition that is given to *div* breasts. In instances where they have genitalia, it is schematically rendered and does not have the level of detail witnessed with the *div*s.

The use of the term "bride" and description of the sirens' long hair suggests these figures are meant to be understood as female. However, the open-endedness of the term "bride," which could also apply to beautiful beardless young males and their occasional depiction with long

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painting may have originally come from a "wonders" manuscript. J.M. Rogers, *The Tale and the Image, Volume Two, Part One. Illustrated manuscripts and album paintings from Iran and Turkey* (London: The Nour Foundation and Azimuth Editions, 2022), 64. The second painting, in the Museum of Art and History, Geneva (1971-0107-0546) is a detached folio but according to the online record, was once part of an *'Aja'ib al-Makhluqat* (The Wonders of Creation) by Qazvini. I have chosen not to include them in my larger group of sirens since they may illustrate a different genre of text. See "Iskandar and the Khaqan Watching the Mermaids by the Sea," Museum of Art and History, accessed 1 November 2024, https://www.mahmah.ch/collection/oeuvres/iskandar-et-le-khaqan-observant-les-sirenes-au-bord-de-la-mer/1971-0107-0546. Additional examples of fantastical sirens are: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Inv. LA161A, fol. 111v; Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, VR-1000, fol. 484r; the Khalili Collection, MSS 681.4; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.19, fol. 91r; Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 760, fol. 287r.

[66] See for example Adam and Eve from an Anthology for Iskandar Sultan, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Inv. LA161B, fol. 240v and Expulsion of Adam and Hawwa from Paradise from *Qisas al-Anbiya*, New York Public Library, Pers. Ms. 1, fol. 8v.

[67] For additional examples of human-like sirens, see Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait, LNS 28 MS, fol. 338v.

hair, both of which occurred with the Prophet Yusuf, makes their exact gender ambiguous, a theme picked up on by some artists. Two paintings depict them with a mixture of short and long hair, suggesting that some of the sirens may be considered male and the term "bride" is employed in its more open-ended form (figs. 3.17-3.19). Furthermore, the sirens are sometimes depicted with a mixture of male and female genitalia. In a 1541 CE painting, sirens with short hair are shown with penises while those with long hair appear to have vulvas (fig. 3.18-3.19). This painting was retouched, likely in the nineteenth-century, and therefore these features may not be original.[68] An earlier painting, however, dated to 1517-8, seems to show the sirens, all with long hair, with faintly rendered genitalia (fig. 3.20). A pair of wrestling figures on the shore appear to have a penis and a vulva (fig. 3.21), respectively, while a third standing figure to their right has a damaged groin but possibly also a vulva that another siren is reaching towards (fig. 3.22). Unlike the phalluses of the *div*s, those of the sirens are diminished and difficult to see, and artists have depicted vulvas, which do not appear on the *div*s. Here genitals are less flagrantly about otherness and an excessive, untamed body, and instead may be a rare instance in which their appearance does the work of gendering the subjects.

[68] Ada Adamova, *Persian Manuscripts, Paintings and Drawings From the 15th to the Early 20th Century in the Hermitage Collection* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 130. The depiction of the sirens as significantly smaller than the humans who watch them also mirrors depictions of the people of Gog and Magog, who are similarly shown nude and sometimes have mixed genitalia. It is possible that a Gog and Magog painting served as the basis for this example, influencing the inclusion of genitalia. See for example, British Library, IO Islamic 3540, fol. 390r. The story of Gog and Magog appears in both the *Shahnma* and Nizami's *Iqbalnama*. In both cases, Iskandar protects a town by building a wall around Gog and Magog (only the former in Nizami's tale), preventing raids and incursions from the demon-like people of those areas. The people of Gog and Magog are described in wondrous ways, for example with large elephantine ears in the case of Firdawsi and long hair that covers their bodies in the case of Nizami. In contrast to these descriptions, artists often depicted the people as human-like but smaller than the average human and often nude. I have chosen not to address these depictions because they require a more thorough examination of their visual source, which deviates greatly from the text and suggests a non-textual origin, and a cross-textual study, including the many sources that came to influence both the *Iskandarnama* and *Shahnama*. Manteghi, *Alexander the Great*, 150 and Firdawsi, *Shahnama*, trans. Dick Davis, 622-624.

For the most part, however, artists often did not depict the sirens with visible genitalia, even in instances when they could. Several paintings include sirens in a crouched position, with their groins exposed to the viewer but these spaces are notably blank (figs. 3.23-3.28). Whether or not this is meant to indicate the figure is ungendered is unclear. As will be discussed in the case of bathing human women in the next section, the absence of genitalia may have been enough to signal a character was female in these instances. The widespread belief that female genitalia was inferior to male genitalia, and the understanding by some that the former was an undescended form of the latter may have influenced representation (or more accurately, non-representation), leading artists to show female bodies with smooth groins and lacking a vulva.[69] Like the term "bride" then, the nude body of the siren in open-ended in regards to gender in those instances where genitalia is not specifically included.

Though not without their wondrous features that set them apart from humans, compared with the ostentatious bodies of the *div*, the sirens are closer in appearance to humans. Unlike the witches who are shown nude right before their execution, nudity here takes on a different connotation and, in those instances where they appear, presented artists with an opportunity to explore the inclusion of genitalia without violating what was considered appropriate given the sirens non-human status. Their playful poses, including their grasping of one another's bodies, hugging, and even perhaps touching genitals, opened the door for more erotic interpretations of the mythical creatures who made Iskandar's blood boil. The voyeurism of Iskandar and the viewer themselves certainly contributes to the sense of illicitness and breaking from social norms. This model, as we will see later, was also applied to female bathers, generating a whole

[69] There is also a question of access to women by male artists, given gender segregation, however, this gets into a level of speculation about the lives of artists, which is risky to venture into without knowing the identities, much less the biographies, of most of the painters of these works.

category of paintings in which the body in water was laid bare for the viewer, often for sensual ends. This serves as a bridging point between the siren and the human, which will be explored further in the next section.

To conclude this discussion of non-humans, the high exposure of monstrous bodies such as *div*s and witches was used primarily as a means to mark the creature as "other" and outside the norms of society.[70] The role of genitalia in gendering the monster's body is secondary to the larger project of capturing the creature's otherness, particularly in relation to the fully clothed humans with which they are shown. The exception to this pattern is introduced with the sirens, where nude bodies (sometimes with exposed genitals) were displayed playfully and perhaps erotically. For all the wondrous beings discussed, however, the degree to which gender matters amongst them is debatable and is not of central concern to artists' representations of nudity. Keeping these beings with extensively exposed bodies in mind, we now turn to their human counterparts.

The 'Awrat-Centric Human Body

Full nudity in Persian painting is extremely limited prior to the seventeenth century, though instances of semi-nudity, with human figures nude from the waist up, do exist. The most common instances in which this occurs is in paintings of punishment, including execution scenes. Less extreme examples include bathing and consummation scenes, though the latter typically show even less of the body than punishment and consummation scenes. That the

[70] Genitalia also appears in the occult sciences, specifically love talismans, where certain celestial figures hold phalluses. See Cambridge University Library, Nn.3.74, fols. 192r and 193v, Royal Asiatic Society, MS RAS Persian 178, fol. 343r, New York Public Library, Spencer Coll. Pers. Ms. 49, fol. 290v. Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, 232.

exposed human body is rare may be attributable to the concept of *'awrat*. There is a clear avoidance of inappropriately exposing the body except in instances where a figure is socially ostracized (as with punishment), engaged in socially taboo behavior, or, as I will argue, could be considered an outsider. Exposure is thus non-erotic and genitalia is moralized as shameful in these instances. From these examples, we can better understand how nudity and genitalia played a role in human representation, mirroring the notion of otherness conveyed by the exposed monstrous body.

Exposing the Criminal

Notions of modesty and decorum were an important means for establishing oneself in society, with clothing, especially headgear, marking a person's status and position in society. To be forcibly stripped of clothing and exposed in public as punishment for a crime was, therefore, a sign of one's excision from the social fabric. Farzin Vejdani summarizes in his study of hair and hat shaming punishments in nineteenth-century Iran, that "[i]n a sense, being bareheaded signified bare life; ejection from a social group meant entering the realm of the bestial," closely recalling how the *div*s' beastliness was in part conveyed through their bare heads.[71] Meanwhile the exposure of the body in public was a violation of one's ability to maintain modesty and bodily purity, particularly if the criminal was a woman, thus bringing further shame upon on the punished.

[71] Farzin Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming Punishments in Nineteenth-Century Iran," *Iranian Studies* (2023): 14.

Punished figures in paintings followed a canonical form over several centuries in which the punished figure was shown shirtless, bareheaded and in white trousers (fig. 3.29-3.32). An oft-repeated illustrated example from the *Shahnama* is that of the youth Bizhan who is thrown into a well as punishment and frequently shown bare-headed and dressed only in trousers (figs. 3.31-3.32).[72] Paintings of the Day of Judgment also display figures in a similar manner, suggesting these people are laid bare both physically and spiritually, awaiting their fate (fig. 3.33). Nearly all instances of figures punished in this manner depict men and it is extremely rare to find an example of a shirtless female, although I will address one later in this chapter. This suggests that this level of punishment was considered inappropriate for representations of criminal women and calls into question whether such punishments were enacted upon them.[73]

An extreme example of a punished figure shown completely nude occurs in a painting of the execution of Goruy-i Zirah, the murderer of the hero Siyavush in the *Shahnama*.[74] Goruy-i Zirah is in the process of being dismembered, stripped of clothing, and with a visible phallus (fig. 3.34). The brutality of the punishment is heightened by the man's humiliation via full nudity and the removal of his limbs. The phallus here, as with those of *div*s (particularly the two captured *div*s from the Tahmasp *Shahnama* discussed earlier), is an emblem of shame and degradation. While it helps to indicate his gender, its depiction is not necessary given his beard and the context of the story, but the features all combined do highlight his masculine identity,

[72] This is true even in one of the earliest surviving depictions of the story, found on the so-called Freer Beaker, where Bizhan is shown shirtless, bare-headed and in white trousers. See National Museum of Asian Art, F1928.2.
[73] Rather it seems that women had their hair cut as punishment, at least based on records from the nineteenth century. Vejdani, "Hair and Hat Ritual Shaming," 8; Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2008), 242.

[74] Another example of Goruy-i Zirah after execution and flaying does not show his phallus. See "Lot 64. An illustrated and illuminated leaf from a manuscript of Firdausi's Shahnameh: Goruy-e Zerah Hanged, Persia, Safavid, Shiraz, 16th century," Sotheby's, accessed 13 June 2023, https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/arts-islamic-world-l14223/lot.64.html.

adding further to his disgrace as a figure who is shamefully reduced in public and thus far from the model of the ideal man laid out in ethical tracts and mirrors for princes. Semi-nudity and the rare instance of Goruy-i Zirah's full nudity call into question the humanity of the punished figure, diminishing their status as a member of society and their possibility of ethical refinement. In some instances, as with Bizhan, redemption is possible, and the figure returns in later images to both society and a fully clothed state. In other examples such as Goruy-i Zirah, the accused is met with death, marking their full severance from human society.

Prior to the seventeenth century the most common context in which a body would be shown semi-nude or nude (the latter of which was even less likely) was in scenes of punishment. As we can see from the above examples, such exposure was meant to depict the figure's divorce from the norms of society. In the case of Goruy-i Zirah, his exposed penis heightens his dishonor and marks his shameful inability to be an ethical adult male. The consistency and prevalence of the punished figure trope signals that it was the normative means by which the semi-nude human body was received. Punishment scenes were the visually dominant means by which the nude body was depicted, framing nudity in the context of the punitive and socially ostracizing. It was not, however, the exclusive mode of representation and there were limited exceptions to this to which we now turn.

Bathing Bodies: A Space for the Erotic

Though notably less frequent than punishment scenes, a more neutral context in which humans are shown semi-nude is that of the bathhouse, which provide us an opportunity to consider the semi-nude body outside of the context of social othering and instead in a context of

same sex social gathering. It is also a limited context in which men can be appropriately shown without headgear. In paintings depicting men at the bathhouse (figs. 3.35-3.37), largely all illustrating the story of the sultan Harun al-Rashid at the bath from Nizami's *Khamsa*, guests and attendants of the bath are shown wrapped in towels with their upper chests exposed.[75] Intriguingly, the representations align with al-Ghazali's proscription against men appearing fully nude amongst one another, although whether this is an accurate reflection of social practice is unclear.[76] It may, instead, be a matter of representational norms that points to an adherence towards modesty in paintings, at least for men. Artists may have felt it to be improper to violate the rules of *'awrat* and depict exposed genitals in these bathing scenes, thus partially clothing the men in towels.

The same level of attention to guarding *'awrat*, however, does not apply to bathing women, who despite being advised to cover their entire bodies, are shown semi-nude and sometimes fully nude. The most famous and pervasive example of this is that of Shirin bathing from the second poem of Nizami's *Khamsa*. The widespread depiction of Shirin bathing in a lake and spied upon by her soon-to-be lover Khusraw is found in nearly every copy of the *Khamsa* (figs. 3.38-3.39). In these paintings, the Armenian princess is shown with a towel tied around her waist with only her hair covering her chest while bathing in the lake. As with depictions of men bathing, Shirin is shown nude only from the waist up, although this also accords with the description Nizami provides of her donning a towel before entering the water.

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[75] These paintings are sometimes also referred to as "Caliph al-Ma'mun and the barber," rather than Harun al-Rashid. Grace Dunham Guest, *Shiraz Painting in the Sixteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1949), 33.

[76] Though in two paintings (figs. 3.35-3.36), bath attendants can be seen reaching under the towels of two men, perhaps implying some form of sexual engagement and providing another example of indirect engagement with the erotic, discussed below.

Shirin's exposure is certainly a key component of the story, being the first instance in which the two lovers see one another in person, although neither recognizes the other, which explains its illustrative importance.[77] Yet the artists' decision to depict Shirin at this moment when she is semi-nude may have also been deemed acceptable since the young woman was an Armenian and therefore an outsider and non-Muslim, unbeholden to the rules of *'awrat*.[78] This may also explain why amongst consummation scenes, those depicting Khusraw and Shirin are most likely to show the latter slightly exposed, whereas other lovers are frequently covered by a blanket, as will be discussed below. As part of the broader cultural imagination the story of Khusraw and Shirin was extremely popular, and this scene in particular became emblematic of the longer story. As such, the semi-nude bathing woman was visually normalized. And yet it appears only in the context of Shirin and other women are not shown this way, again suggesting that Shirin's identity made it more acceptable for her to be shown in such a manner.[79]

A less common example of bathing women accompanies another of Nizami's stories, this one from the *Haft Paykar* (Seven Portraits), about a man spying on women bathing in his garden, of which at least three paintings exist (figs. 3.40 and 3.42).[80] In these examples of the

[77] Nizami is also careful to attempt to protect Shirin's character by describing Shirin's shame at being discovered when she believed herself alone and Khusraw's recognition that he must behave chivalrously and not look at her. Throughout the story it is also Shirin who upholds her own dignity and refuses Khusraw's advances.

[78] Like Khusraw (Khusraw II Parviz, 590-628 CE), Shirin is based upon a historical figure recorded in two Greek letters, one of which describes her as Christian, and two Syriac chronicles. Paola Orsati, "Ḵosrow o Širin," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, article published 15 August 2006, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kosrow-o-sirin; Nizami Ganjavi, *Khosrow and Shirin*, trans. Dick Davis (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2024), xxxviii-xxxix.

[79] The trope of Shirin bathing, however, was copied by other artists and applied to male characters, such as Yusuf and Khizr. See Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Supplément Persan 1015, fol. 61r and Cambridge University Library, Add. 3139, fol. 374r.

[80] The third example is British Library, Or. 6810, fol. 190r. For the story, see Nizami, "Section 32: Bahram Gur sits on Friday in the White Dome," Ganjoor, accessed 27 December 2024, https://ganjoor.net/nezami/5ganj/7peykar/sh32; Nizami Ganjavi, *Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, trans. Julie Scott Meisami (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2015), 217-233.

"eavesdropper" story, the women are shown nude from the waist up, with their long hair descending over their chests but their upper bodies otherwise completely exposed. One of the paintings shows fully nude women, such as a figure sitting at the right edge of pool (fig. 3.41). Her genitals are not visible due to her sitting position, but the tops of the thighs of two standing figures in the middle of the pool, who are horsing around as one grabs the ankle of the other, are visible. Oddly, the figure on the right appears to have a small penis, while a third figure who watches them has two dome-shaped lines in her groin area that may be a vulva. Given the shared motifs of a voyeuristic male watching nude figures with long hair playing in water, it is possible the artists copied a yet-to-be-identified painting of "Iskandar watching the sirens" in which the sirens are playing and have mixed genitalia.

Indeed, it may be the shared features of the two stories made it acceptable to depict these human women fully nude by association with their non-human counterparts. The artists of these paintings may have been inspired by and potentially copied the tales of Iskandar spying on the sirens, of which earlier iterations exist. I have not found direct compositional copies of the "Iskandar" paintings amongst the "eavesdropper" paintings or a manuscript of the *Khamsa* that includes both paintings, so it is difficult to ascertain if the artists created this association between the two subjects. However, the repetition of particular motifs that are not seen in other paintings, such as figures grabbing each other's ankles, suggests a likely awareness of the earlier Iskandar paintings amongst the painters of the "eavesdropper" paintings.[81] Grace D. Guest and Richard

[81] The manuscript from which the later "eavesdropper" painting comes, which is now held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is missing two paintings. Priscilla Soucek believes the missing paintings may have illustrated Bahram's visit to the Princess of the Golden Pavilion and his conflicts with the ruler of China. Priscilla Soucek, "123A-C. Three Folios from the Haft paikar (Seven Portraits) of the Khamsa (Quintet) of Nizami," in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, eds. Maryam Ekhtiar, Priscilla P. Soucek, Sheila R. Canby, and Navina Haidar (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 183–84.

Ettinghausen make a textual connection between sirens or mermaids and the bathing women by pointing out that the shared root of *mah* for "moon" and *mahi* for "fish" are playfully intertwined by Nizami in his description of the women while simultaneously introducing an erotic element to the text through phallic associations of the fish.[82] Such a comparison may have further inspired artists to compositionally reference paintings of sirens and encouraged viewers to make such an association as well.

With the sirens, however, genitals only occasionally make an appearance. More commonly, male and female bathers, human or mythical, have exposed chests, which are similarly depicted. Regardless of gender, the breasts are rendered with a simple line and dot to delineate the vague outline of a breast and nipple. This manner of representing breasts for both men and women remained stable over several centuries, suggesting that breasts were not considered highly relevant to gender differentiation in paintings produced between the fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As will be shown later in this chapter, this would change in the mid-seventeenth century as breasts gained importance as markers of gender differentiation.

Concealed Consummation

A final significant arena in which human semi-nudity is depicted is in scenes of consummation. Typically, such scenes are fairly tame, with the subjects fully clothed and hidden underneath a blanket, such as in instances of the union of Yusuf and Zulaykha after marriage

[82] Guest and Ettinghausen, "Iconography of a Kāshān Luster," 53.

(fig. 3.43).[83] Aligning with the use of euphemism and metaphor in poetry, eroticism in Persian painting was more commonly expressed through gesture and metaphor. For example, in her study of a Mughal copy of Sa'di of Shiraz's (c. 1217-1292) *Gulistan* (Rose Garden), Mika Natif reveals how certain elements of a painting of Sa'di with a friend, including gesture and background detail, provide an erotic undertone, hinting at homoeroticism without specifically applying it to the master-student relationship captured in the painting.[84] Earlier paintings similarly alluded to the erotic through gesture, for example the grasping of another's belt, seen for example in a 1621 CE painting of Maniza grabbing her lover Bizhan's belt from the *Shahnama* (fig. 3.44). Like with the *ghazal* versus obscene poetry discussed by Ingenito, such gestures can be read as an "underhanded" and euphemized approach to the erotic.

Some, however, do show some nudity, though significantly less than punishment and bathing scenes, often revealing only the stomach, upper thigh or buttocks, or leg of the female partner. Notably, this appears nearly exclusively with scenes of Khusraw and Shirin (figs. 3.45-3.48), which as discussed earlier in scenes of the princess bathing, may have been deemed less scandalous because Shirin was a foreigner.[85] Genitalia is not included in these scenes (thanks in part to skillfully placed textiles and body parts) and gender is apparent from the clothing and position, as the male is always positioned in the dominant top. The general modesty with which these royal lovers are shown is contrasted by another example of not consummation but its avoidance through repetitive fornication found in one of Sa'di's obscene poems.

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[83] According to Willem Floor, clothed sex was the norm, most likely due religious opinion. Floor, *A Social History*, 82-3.

[84] Mika Natif, "The generative garden: Sensuality, male intimacy, and eternity in Govardhan's illustration of Sa'dī's *Gulistān*," in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, ed. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 46-7.

[85] For additional examples of Khusraw and Shirin's consummation, see Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, Add. 3139, fol. 125v; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 192, fol. 92v; San Diego Museum of Art, 2006.216.

The bawdy poem recounts the tale of a young man who, to avoid consummating his marriage with his uncomely wife, sleeps with all other members of the household. When the father is the only member left unmolested by the groom, the former agrees to the latter's divorce from his daughter to protect himself against the lascivious son-in-law. The artists of the two paintings of this scene took full advantage of this tale of sexual deviancy to show various sexually explicit scenes (figs. 3.49-3.50). Although the paintings are meant to show the son-in-law's multiple escapades in a single frame (achieved through the repetition of a male figure in a turban in several of the couplings) the artists also inserted additional pairings that do not include the man. Some of the pairings also flaunt social norms, for example showing a woman astride a man (the typically dominant partner) and a beardless, dark-skinned male (perhaps a slave) penetrating a bearded male (perhaps his master).[86] Male erections are prominently displayed, while two women have exposed groins but not visible genitals. While such an image is certainly erotic, it is also ribald, poking fun in a way not exhibited with royal couples and therefore likely deemed inappropriate for their representation.

That the most sexually explicit paintings accompany *hazl* poetry points to a visual alignment with the '*awrat*-centric spectrum described by Ingenito. In general, however, the Sa'di paintings are not a common use of nudity or genitalia in painting, suggesting a more conservative position in the visual than literary realm. What these examples of human nudity reveal is that nudity generally signaled social alterity.[87] In rare instances where it did not, the rules of

[86] Both instances imply the passivity of the adult male, which was socially unacceptable in sexual relations. Floor, *A Social History*, 73-4; Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Pres, 2005), 22.

[87] Sussan Babaie similarly points to the visual expression of *hazl* in her study of the Chihil Sutun murals. She also makes the argument that the figures who are engaged in indecent acts throughout the mural seem to be Europeans (despite their Persian dress), thus marking them as social outsiders. Sussan Babaie, "Frontiers of visual taboo:

protecting *'awrat* were followed (as in the case of bathing men) or an exception was made due to a character's identity as a non-Muslim (Shirin) or to exploit a correlation with non-human figures (bathing women). Nude bodies were unevenly gendered through their genitalia and not at all through their exposed breasts. As we will see in the next section, a case study from the *Shahnama*, semi-nudity again signals social estrangement until a shift occurs in the mid-seventeenth century and the nude body takes on new connotations.

Bare Breasting It: A Young Man Hiding in Nushin Ravan's Harem

An instance of cross dress in the *Shahnama* provides an entry point for tracing the evolution of nudity, genitalia, and breasts in representing gender. In this example, an unnamed male youth dresses as a young woman to live with his beloved in the harem of Nushin Ravan. As with the case of Bahram Chubina, cross dressing is negatively framed here, allowing an invasion of the private harem space, which in turn constitutes a threat to Nushin Ravan's authority. Unlike with Bahram Chubina, however, cross dressing does not explicitly diminish the wearer but poses a potent sexual and political threat by allowing a member of the lower classes access to the shah's women and thus raising the specter of usurpation. As punishment, the youth is humiliated through the physical stripping of his body and, in one case, his half-sister's, before they are executed. Semi-nudity continues to hold the same associations with alterity that it did with monstrous others and criminals. In later centuries, however, the exposure of the youth reveals the emerging relevance of the breast as a marker of gender difference and the nude body as an erotic

Painted Indecencies in Isfahan," in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, ed. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Farnham Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 145.

subject. I will also demonstrate how the illegibility of gender may have served as a form of visual conundrum meant to challenge and entertain viewers, but that was also occasionally met with a desire to punish the painting's subjects through physical alterations, maintaining the role of humiliation and punishment throughout.

Firdawsi's Tale

The story of the youth in Kisra Nushin Ravan's harem begins with a dream. One evening, the shah dreams that he is enjoying a feast on his throne when a boar joins him and asks to drink from the same goblet. The court interpreter and high priests are unable to understand the dream, so the ruler sends messengers throughout his land to find someone who can decipher it, one of whom returns with a youth named Buzurjmihr. He explains the dream as follows:

چنین داد پاسخ که در خان تو　　میان بتان شبستان تو
یکی مرد برناست کز خویشتن　　به آرایش جامه کرده ست زن[88]

He gave an answer such: In your chamber　　Amongst the idols of your harem
Is a young man　　Who has adorned himself in women's clothing[89]

[88] Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 7*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987), 173.

[89] Translation my own.

Buzurjmihr advises the king to clear the court and have his harem walk before him, and through their tread the intruder will be revealed. This is done but the youth does not appear, so the women are ordered to walk again but this time unveiled, at which point the youth with a cypress stature and Kayanid face is found.

شمن گفت: رفتن به افزون کنید　　رخ از چادر شرم بیرون کنید
دگرباره بر پیش بگذاشتند　　همی خواب را خیره پنداشتند
غلامی پدید آمد اندر میان　　به بالای سرو و به چهر کیانا[90]

He said: Have them go again　　And bring their faces outside the chador of modesty
Another time they went before　　Still they thought the dream amazing
When a ghulam emerged amongst　　[Of] cypress body and Kayanid face[91]

When the youth is found, the king asks who he is and a young woman from the harem steps forward to explain he is her half-brother, and claims he veiled himself out of respect for the shah. Unpersuaded, the shah orders their swift execution, after which their bodies are hung upside down as an example for the court.

Like the story of Bahram Chubina, this tale conveys an instance in which a shah's power is challenged by a lower member of court hierarchy. In this case, both the young man and woman are described as *ghulam*s, or slaves, though the latter likely holds a slightly different status as a royal slave in the harem. The harem referred both to a group of women linked to the

[90] Based on Firdawsi, *The Shahnama (Book of Kings), vol. 7*, ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh, 174.

[91] Translation my own.

shah or another aristocratic man (including wives but also sisters, daughters, concubines, and his mother), and a space secluded from public admittance, and accessed only by the patriarch, female servants, eunuchs, and sometimes young male pages before the age of puberty.[92] As an emblem of a patriarch's domination, the harem was strictly controlled to avoid intrusions by outsiders, who might constitute a political or sexual threat, or both, as the dream of Nushin Ravan intimates.

In the dream, the young man takes on the form of a boar who joins the shah on his throne, his seat of power and authority, and deigns to drink from the same cup, the ruler's source of pleasure at the feast and a likely metaphor for the harem. Yet it may also reference Nushin Ravan's authority. Firdawsi describes the youth as having a Kayanid face, thus referencing the second dynasty of the *Shahnama* and perhaps suggesting this youth descends from this earlier line. Whether a specific reference to this previous dynasty or a more general inference to the youth's royal appearance, he poses a threat to Nushin Ravan, first through his actions and perhaps secondly by possessing royal blood. Ultimately, in addition to transgressing the boundaries of the harem, the male *ghulam*'s incursion, whether as a royal descendent or not, also places him above his station, on the same level as the divinely sanctioned ruler. Within the context of the *Shahnama,* that he might usurp the throne is likely all the more galling to Nushin Ravan and his courtiers by that fact the youth can be mistaken as a woman, a form of gender ambiguity that is antithetical to the gendered hierarchy of society. The young man's recklessness, driven by blind love, thus result in a far more severe punishment than that of Bahram Chubina: death.

[92] For a concise overview of the harem, see Leslie Peirce, "Harem, in the Middle East," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Devin J. Stewart. Accessed on 01 January 2024, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30323.

Unlike in the story of Bahram Chubina, where donning the unworthy robe creates an uncanny conjunction, here the young man can easily pass as a woman, at least while veiled, perhaps suggesting that his masculinity is not as developed.[93] His young age and description as cypress-bodied may signify that he is an *amrad*, or a beardless youth, making him distinct from the fully bearded and therefore fully adult Bahram Chubina. The description of his body through metaphors applied to male and female youths adds to his gender liminality. It is a clue to how the youth can so easily blend in on the first attempt at Buzurjmihr's test. In poetry cypress-statured beauties are often described as swaying when they walk, implying that not only their appearance but their movement behavior was undifferentiated by gender. Thus, the youth can pass the first test of walking before the shah and Buzurjmihr because his refined physical movements are like those of the women around him.

Despite his ability to pass as a different gender, the ruse is only temporary for the youth and his gender identity is revealed once the women are ordered to remove their face veils and pass through again. In this instance the youth's face is visibly distinct from that of the women's, which allows for his identification. In some ways this goes against the tendency for youthful beauties of any gender to share the ideal of the moon-face.[94] As discussed in the previous chapter, this trope flattened the physical difference between genders, privileging an ideal above the material body. In this story, it may be that the youth and the other women in the harem do not share in this ideal and their faces are instead distinguishable by gender.

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[93] Given the patriarchal attitudes expressed towards women in the story of Bahram Chubina, we may also assume that as a male who could pass as a female, the youth's potential claim to the throne would have been even more galling since his manliness is in question due to his cross dress.

[94] Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 209; Omid Safi, "'The Real Intention was My Beloved:' The Moon in Persian Sufi Poetry," in *The Moon: A Voyage Through Time*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Toronto: Aga Khan Museum, 2019), 38.

And yet, Firdawsi does not use the term "moon-faced beauty," and instead specifics that the youth has a Kayanid face, a feature that may be the true source of difference, rather than the distinction laying in his masculine looks. As mentioned, Kayanid refers to the second ruling dynasty in the *Shahnama* and it appears throughout the epic primarily in reference to objects such as crowns and (male) characters who possess a royal appearance, and thus the potential to be a ruler. The young man's face is therefore a material reflection of his potential for power, despite that he is a slave and also lacks a beard. Thus appearance adds to the youth's threat to the shah, not just his transgression into the harem, distinguishing him through Kayanid's relationship to power, privilege, and perhaps the previous dynasty's divine right to rule.

The Youth in the Harem Visualized

Artists' interpretations of this scene are varied. There is a compositional and episodic variety that is distinct from many other illustrated scenes in the *Shahnama*, which we have seen with Bahram Chubina and Gurdafarid and Suhrab often follow the same compositional format and illustrate the same moment in a given scene.[95] The paintings roughly form three groups that illustrate different moments in the larger story, highlight separate themes, and mark distinct approaches to gender differentiation. The first group emphasizes the punitive themes of the story, recording the moment after the youth is discovered and just before his and the harem girl's execution. The second group, which is most common, focuses on the act of cross dressing and

[95] For more on repetition in Persian painting, see Ada Adamova, "The Repetition of Compositions and the Problem of Identification of Artists in Persian Painting," in *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light on the Parthian and Sasanian Empires*," ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curits, Robert Hillenbrand, and J.M. Rogers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 175-181.

conceals the youth amongst the women through both dress and an idealized manner of representing the faces of youthful beauties. The final group, which developed in the mid-seventeenth century, returns to emphasizing gender differentiation but this time through the body, rather than clothing. In this case, the instances illustrated include the women's pass before the shah and vizier (though sometimes only the former appears), and the moment just before the two youths are executed.

The Punitive Approach: Group One

Among the first group, only one painting clearly depicts the two youths together. In a 16th-century painting, the youth is seen bound and held by a guard, who also drags away his half-sister (fig. 3.51). The siblings are distinguished from one another by their dress. The half-sister wears a white chador, a garment that is exclusively associated with women, and a robe that closes down the middle. Contrary to the text, the male youth is not shown in cross dress, but instead wearing a cross-body robe like that of the shah and another male court attendant, which helps to signal that his dress is associated with men. Unlike the other male figures in the scenes, however, he is not wearing head gear, signaling his punishment and humiliation at court. Though not semi-nude, a corner of his robe is also undone, suggesting his body has perhaps been examined or is about to be exposed, furthering his degradation.

The *ghulam* is also shown with a gray face. Rather than indicating racial otherness, this grayness likely indicates the youth's sinfulness, as the blackened skin of the witches also indicated their wickedness. As Christian Lange has shown, blackened or partially blackened faces related to degrees of sinfulness, as the faced served as a window to the soul and on the Day

of Judgment sinners would have completely blackened faces.[96] This is visible, for example, in a painting of the Judgment Day from a mid-16th century *Falnama* (or Book of Omens) where a group of figures are shown with blackened faces below the scales of justice (fig. 3.33). Thus, the male *ghulam*'s gray face reflects his culpability, further heightening the castigatory themes of the image.[97] This painting provides a brief example of the ways in which dress distinguishes between the male and female figures, and as it turns out, a uncommon example where both the half-sister and *ghulam* are easily identifiable. In other paintings of this scene, the two figures are more difficult to pinpoint and dress becomes a less reliable indicator of gender identity.

For example, in a painting dated to 1333 CE, clothing is largely stripped away (fig. 3.52). Here, Nushin Ravan is enthroned and turned toward the beardless Buzurjmihr, who in turn faces a group of women in chadors on his right and a standing figure, who is shown stripped to a pair of white trousers and with no headgear. An owner seal that reads Muhammad Iskandar was added at some point prior to the seventeenth century over the figure's chest.[98] The figure fits

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[96] Christian Lange, "'On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black' (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in the Arabo-Islamic Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127: 4 (2007): 429-31. Gray skin was a poetic trope that was also frequently equated with the Hindu, enslavement and servitude. Annemarie Schimmel, "Turk and Hindu: A Poetical Image and Its Application to Historical Fact," in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, ed. Speros Vryonis, Jr. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 110; Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, "To be Feared and Desired: Turks in the Collected Works of 'Ubayd-i Zākānī," *Iranian Studies* 42.5 (2009): 729.

[97] This also seems to be repeated in another later painting (fig. 3.57), but in this case the half-sister is shown with ashen skin. As the women emerge from the harem, a gray-skinned figure is shown isolated in the foreground. Their skin color and position make them distinct from the other women of the harem, who are lighter skinned, grouped together, and in some cases pointing at this figure. The figure's exceptionally long hair, which mimics that of several other women in the harem and is visible emerging from the bottom of their headscarf, indicates that this is more likely the female *ghulam* rather than the male *ghulam* in disguise. Another gray-skinned figure in a turban to the right of the shah is perhaps meant to be the male youth but his compositional positioning, cut off by a wall and near the shah, suggests this is more likely a court attendant and not one of the central characters of the story. Despite the placidness of the faces in this scene, the social isolation of the woman adds an ominous tone to this painting. Rather than shown enfolded within the community of the harem as in the other paintings, this figure is isolated and alone, signaling her impending permanent removal from society via execution.

[98] A.T. Adamova and L.T. Giuzal'ian, *Miniatury rukopisi poemy "Shahname" 1333 goda* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1985), 14 and Robert Hillenbrand, *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings* (Aldershot:

with the common visual trope of the punished figure broadly and with other punished males specifically found throughout the 1333 CE manuscript. Thus, on first read we are meant to understand that this figure is the young male *ghulam*, depicted after his true identity is discovered and his execution imminent.

And yet, a contemporaneous painting of this scene shows a rare but important depiction of the young harem girl also stripped to the waist with her upper torso exposed (fig. 3.53) and challenges our ability to definitively read this figure as the half-brother. Here the two youths are shown hung on crosses following their execution. They are nearly identical to one another, with matching white trousers, bare-chests, long hair descending over their breasts, and arms tied behind their backs. The primary distinction between the two figures is size; the figure on the right is slightly smaller, which may suggest that this is the harem girl but there is nothing definitive to confirm this attribution or count this as a defining feature of gender distinction.

This painting of a semi-nude punished female is extremely rare and the only one from this period that I have found.[99] All other examples with identifiable subjects are male characters. Instead, the closest contemporaneous visual comparison comes from the unicum romance of *Varqa and Gulshah* by the 11th-century poet ʻAyyuqi, in which the titular lovers are shown resurrected after death and depicted in white trousers with their long hair descending over their

Ashgate, 2004), 62. This seal precedes another in the manuscript that reads 1606 CE and indicates that the manuscript was part of the group donated by Shah ʻAbbas to the shrine at Ardabil, providing a *terminus ante quem* for the first stamp to the early seventeenth century. Muhammad Iskandar's seal is applied to several other paintings, including some depicting punishments, such as the execution of Afrasiyab and Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothing (fig. 1.2). In the former, Afrasiyab is dressed like the *ghulam*, shirtless and in white trousers, but here the seal is applied to the man's leg and not over his chest. It is possible that despite the re-presentation of this figure as the young *ghulam*, Muhammad Iskandar was still compelled to bring this character into alignment with the more modestly dressed characters in the scene, covering his naked torso with his seal.

[99] There is another painting of a punished, shirtless female in a 16th manuscript of Nizami's poetry in the Walters Art Museum, W.657.210B.

bare chests (fig. 3.54). Here the figures' semi-nudity aligns with judgment following death. Throughout the manuscript the appearance and scale of the two figures is similar to such a degree that they are largely distinguishable from one another only by text captions, thus negating scale as a reliable indication of gender differentiation in this period. Rather in both the case of the punished youths and the resurrected lovers, gender distinction based in clothing or the body, especially the face, fails us here. The figures are represented through the idealized notion of beauty described in the previous chapter, sharing many physical features between them, and most importantly for this chapter, their breasts are similar and do not provide a gender distinction. The paintings that constitute group one most clearly engage with visualizing guilt particularly through semi-nudity.

An Amrad Amongst Women: Group Two

The physical similarity between the youths is heightened and exploited in the second category of paintings of this story, in which the youth is still hidden in cross dress. It is far more common in these paintings of Nushin Ravan inspecting his harem that there is no visible distinction between the male youth and the women of the harem. These compositions collapse the two instances where the harem passes through for inspection into a single moment, where the women are shown unveiled but the youth is not yet visible. Such is the case in a c. 1585 CE manuscript painting (fig. 3.55) and a 1603 CE iteration (fig. 3.56).[100] Another early 17th-century version, which is currently titled "Nurshivan interviews the intruder to his harem," (fig. 3.57) is

[100] For another example that is damaged, see Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Supplément Persan 493, fol. 438v. The damage does not seem intentionally aimed at a single figure, unlike that in the earliest Injuid painting. Rather, it occurs throughout the painting and is more likely caused by water damage.

most likely misidentified and instead depicts a beardless Buzurjmihr seated next to Nushin Ravan and reviewing the women of the harem who exit a building at the right of the painting.[101]

In these paintings, the members of the harem share a uniform appearance, with little distinction between their faces and sometimes also dress. The male youth, who is hidden amongst the women, is thus disguised through both clothing and the moon-face that he shares with the women around him. This may seem surprising to us, given that it is his face that reveals his identity in the story, but as noted, Firdawsi specifies it is his *Kayanid* face, alluding to a prior dynasty and drawing in associations of royalty rather than gender to single out the male youth from the women of the harem. In contrast to the textual, artists focus on the similarity of faces, often rendering them virtually indistinguishable from one another.[102] The artists draw upon poetic tropes, such as the "moon face" as well as the absence of gender differentiated pronouns in Persian grammar discussed in the intro. They exploit these literary and visual features of gender ambiguity to hide the male youth amongst the women of the harem.

The depiction of the harem members in this way cleverly connects to the text and the conundrums that Nushin Ravan faces, first in interpreting his dream and then in ferreting out the intruder in his harem. In choosing to render the male youth and the women of the harem as indistinguishable from one another, the artists draw upon the difficulty of Nushin Ravan and

[101] Buzurjmihr is described in the text as a youth and this is exclusively interpreted by artists as meaning he is beardless. He is typically shown wearing a turban and seated or standing next to the shah, which was typical of a vizier or advisor's position. It is very unlikely that the youth, who had violated the shah's harem would be allowed to be seated in his vicinity in this manner. In addition, the story does not describe Nushin Ravan interviewing the young male *ghulam*, but rather the female *ghulam* instead speaks to the king. The folio's break lines, copied at the top and bottom of the painting, align with this telling of the tale.

[102] An exception in the c. 1585 painting (fig. 3.55) is the figure at the far-right edge of the frame who is wearing a white hijab, making them distinct from the other figures who wear short white headscarves. While this may be one of the youths, this figure more closely aligns with older female characters, such as nurses, who are associated with the harem and are typically depicted with full hijabs and shown in profile.

Buzurjmihr to identify the male *ghulam*, pulling the viewer into the same struggle and adding a new level of engagement to the paintings. The search for the intruder on the part of the viewer may have added to the entertainment value of the painting.[103] Perhaps drawing on the long tradition of riddles and conundrums in court poetry, the artists turn their paintings into puzzles that invite the viewer to look closely and ponder gender representation to see if they can find the youth.[104]

Visual engagement of this kind shows how such paintings were more than merely illustrations and instead spaces of enthrallment and cogitation. Nina Ergin has demonstrated this through her study of faces and figures in rock formations in the backgrounds of paintings, which she posits were inserted by artists to intensify the cognitive viewing experience, particularly if the viewer was under the influence of wine or opiates.[105] In this case, the artists created visual conundrums that slowed the viewers' progress and inspired a reflection on what mattered for gender in one's own time, or perhaps even in the past if a viewer was looking at an older manuscript. As discussed above, cross-dressing found moderate social acceptance as a form of entertainment, and this may have similarly manifested itself in manuscript paintings. Gender masquerade as a form of entertainment was pleasurable for the ways in which it called on a

[103] This may have even played out on a symbolic level. In the 1603 painting (fig. 3.56), the space between the shah and Buzurjmihr and the harem women is bisected by a window in which there is a cypress prominently displayed. This may be an allusion to the male youth, who is described as cypress-statured. Thanks to Molly Aitken for pointing out this detail to me.

[104] A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Courtly Riddles: Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010) 22, 27, 45-7; C.E. Bosworth, "Muʿammā," *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, accessed 15 April 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5272; M. Bencheneb, "Lughz," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, accessed 15 April 2024, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4686.

[105] Nina Ergin, "Rock Faces, Opium and Wine: Speculations on the Original Viewing Context of Persianate Manuscripts," *Der Islam* 90, no. 1 (2013): 67.

viewer to consider what distinguished a person's gender identity and to test their perception.[106] In these iterations it is impossible to discern the young man from the other women in the harem as he shares all their physical attributes and dress, providing the tantalizing prospect for some viewers that this too is possible in the real world and adding to the challenge of looking at gender.

As puzzles, however, the paintings do not have a resolution and the youth remains coyly hidden in plain sight, undetected by the shah, Buzurjmihr and the viewer. Instead, they are visual cliffhangers for the story, which encourage the audience to read on. Furthermore, they bring to the surface issues that take the educated viewer beyond the themes of the story. The paintings demonstrate the ways in which both dress and the face, idealized through youthful beauty, are unreliable markers of gender in manuscript painting. Through cross dress and conventionalized depiction, the artists of these works call attention to the constructed and unstable nature of gendered appearance, where both features can mask a character's true gender identity. Such paintings, therefore, demonstrate the ways in which artists and pre-modern viewers were similarly thinking about the iconography of gender, and this is not an exclusively contemporary pre-occupation.

Punishment also remains relevant in some these paintings, however, in an unexpected manner through which we could argue that the puzzles have been "solved," at least to a degree. For example, in the 1333 painting of the punished figure, a later owner stamped their seal across the chest, as a visual power play by which the owner Muhammad Iskandar added their own mark of domination and arguably, damnation or punishment. This is even more aggressively recorded

[106] Some may argue that an interest in gender is a modern concern, however, given the gender-based organization of medieval and pre-modern Islamic society, particularly as it manifested in a range of sources from juridical texts to bawdy humor, that there was a fine attunement to gender and its physical manifestation in all aspects of society.

in instances where the face of a figure has been intentionally removed by a later viewer, for example, in a 1330 CE painting (fig. 3.58). The composition is nearly identical to that of the 1333 CE painting and may have been the original source from which the later artist copied. Here, however, the standing male figure is replaced with a seated figure in a chador. The figure's face, who may be the youth in disguise or his half-sister, is missing.[107]

While there are some flaking and light smudging throughout the painting, this figure's face is the only one that is entirely gone, suggesting that it was intentionally removed, perhaps in response to the scandalous nature of the story. If on the one hand, we understand the seated figure to be the young female *ghulam*, then her exposed face was possibly considered shameful. While women appear unveiled throughout the manuscript, within the confines of this composition, her unveiled face makes her distinct from the other more modestly dressed women with face veils. Through erasure, the viewer brings her body back into line with the veiled women in the scene (albeit more extremely), thus restoring her modesty. On the other hand, if we read the figure as the young male *ghulam*, his cross dress would have similarly been deemed inappropriate and the modification was thus an act of punishment, not unlike the one he receives in the story. No matter which character the figure is meant to be, the erasure of the face is a "virtual decapitation" that presages their later execution, recording a viewer's engaged and affective response to the visual and reinserting ideas of crime and punishment not visually expressed through a stripped body.[108]

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[107] The face, if it had remained undamaged, may not have contributed much to revealing the figure's gender identity due to the trope of the moon-face.

[108] Christiane Gruber, "In Defense and Devotion: Affective Practices in Early Modern Turco-Persian Manuscript Paintings," in *Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Muslim Empires: New Studies in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Art*, ed. Kishwar Rizvi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 100.

In "In Defense and Devotion: Affective Practices in Early Modern Turco-Persian Manuscript Paintings," Christiane Gruber examines later modifications in historical paintings, such as in copies of the *Jami' al-Tavarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), through erasure, touching, cutting, rubbing and wetting through kisses. Gruber argues that rather than acts of exclusive iconoclasm, these modifications reflect a viewer's "affective ethics," where they are moved to physically alter a painting to institute their own views or emotional responses.[109] For example, in two paintings depicting the punishment of early Muslims, viewers disfigured the representations of the non-Muslim enemies through facial erasure in acts of retribution and defense of the depicted Muslims. Modifications could also include devotional acts, such as the addition of white veils over the faces of religious figures and accidental damage caused by repetitive adoring touch.[110] Touching could even be sensual.[111] In the case of the 1330 *Shahnama* painting, a viewer was compelled to enact their own punishment onto the image, leaving a material trace of their emotional response. Thus, gendered concerns, for example around modest appearance, could also activate a viewer's "affective ethics," and lead them to alter an image. Thus, while the artist intended to challenge the viewer with visual puzzles based in gender ambiguity, some viewers' affective response was to single out a figure that they thought was the *ghulam* or half-sister and participate in the punishment by physically altering the painting. Thus

[109] Gruber, "In Defense and Devotion," 100.

[110] Gruber, "In Defense and Devotion," 106, 110-111.

[111] This is documented in the case of European manuscripts but likely also occurred with Persian paintings. For example, in a 1632 painting of the consummation of Shirin and Khusraw's wedding, their exposed legs were covered by wetting and smearing the surrounding purple paint from the wall and Khusraw 's robe. The act may have been to return modesty to the bodies of the copulating couple, but may also be interpreted as a gesture of sensual petting. See Victoria and Albert Museum, MSL/1885/364, fol. 211r (fig. 3.48). For a European example of sensuous touching, see Kristen N. Racaniello, "Haptic Homoeroticism: Evidence of Queer Bathing Histories in the Glazier *De Balneis Puteolanis*," *Public Art Dialogue* 10, no. 1 (2020): 64-80.

the castigatory theme of the socially ostracized figure continued to surface even in instances where they are not explicitly depicted as such.

An Erotic Turning Point: Group Three

The way in which such paintings engaged viewers gained a new dimension in the mid-seventeenth century, shifting emphasis from the puzzle to pleasure, particularly erotic pleasure. The exposed and semi-nude body became central to the composition and to exposing the male youth and a harem woman, possibly his half-sister. Unlike the "punished male" trope that used the nude body to convey humiliation and presage execution in earlier paintings, in these later works the artists exaggerate the idea of *unveiling* to become *undressing*, demonstrating a new visual interest in sex markers as distinguishers of gender and also the erotic possibilities of the nude body that are fully at home in painting trends of the late seventeenth century.

The first painting (figs. 3.59-3.60) that exhibits this new function on the semi-nude body appears in the so-called Windsor *Shahnama*, produced in 1648 CE for the patron Qarajaghay Khan, governor of Khurasan, and discussed in Chapter One for its interpretation of Bahram Chubina's punishment, where the general (depicted with the visage of Shah 'Abbas) is not shown in women's clothing. The painting of Nushin Ravan inspecting his harem captures the moment when the youth is discovered and the female *ghulam* pleads for his innocence. In it a seated shah and Buzurjmihr listen to a standing figure, likely the half-sister, who wears a style of cap associated with Georgian women and has defined breasts like the other women in the

scene.[112] She points at a figure to her right, who has a moon-face and wears a costume like hers but the top of their coat and robe are opened and pulled down around the shoulders, exposing a completely bare chest lacking even nipples. The absence of breasts compared with the rounded breasts of the surrounding women hints that this is the young male, a likelihood that becomes stronger when this painting is brought into comparison with the second mid-17th-century example.[113]

The second painting (figs. 3.61-3.62) is in a manuscript commissioned for Shah ‘Abbas II (1642-1666 CE) and dated to 1651 CE.[114] It depicts a member of the harem undergoing a thorough examination, with their clothing removed to expose their entire torso, including below the waist.[115] The woman’s breasts are well rounded, though lacking nipples, and they appear to lack genitals. Based on earlier works we have seen, this visible lack, particularly of a penis, combined with the defined breasts likely suggests that this is meant to represent a woman,

[112] The visible foreignness of this figure perhaps made it more acceptable to show them stripped. For more on the Georgian hat, see Massumeh Farhad, “Safavid Single Page Painting, 1629-1666,” PhD diss., (Harvard University, 1987), 225 and Axel Langer, *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art & Contemporary Art from Tehran* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg and Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2013), cat. 141. The style of dress reflects the popular bell shape that, over the course of the century, became popular for both male and female dress. For more on Safavid dress and textile production generally, see Jennifer Scarce, “Style from top to toe: how to dress in Isfahan,” in *Safavid Art and Architecture*, ed. Sheila Canby (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 72-76 and “Safavid Dress and Europe,” in *The Fascination of Persia*, 58-69.

[113] Another painting in this manuscript shows the enemy king Afrasiyab shirtless after he has been captured and his breasts are rendered in a realistic manner. Both paintings are attributed to Muhammad Yusuf, so it may be that in this case, where the gender of the king was not in question, the representation of breasts was considered unproblematic. The Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 10005014, fol. 390r.

[114] Rudi Matthee, “Administrative Stability and Change in Late-17th-Century Iran: The Case of Shaykh Ali Khan Zanganah (1669-89),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1994): 98fn71; “Shahnama (National Library of Russia Dorn 333),” *Shahnama Project*, accessed 1 February 2024, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-STPETNLR-DORN-00333/1.

[115] The dress of this figure is not explicitly foreign as with the Georgian costume in the previous painting. The harem often included foreign women (here there are Georgian women) but the figure’s identity is left open-ended, marking a potential shift away from the previous trend of exposing the *‘awrat* of non-Muslim foreigners.

perhaps the female *ghulam*, and not the male intruder.[116] Brought into comparison with one another, the two paintings highlight how the presence and absence of particular sexual markers is used to delineate gender in these works in a manner not so explicitly expressed. In the 1648 CE painting, the absence of breasts, particularly compared with the surrounding women, indicates this is likely a man while the absence of a penis and presence of defined breasts in the later painting suggests that this figure is a woman. Thus, there is a marked shift from earlier modes of painting where breasts did not play a significant role in gender differentiation, to a new interest in breasts as feminine.

This development was not isolated from the broader context of Persian painting of this time, which saw the emergence of both defined breasts and the female nude as a popular new subject. Several scholars have noted that the emergence of the well-defined breast and female nude was likely influenced by European painting traditions.[117] The growing circulation of European paintings and prints of women, both portraits and more generalized types such as Venus, exposed Persian artists and patrons to eroticized representations of women in which breasts, either fully exposed or cleavage, were more pronounced than in local tradition. Artists took to this visual model, and the female nude was introduced and incorporated into Persian

[116] For a contemporaneous example of a female nude shown with a bare groin, see National Museum of Asia Art, F1954.24.

[117] Amy Landau, "Visibly foreign, visibly female: The eroticization of *zan-i farangī* in seventeenth-century Persian Painting," in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, ed. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Farnham Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 99–129; Axel Langer, "European Influence on Seventeenth-Century Persian Painting: Of Handsome Europeans, Naked Ladies, and Parisian Timepieces," in *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art & Contemporary Art from Tehran*, ed. Axel Langer (Zurich: Museum Rietberg and Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2013), 170-237; Negar Habibi, "Zan-i Farangi, a Symbol of Occident: The European Women in Farangi Sazi Paintings (1666-94)," in *Iran and the West: Cultural Perceptions from the Sasanian Empire to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Margaux Whiskin and David Bagot (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 225–40.

painting around 1590 CE (fig. 3.63).[118] These elements also became a key component of the newly emerging *farangi-saz* style, which syncretized elements of Persian and European painting together.[119] Within Persian art, the exposed breast was initially attached to representations of European women and in many instances, a marker of foreignness.[120]

Yet the rise of the defined breast also had its own localized developments in painting, namely an increasing trend toward eroticism, identified by Richard Ettinghausen as beginning in the 1630s CE, indicating a lessened concern for protecting the *'awrat* of the painted subject.[121] This was part of a broader movement towards greater realism in painting, both stylistically and topically, which included more deliberate representations of sexual relations.[122] Changing fashions in clothing in this period, including tailored shapes for both men and women that were more revealing of the upper body, also contributed to representations that emphasized the chest more than the loose robes of centuries prior. Additionally, painterly representations of the body shifted to rendering them thicker and fuller, moving away from the slender bodies seen in earlier

[118] Landau, "Visibly foreign," 110.

[119] Amy Landau, "From Poet to Painter: Allegory and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century Persian Painting by Muhammad Zaman, Master of *Farangī-Sāzī*," *Muqarnas* 28 (2011): 103.

[120] Landau, "Visibly Foreign," 113. Sheila Canby notes that Riza Abbasi's famous painting of a nude female next to a river (fig. 3.63) is more likely a Persian than a European based upon her hair styles and jewelry. Sheila Canby, "The Demimonde in Safavid Painting," in *The Arts of Iran in Istanbul and Anatolia, Seven Essays*, ed. Olga M. Davidson and Marianna Shreve Simpson (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018), 65, fn. 32.

[121] Richard Ettinghausen, "Stylistic Tendencies at the Time of Shah 'Abbas," *Iranian Studies* 7, no. 3/4 (1974): 602-3. Such sexual explicitness was not just directed towards heterosexual pairings but also appears in homoerotic paintings, such as that of Shah 'Abbas and a wine bearer (Musée du Louvre, MAO 494). Sheila Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (London: The British Museum, 2009), 251. Sussan Babaie describes this as a "sexual age" in Isfahan in which the literary, theological and visual all reflected themes of sexuality. Babaie, "Frontiers," 147.

[122] See for example, the consummation scene in *Khusraw and Shirin*, Victoria and Albert Museum, MSL/1885/364, fol. 211 (fig. 3.48).

Safavid painting.[123] This emphasized the natural curves and heft of the body, particularly obvious in the heavy hips and thighs that both male and female characters exhibit in this period but also eventually the breasts of female characters. Thus, while the *exposed* breast may have had its roots in representations of European women, the *defined* breast emerged from a locally growing interest in the sensuality and materiality of bodies, including those of Persians. This is apparent in the number of single page paintings in which women in Persian, not foreign, dress, are shown with defined breasts.[124]

An interest in the erotics of the body is fully on display in this painting. The artist does not choose a more pivotal moment, such as the exposure of the male *ghulam* or the youths' dramatic removal to execution, but instead transforms the examination of the harem, which in prior iterations had been mundane and fully clothed, into a salacious event, seizing the opportunity to insert a nude female where it does not necessarily need to be. Whether this woman is even the female *ghulam,* a character central to the scene, or not is unclear and further adds to the excessiveness of her nudity. Her undressing is more than an act of inspection and instead becomes an erotic moment. Gesture also remained relevant as it was in the previous century. The gray-skinned beardless man in a turban, likely a eunuch, firmly holds the woman's arm with one hand while the other hand languidly grazes her breast. The gray-skinned woman with a full hijab, likely a nurse or harem servant, pulls down the woman's trousers and gestures towards the groin area, emphasizing her sexual organs. Even Nushin Ravan comes off his

[123] Canby, *Shah 'Abbas*, 20 and 135.

[124] See for example Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), M.73.5.14, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 50.164.

platform and gestures towards her nude body, heightening the hetero-erotic potential of the moment.[125]

The decision to depict an exposed woman detracts from the textual thrust of the scene, namely the search for the young man. Buzurjmihr is notably absent from this depicition, diminishing the connection to the story and his role as the originator of the examination. Like the group two paintings, the male *ghulam* remains hidden amongst the women of the harem but the eroticism of the depiction and the absence of Buzurjmihr makes it is almost easy to forget the purpose of this inspection. Instead, the artist heightens the sexual elements of the story that are not explicit in Firdawsi's text.

Furthermore, the diminishment of the young man's presence shifts the act of intrusion onto the viewer, who witnesses what would otherwise be completely hidden from view and only the purview of the shah. That is, of course, unless the viewer was the shah himself, which was the original intention for this manuscript that was commissioned for Shah 'Abbas II (1642-1666 CE) by his *qurchi-bashi* or master of the tribal cavalry, Murtaza Quli Khan.[126] Within this context, the motivations for diminishing the male *ghulam*'s role becomes more apparent. In a story about transgression and punishment, the artist exploits the more pleasurable potential of the narrative to create a highly erotic image that is rare for *Shahnama* manuscripts but commensurate with growing artistic interest in this theme. In doing so the artist also reimagines the threats to a shah's authority in a more sensual manner, something that would have been pleasing to its recipient. Whereas nudity is used in both the 1648 and 1651 CE paintings to delineate gender

[125] Not all members of the harem were sexual partners with the shah, as it could include sisters, mothers and other blood relatives. Firdawsi's specification that the girl is from Chaj, however, indicates that she was likely not related to the king and was one of his consorts.

[126] Matthee, "Administrative Stability," 98fn71.

identity, in the later work it also emphasizes the sexual potential between the harem woman and shah, as well as the woman's sexual availability to the viewer, who at one time was the shah himself.

And yet, despite the erotic framing of the painting, Shah 'Abbas II or another viewer still sensed the threat to Nushin Ravan's authority and inserted their own punishment. At the far-right edge of the painting, behind Nushin Ravan, the face of one of the onlookers has been forcibly rubbed out, again virtually decapitating the figure as in the previously discussed 1330 CE painting. Despite the efforts of the artist to heighten the sexual elements of the story that are not explicit in Firdawsi's text, the painting still elicited a sense of injustice that a viewer felt compelled to correct. While other instances of physical alterations to a painting such as rubbing and kissing could indicate positive affective responses to the paintings, including erotic engagement, here the manner of removal (seemingly chipped off rather than rubbed over time) suggest that the viewer was not lustfully engaging with the subject but reprimanding them. As with the earlier altered paintings, we do not know if the viewer saw this figure as the *ghulam* or the half-sister but it is clear that they sought to re-establish a social order that had been disturbed by a deceptive gender presentation.[127] The theme of punishment is present alongside the erotic.

Turning back to the representation of gender, an important question for this study is the degree to which the breast was considered a vital component of the visual iconography of gender. As noted before, in centuries prior, exposed breasts, whether male or female, were schematically rendered with a simple line and dot to delineate the vague outline of a breast and

[127] This is not to say that cross dressing is the most egregious offense here. As we saw with Gurdafarid and Amr-i Umayya it could also have positive use and reception. It is, however, the means by which the bigger crime of infiltrating the shah's harem occurs, thus marking gender identity as sufficiently malleable to be used as a means of deceit and disrupting social order.

nipple. These two paintings of Nushin Ravan examining his harem demonstrate a marked shift in the use and reception of breasts in paintings, one that extends beyond associations with foreignness noted by other scholars for this period. The emphasis on the woman's breasts in the 1651 CE painting and the absence of breasts for the male character in the 1648 CE painting demonstrates the increased importance of these body parts as markers of gender. From these paintings we can understand that in the seventeenth century breasts were gaining prominence as a distinguishing factor of the visual iconography of gender as an indicator of femininity.[128]

The process of transition to gendering the body through breasts was not always consistent or definitive in this period, as several ambiguously gendered figures in single page paintings reveal, such as a painting by Riza 'Abbasi (1565-1635 CE) currently identified as "Kneeling man offering wine" (fig. 3.64).[129] The figure's face is an idealized moon-face type that lacks gender specificity. The clothing is a blend of features that might be worn by male or female subjects. The cut of robe with a wide scalloped collar is typically but not exclusively worn by male characters, while the round collar undergarment is most often seen on men. Meanwhile, layered beaded necklaces like the type seen here are worn exclusively by female characters. While headgear can often illuminate gender, the pointed hat with round fur trim depicted is not

[128] While this process of feminizing the body is visually apparent, there may have also been concurrent efforts to visually solidify masculine identities. Returning to the 1648 painting of Bahram Chubina, we may see it in a new light as a move towards preserving the masculinity of the hero. It is possible that the abnormality of the painting in comparison with other renderings of the same scene is due to an increasing concern for the boundaries between genders.

[129] Moya Carey connects this painting with a European print (Chester Beatty Library, AF735) depicting a young man in a similar pose to suggest that the European painter had based their work on similar single page paintings. This does not, however, definitively gender the subject of the Persian original, if it indeed served as a model, as the subtleties of gender representation may have been misinterpreted or reduced by the European artist in the process of translation. Moya Carey, *Meeting in Isfahan: Vision and Exchange in Safavid Iran* (Dublin: The Chester Beatty Library, 2022) 74.

definitively linked to one gender or ethnicity.[130] Based on the above discussion of the defined breast, we might interpret the presence of the breast on the proper right side of their chest as an indication that they are female. And yet its subtlety, which was enough that others have ignored it and called this figure a man, plus the mixture of dress cast doubt on this figure's identity. The exact gender presentation of this moon-faced youth is open to interpretation, which as was discussed in the previous chapter, may have been intentional on the part of the artist to convey more metaphorical ideas associated with beauty. Such ambiguity was possibly part of the fun and entertainment of gazing on this painting.

Laying it all Bare: Conclusion

The examples presented in this chapter should not suggest to the viewer that nudity was a frequent feature of pre-modern Persian painting. Rather, nudity appeared in limited circumstances, such as to depict social outsiders including criminals and demons, and select moments such as bathing and consummation. The general lack of nude bodies in such paintings was certainly influenced by the historical context in which the paintings were produced, which promoted protection of *'awrat*, modesty of appearance, and the separation of the sexes. In stories that focus on heroes and kings, it is far more common and appropriate to emphasize their noble characters through clothed appearances. To that end, when nudity is shown it is deployed for

[130] It is reminiscent of the type worn by Georgian women but lacks the split and pointed brim that is so characteristic of that particular style. Instead, it relates more closely to a form of soft, fur-lined hat that could be molded into different shapes depending on how one rolled the brim. See for example, a figured identified as a young woman wearing this hat in the Hermitage, St. Peterburg, inv. No. P2-1074, published in Sheila Canby, *The Rebellious Reformer: The Drawings and Paintings of Riza Abbasi of Isfahan* (London: Azimuth, 1996), cat. 39. For other youths in this hat, see LACMA, M.73.5.458 and Victoria and Albert Museum, MLS/1885/364, fols. 73r, 99r, 192r.

very specific purposes. Most frequently, it signals a break with social norms, as we saw with figures such as the *div*, witch, and criminal whose bodily exposure is a sign of their wickedness or wrongdoing. In rare instances, such as with sirens, bathing women, and consummation scenes eroticism and sensuality, even playfulness, are introduced. This is particularly heightened in paintings produced after the mid-seventeenth century and would continue to develop and become more explicit well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[131]

The role of the nude body, genitalia, and breasts in representing gender was therefore limited, at least until the mid-seventeenth century for the latter. From the fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century the breast was irrelevant to gender differentiation and genitals were unevenly utilized (and sometimes even confusingly applied, as in the case of the female bather with a possible penis). In some instances, their non-representation may be the indication of gender, though this often required further affirmation from additional visual cues, such as hair, or narrative context. As it was in the juridical and medical realms, genitalia were a contestable form that often required substantiation from other markers. With the example of the youth in Nushin Ravan's harem, however, we can trace an iconographic shift in which the breast takes on new importance as a marker of feminine gender. Influenced by both European artistic traditions and localized stylistic developments in representing bodies, the breast was transformed from a sketchily rendered feature to a fleshy materialization of the female body. Though subtle and not always consistently applied, such changes are paramount to tracking shifting attitudes towards gender, the body, and the means for representing both. It is through such examples that we can

[131] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 41; Christiane Gruber, "'To not toil in lonely obsession': Modern Persian erotica in the Kinsey Institute," in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, eds. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 214 and 227.

see that what defined gender was debated and malleable, everchanging with new cultural, historical, and artistic influences, themes that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Conclusion: Reframing Our Reading

Gender's pervasiveness as a cultural phenomenon can make it easy to overlook. Indeed, within the field of Islamic art history, gender has remained a limited field of inquiry, one that has primarily been addressed through studies of female representation and patronage. This dissertation has taken a new approach by critically considering *how* gender was conceptualized and represented in the pre-modern Persianate world. Textual sources from this period demonstrate that gender was debated, ambivalent, and framed around a hierarchical understanding of power that privileged adult males over non-males, an amorphous group of gender presentations that included women, beardless youths, *khunsa*s and *mukhannasun*. With an eye to this historical context, my visual analysis moved away from the male-female binary to attend to the culturally specific and nuanced ways in which gender was conveyed through a combination of visual cues, including hair, the body, and dress, features that demand our close examination when reading a painting.

To foster such close study, this dissertation sought to establish an iconography of gender for paintings of romances and epics produced between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Each chapter in this dissertation closely examines a different bodily feature to determine its place within in this iconography. Chapter One demonstrates the cultural importance of hair, in particular facial hair as a marker of masculinity, seen for example in its use to convey Bahram Chubina and Suhrab's male identities. Long head hair could signal a female character's gender identity, as with depictions of Gurdafarid, but it was a less reliable indicator as it was sometimes

applied to male characters, such as Yusuf. This chapter also introduced an example of how a visual representation could convey multiple gender positions through Amr-i Umayya's gender masquerade that recalled both female dancers and the *mukhannas*. Chapter Two moved us into the realm of ambiguity, arguing for the existence of an idealized form of beauty in both poetry and painting that did not distinguish between women and beardless male youths, expressed through tropes such as the moon-face. In such instances, the gendered body is subsumed to a more pertinent cultural ideal, conditioned by assumptions about the external manifestations of spirituality and nobility. The final chapter examined nudity, which was uncommon and frequently used to convey social alterity. In instances where the breast is exposed, however, we can trace a shift in its growing relevance as a marker of femininity in the mid-seventeenth century. These features of the iconography of gender provide a general base that will aid future visual analysis and hopefully foster additional studies into additional gender markers.

Much of this project has been a process of doing and undoing – teasing out factors or "rules" that seem consistent but then finding they are completely disregarded or used in a different manner in a subsequent example. What this lack of a hegemonic pattern indicates is the open-endedness of gender in the pre-modern Persianate period, and its capaciousness as a means of identification. While Persian society adhered to a rigid gender hierarchy organized around the superiority of the rational adult male, it also accommodated distinct gender positionalities, and accepted and embraced ambiguity. Indeed, ambiguity became creative fuel for poets and inspired the artists who created paintings to accompany these texts and beyond, as in the case of single page paintings such as the one of the lounging beauty that began this dissertation. The inscrutability of the represented body captures the variability of gender in Persian paintings. For art historians this should cause pause before assuming the gender of a subject and invite bringing

a critical and culturally sensitive lens to any interpretation. With this attentiveness, we get closer to seeing gender with a period eye that is attuned to how this fundamental form of identity was conceived, conveyed, and received.

The relevance of attending to gender in pre-modern Persianate painting extends beyond the realm of art history, allowing us to better understand how represented figures were perceived as social categories in relation to one another and broader culture. For example, while the *mukhannas* might have been a social minority, Amr-i Umayya's masquerade in a positive context that benefits 'Ali suggests that even those on the gender periphery had a functional role in society, rather than having their personhood refuted, as so often happens with gender non-conforming individuals in our present society. This is not to view the past with rose-tinted glasses, as indeed acts of gender non-conformity were sometimes used to degrade, as in the case of Bahram Chubina, and condemn, as may be an impetus behind later viewers damaging paintings of the youth in Nushin Ravan's harem. Rather, the example of the *mukhannas* and other gender representations in painting points to the capaciousness of gender in period and encourages us to reflect critically on the narrow confines of our own contemporary concepts and biases.

As our thinking about gender continues to become more nuanced, we will get closer to understanding how it operated in the past and hopefully extract lessons to inform our present. We are now coming to terms with an idea that was inherent in previous debates about gender: that the range of factors we use to assess gender are variable and unstable, and thus open to constant change and debate. As Andrea Long Chu writes, "The claim that gender is socially constructed has rung hollow for decades not because it isn't true, but because it's wildly incomplete."[1] We

[1] Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), 35.

are only just beginning to fill in the gaps and mine the levels at which gender is shaped and operates. Bringing our attention to the historical negotiation of gender can help us to reframe our own approach to it, accepting it not as a given but a mode of identification that is in flux for both individuals and communities.

The pre-modern Persianate world can continue to help us rethink the parameters of gender through questioning what is relevant to its expression and how it operates in a given society. It also can elucidate new approaches such as reading gender through ambiguity. What can be gained when we let go of a desire to categorize and taxonomize? How does attending to the range of discourses that shaped knowledge production, for example Sufi mysticism and Sunni orthodoxy, change how to read for gender and its representation? How does love, considered a dangerously overpowering emotion in pre-modern Persia, condition gender?[2] Pursuing such lines of inquiry is beneficial not only to area or methodologically specific studies, such as Persian studies or art history, but to our wider understanding of what it has meant to be human at different points in history.

What I hope this project has made clear is that gender in the premodern Persianate world was neither fixed nor natural. There is no essential truth to gender. Rather, it is shaped by a variety of factors, taking different forms in different contexts. What we gain from studying the iconography of gender is a sense of this expansiveness, which invites us to critically examine the category as a whole. Pre-modern Persian poets and artists demonstrated this through their experimentations with ambiguity and the manner in which they made gender legible (or not) to their audiences. As we move forward, we can take a page from their manuscripts and approach gender with a new attunement to its unconstrained possibilities.

[2] Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University, 2021), 190.

Figures



Figure i. Reclining figure, Iran, 1630-40 CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 12.223.3



Figure 1.1 Bahram Chubina in women's clothes as punishment, from the Shahnama of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, November 1330 CE (Safar 731 AH), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H.1479, fol. 249r



Figure 1.2. Detail of Bahram Chubina dressed in women's clothing as punishment, from the Shahnama of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, February 23, 1333 CE (733 AH), National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 329, fol. 321r



Figure 1.3. Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothes as punishment, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1341 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 110.84



Figure 1.4. Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothing, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, 1489 CE, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 4255, fol. 279r

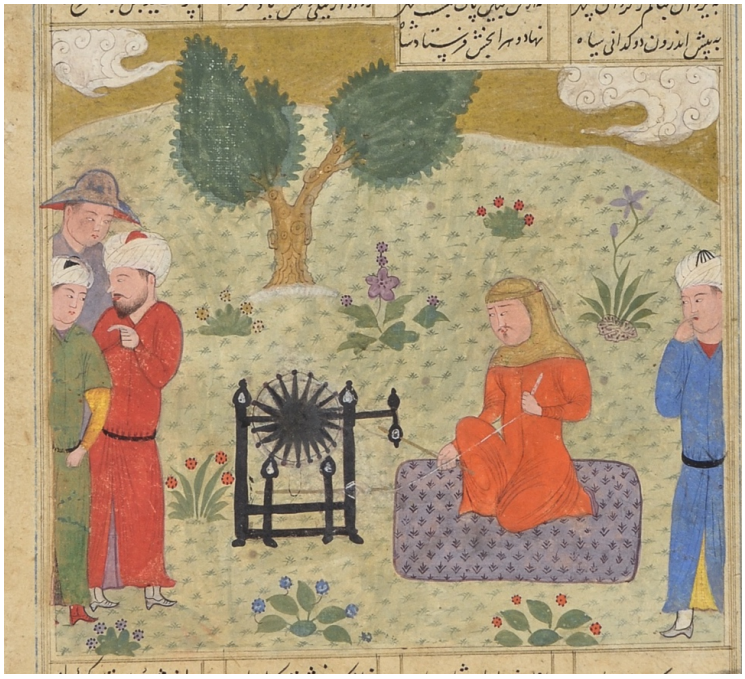


Figure 1.5. Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothing, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, ca. 1480-90 CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2018.278a, b



Figure 1.6. Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothes as a punishment, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, c. 1300 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 104.71



Figure 1.7. Bahram Chubina wearing women's clothes as punishment, from the Second Small *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, possibly Baghdad, c. 1300 CE, McGill University, Toronto, MSP Leaf 2



Figure 1.8. 'Amr-i Umayya addresses the King of the East, from the *Khavarannama* of Ibn Ḥusam, Iran, Shiraz, 1475-1500 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 293.7



Figure 1.9. Haftvad's daughter spinning, from the Second Small *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, possibly Baghdad, c. 1300 CE, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, 51.37.9A,B



Figure 1.10. Haftvad's daughter spinning, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, November 1330 CE (Safar 731 AH), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H.1479, fol. 180v

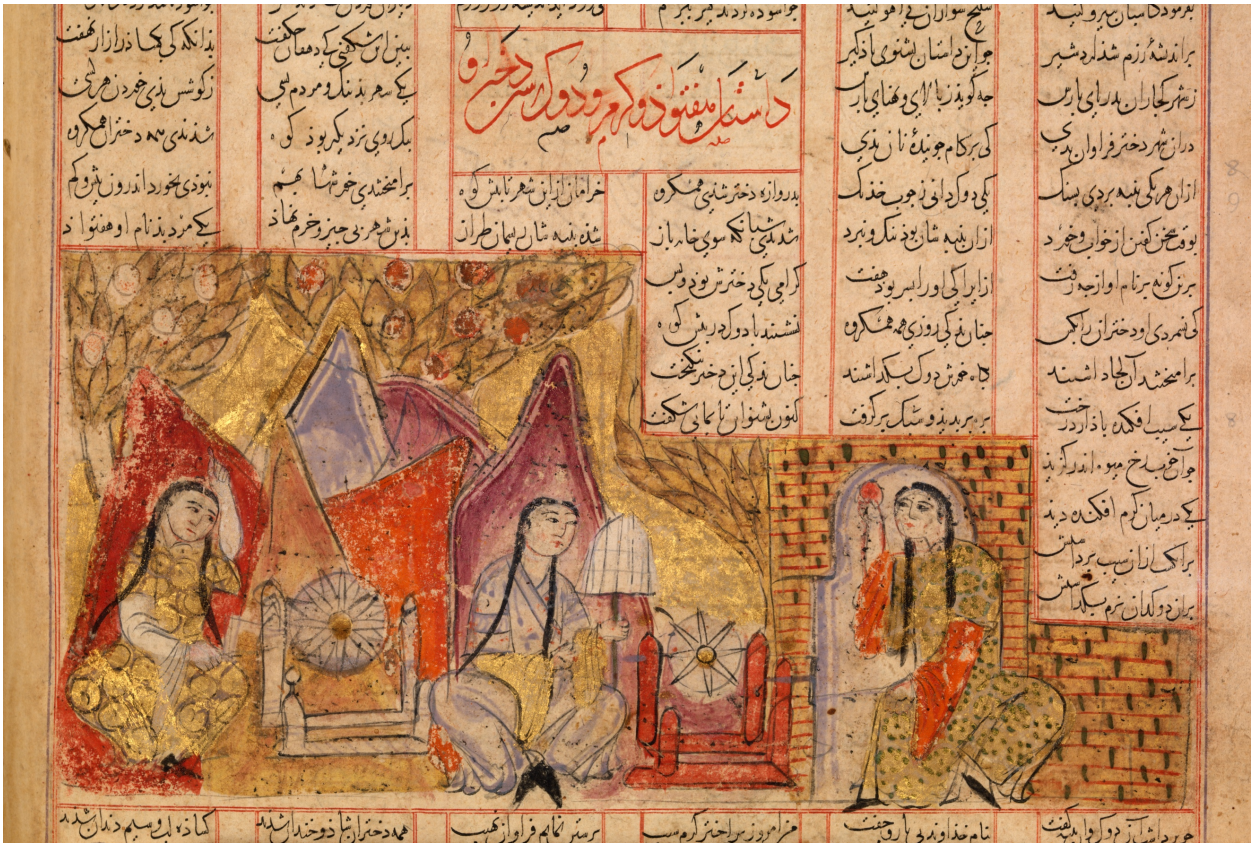


Figure 1.11. Haftvad's daughter finds the worm, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1341 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 110.60



Figure 1.12. Attributed to Muhammad Yusuf, Bahram Chubina with the spinning-wheel sent to him by Hurmuzd, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1648 CE, The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, RCIN 10005014, fol. 668r



Figure 1.13. Suhrab removes Gurdafarid's helmet, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, 1494 CE (899 AH), Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Elliott 325, fol. 106a



Figure 1.14. Suhrab removes Gurdafarid's helmet, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, North provincial (Mazandaran)/ Timurid, 1446 CE (AH 850), British Library, London, Or. 12688, fol. 113b



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Figure 1.16. Suhrab and Gurdafarid in battle, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, likely 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. Diez Album A, fol. 73, S.70 Nr. 1 73.70.1r



Figure 1.17. Detail of Suhrab and Gurdafarid in battle, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, likely 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. Diez Album A, fol. 73, S.70 Nr. 1 73.70.1r



Figure 1.18. Woman with a blossom, Iran, likely 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. Diez Album A, fol. 73, S. 38



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Figure 1.20. Attributed to ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, Detail of Suhrab meets Gurdafarid, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi made for Shah Tahmasp, Iran, ca. 1525-30 CE, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran



Figure 1.21. Suhrab removes Gurdafarid's helmet, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Afghanistan, Herat, 1606/7 (1014 AH), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.228.16, fol. 95r



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Figure 2.1. ‘Abd al-Mu’min al-Khuyi, Varqa and Gulshah with the King of Syria, from *Varqa and Gulshah* of ‘Ayyuqi, likely Anatolia, 13th century, The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 841, fol. 61r



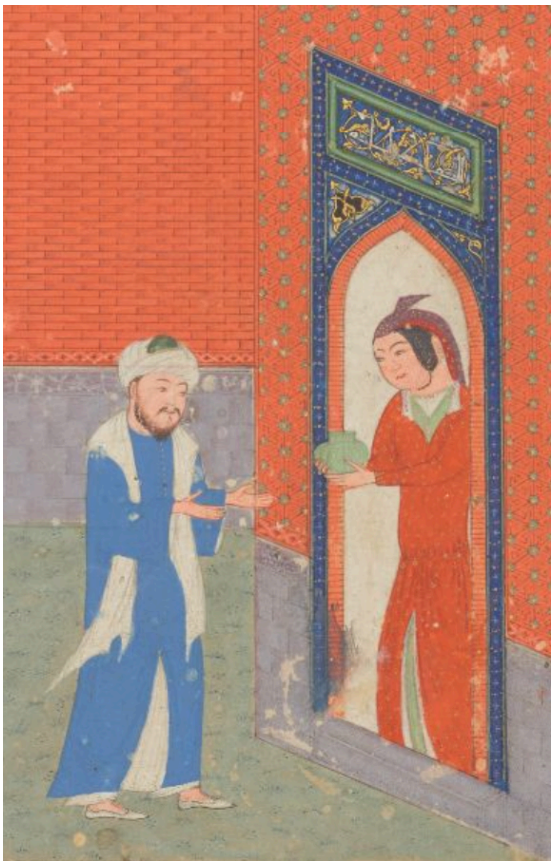


Figure 2.2 and 2.3. A lady offers a cool drink to the poet Sa‘di and detail, from Prince Baysunghur's *Gulistan* of Sa`di, Herat, 1427 CE (830 AH), Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 119.36



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Figure 2.6. Yusuf tends his flock, from the *Haft Awrang* of Jami, Iran, 1556-65 CE, National Museum of Asia Art, Washington, D.C., F1946.12.110



Figure 2.7 and 2.8. Details of Yusuf tends his flock from the *Haft Awrang* of Jami, Iran, 1556-65 CE, National Museum of Asia Art, Washington, D.C., F1946.12.110

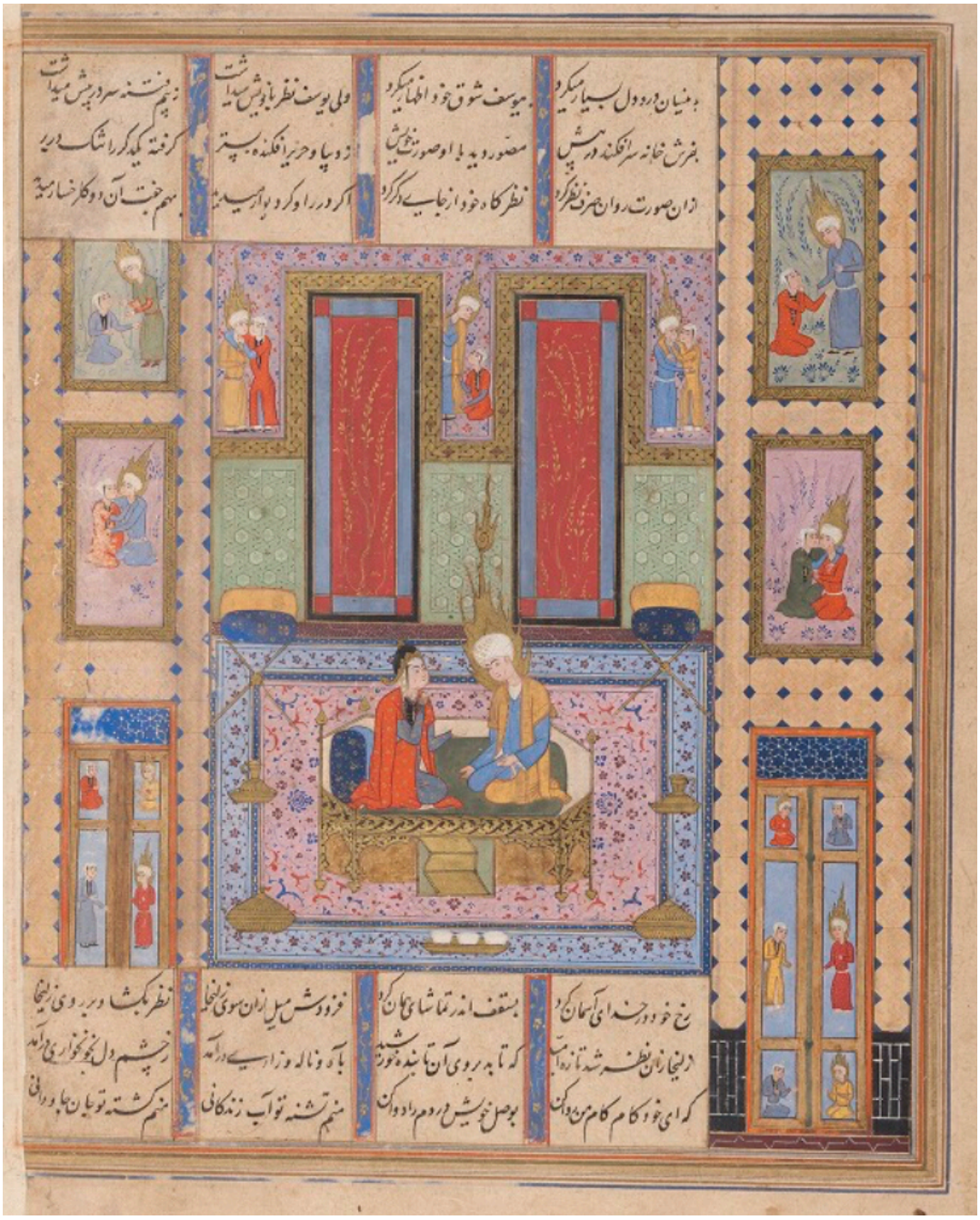


Figure 2.9. Yusuf and Zulaykha seated in her pleasure palace, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, 1560-1599 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 149, fol. 199v



Figure 2.10. Detail of Yusuf and Zulaykha seated in her pleasure palace, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, 1560-1599 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 149, fol. 199v



Figure 2.11. Detail of Yusuf and Zulaykha seated in her pleasure palace, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, 1560-1599 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 149, fol. 199v



Figure 2.12. Muhammad Rafi, Zulaykha grabs Yusuf's robe, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Central Asia, Bukhara, 1683-1684 CE (1095 AH), The David Collection, Copenhagen, Inv. no. 43/2000, fol. 103r



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Figure 2.18. Gabriel brings blessings for the marriage of Yusuf and Zulaykha, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Tabriz, 1540 CE (947 AH), Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 251, fol. 152v





Figures 2.19 and 2.20. Aged Zulaykha tries to meet Yusuf and detail, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, 1560-1599 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 149, fol. 212v





Figures 2.21 and 2.22. Yusuf sold and detail, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, 1560-1599 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 149, fol. 190r



Figure 2.23. Yusuf and Zulaykha Consummate Their Marriage, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1580 CE, British Library, London, Or. 4122, fol. 155b



Figure 2.24. The Wedding of Zal and Rudaba, from the Shahnama of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, 1425-1450 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.73.5.575



Figure 2.25. Attributed to Riza ‘Abbasi, Kneeling man offering wine, Iran, Isfahan, 1630-35 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 260.3



Figure 3.1. Siamak attacked by the Black Demon, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 359, fol. 57r



Figure 3.2. Detail of Siamak attacked by the Black Demon, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 359, fol. 57r



Figure 3.3. Kay Khusraw Captures the Demon-occupied Bahman Castle, from *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, 1525-1530, The David Collection, Copenhagen, Inv. No. 31/1988



Figures 3.4. Detail of Kay Khusraw Captures the Demon-occupied Bahman Castle, from *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, 1525-1530, The David Collection, Copenhagen, Inv. No. 31/1988



Figure 3.5. Attributed to Sultan Muhammad, Tahmuras Defeats the Divs, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1525, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1970.301.3



Figure 3.6. Attributed to Sultan Muhammad, Detail of Tahmuras Defeats the Divs, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1525, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1970.301.3



Figure 3.7. Akhvan div throws Rostam in the sea, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 359, fol. 233v



Figure 3.8. Detail of Akhvan div throws Rostam in the sea, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 16th century, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 359, fol. 233v



Figure 3.9. Rustam's fourth feat: he kills the witch, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, ca. 1525, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1970.301.17



Figure 3.10. Attributed to Qasim ibn 'Ali, Isfandiyar's fourth feat: he kills the witch, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1525–30, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970.301.52

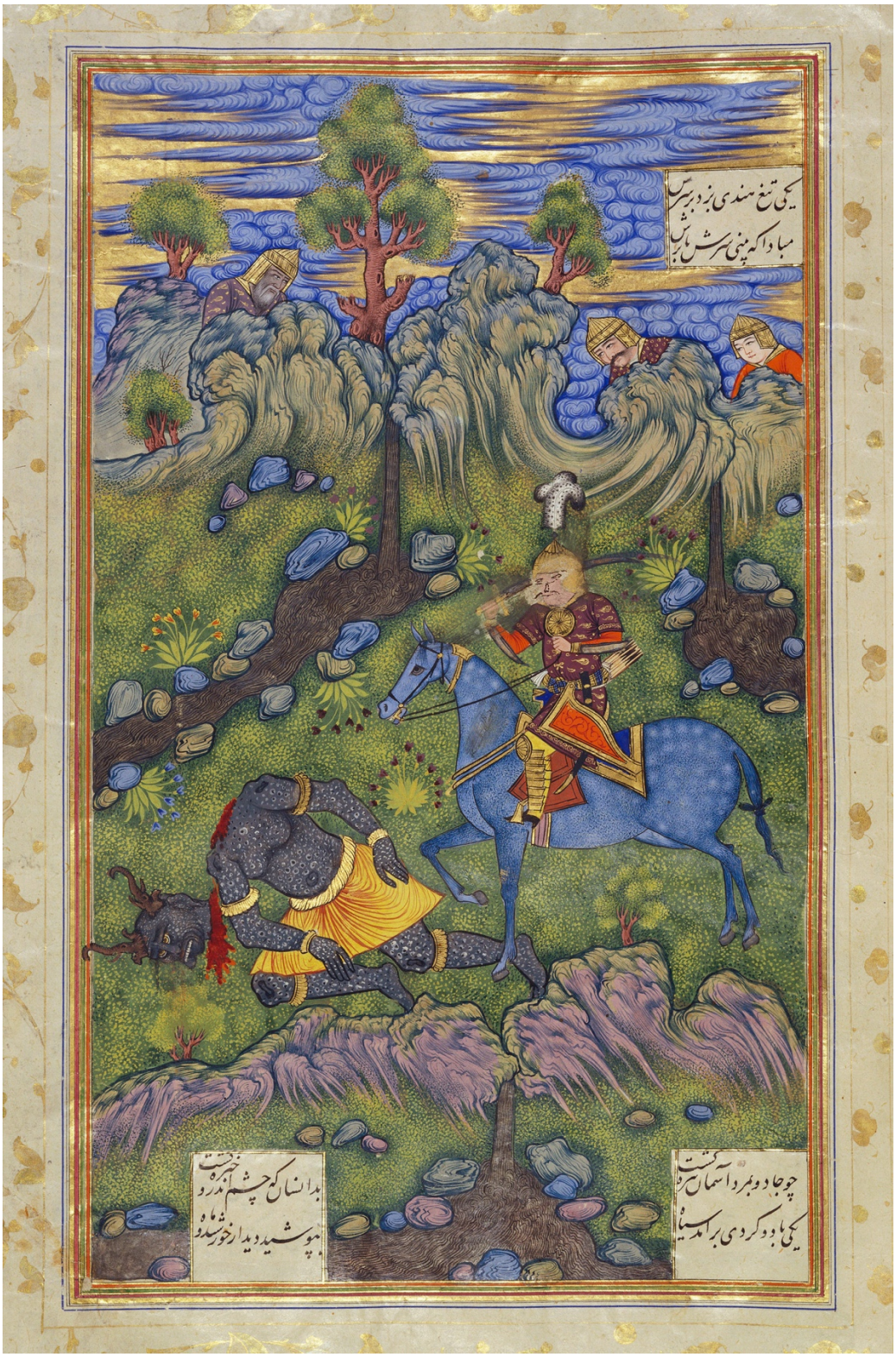


Figure 3.11. Attributed to Muhammad Qasim, Isfandiyar's fourth feat: he kills the witch, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1648, Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN 1005014, fol. 438r



Figure 3.12. Rustam's fourth feat: he kills the witch, Iran, Shiraz, November 1330 (Safar 731), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H.1479, fol. 21r



Figure 3.13. Detail of Isfandiyar's fourth feat: he kills the witch, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1585 with later overpainting, Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN 1005013, fol. 189r



Figure 3.14. Detail of Isfandiyar's fourth feat: he kills the witch, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1585 with later overpainting, Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN 1005013, fol. 189r



Figure 3.15. Isfandiyar's fourth feat: he kills the witch, Turkman Shiraz, 1489, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Ms. or. fol. 4255, fol. 169r



Figure 3.16. Iskandar watching the sirens, from composite work written for Jalal al-Din Iskandar ibn ‘Umar Shaikh, Iran, Shiraz, Timurid, 1410-11, British Library, Add. 27261, fol. 286v



Figure 3.17. Iskandar watching the sirens, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz; 1463, The David Collection, Copenhagen, 39/2006



Figure 3.18. Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, May-December 1541 CE (Safar-Sha‘ban 948 AH), Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, VR-999, fol. 366v



Figure 3.19. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, May-December 1541 CE (Safar-Sha‘ban 948 AH), Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, VR-999, fol. 366v



Figure 3.20. Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, 1517-8 CE (923-924 AH), Walters Museum, Baltimore, W.606.354B

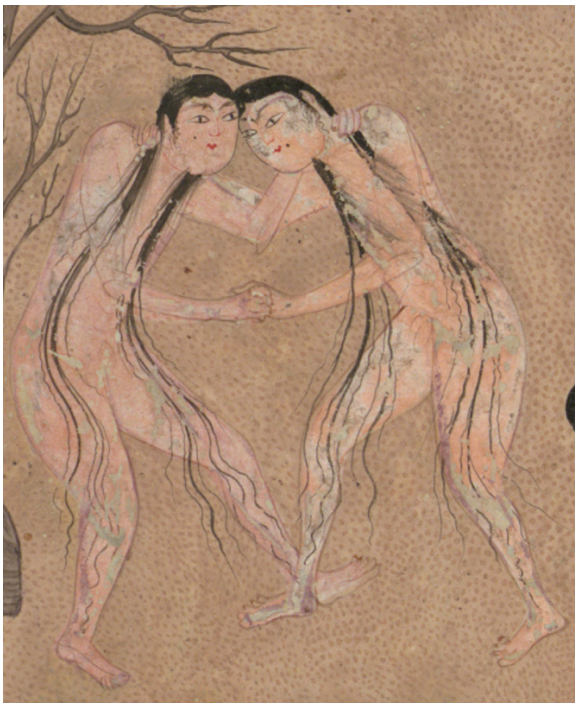


Figure 3.21. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, 1517-8 CE (923-924 AH), Walters Museum, Baltimore, W.606.354B

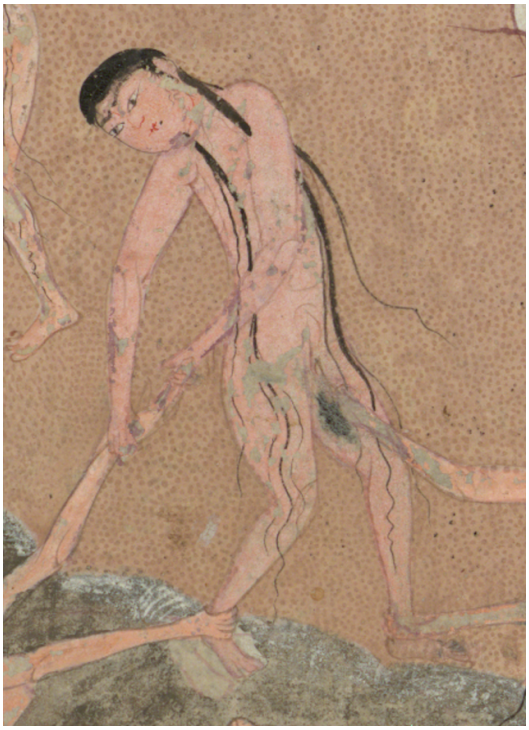


Figure 3.22. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, 1517-8 CE (923-924 AH), Walters Museum, Baltimore, W.606.354B



Figure 3.23. Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, dated four times: later January-February 1500 CE (towards the end of Jumada II 905 AH), 4 March 1500 CE (3 Sha‘ban 905 AH), May 1500 CE (Shawwal 905 AH) and 13 June 1500 (16 Dhu‘l-qa‘dah 905 AH), Khalili Collection, Geneva, Switzerland, MSS 547, fol. 314v



Figure 3.24. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, dated four times: later January-February 1500 CE (towards the end of Jumada II 905 AH), 4 March 1500 CE (3 Sha‘ban 905 AH), May 1500 CE (Shawwal 905 AH) and 13 June 1500 (16 Dhu‘l-qa‘dah 905 AH), Khalili Collection, Geneva, Switzerland, MSS 547, fol. 314v



Figure 3.25. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, 1501 CE (907 AH), Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 192, fol. 333r



Figure 3.26. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, 1501 CE (907 AH), Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Elliott 192, fol. 333r



Figure 3.27. Iskandar watching the sirens, from the Khamsa of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, 1548, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C., F1908.259-284



Figure 3.28. Detail of Iskandar watching the sirens, from the Khamsa of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, 1548, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C., F1908.259-284



Figure 3.29. Alexander Executes Janusiyar and Mahiyar, the Slayers of Darius, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, 1482 CE (887 AH), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 40.38.1

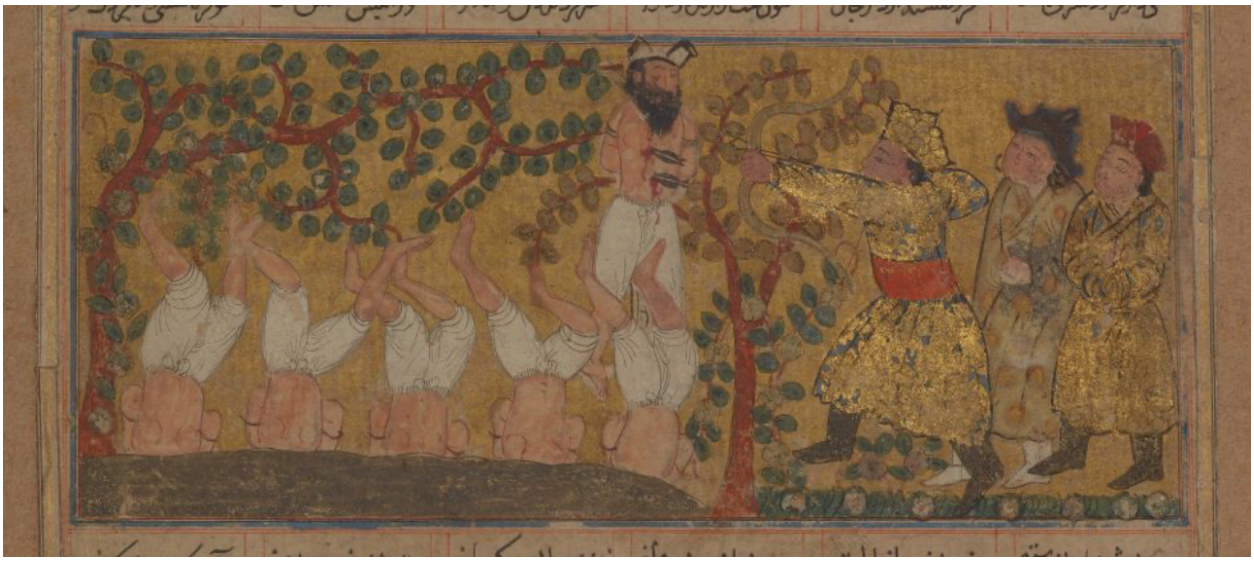


Figure 3.30. Nushin Ravan orders the execution of Mazdak and his followers, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, c. 1300, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 104.64



Figure 3.31. Rustam rescues Bizhan from the well, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, February 1341 (Ramadan 741 A.H.), National Museum of Asian Art, F1945.7



Figure 3.32. Rustam rescues Bizhan from the pit, from a *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1560-80, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 65.7.2



Figure 3.33. Day of Judgment, from a manuscript of the *Falnama* (Book of Omens), Iran, Tabriz, c. 1555, Harvard Art Museums, 1999.302



Figure 3.34. The execution of Goruy-i Zirah, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1560, Louvre Museum, MAO 2277



Figure 3.35. Harun al Rashid at the bath, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1457-60, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 753, fol. 22v

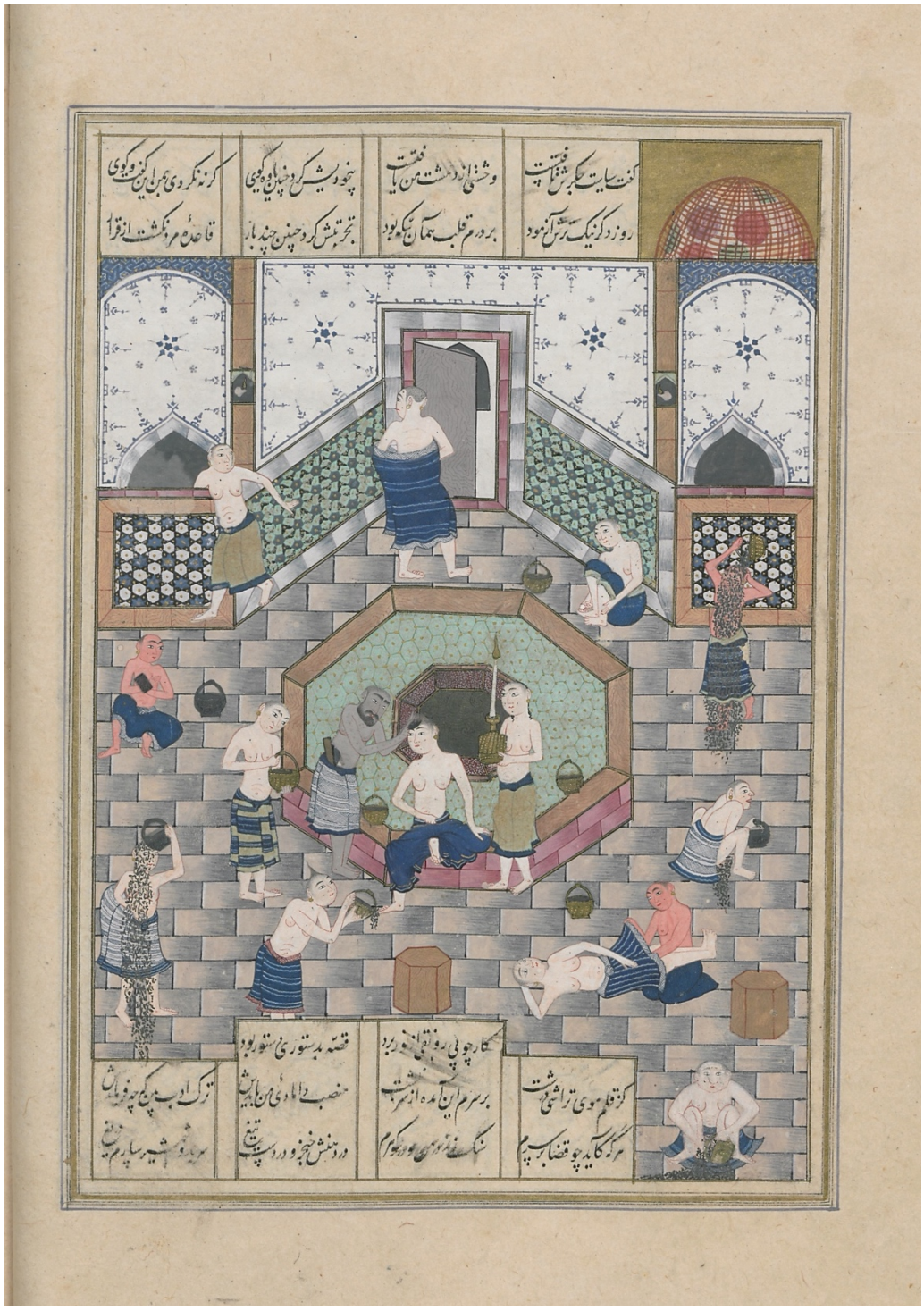


Figure 3.36. Harun al Rashid at the bath, from *Khamsa* of Nizami. Iran, Shiraz, Nov.-Dec. 1534 CE (Jumada I 941AH), Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 760, fol. 22r



Figure 3.37. Harun al Rashid and the Barber in the Public Bathhouse, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1560 CE, The David Collection, Copenhagen, 94/2006



Figure 3.38. Shaikh Zada, Khusraw Catches Sight of Shirin Bathing, from a *Khamsa* of Nizami, Herat, Afghanistan, 1524–25 CE (931 AH), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.228.7.3

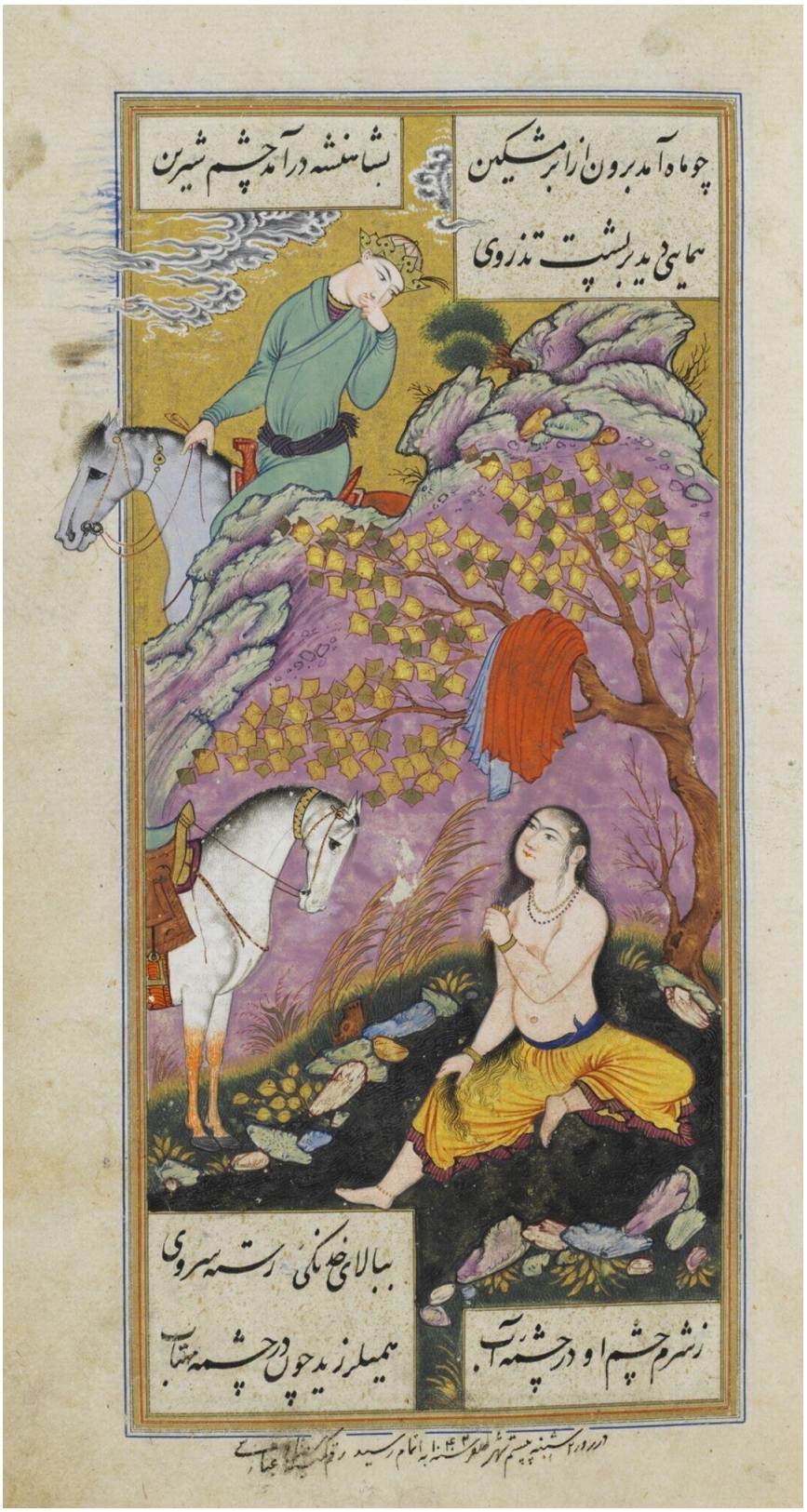


Figure 3.39. Reza Abbasi, Shirin bathing from *Khusraw and Shirin* by Nizami, 17th century, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, MSL/1885/364, fol. 47r



Figure 3.40. “The Eavesdropper,” from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1457-60 CE, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 753, fol. 205r



Figure 3.41. Detail of “The Eavesdropper,” from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1457-60 CE, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 753, fol. 205r



Figure 3.42. "The Eavesdropper," from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, present-day Afghanistan, Herat, ca. 1430, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.13.6



Figure 3.43. Consummation scene of Yusuf and Zulaykha, from *Yusuf and Zulaykha* of Jami, Iran, Shiraz, c. 1580 CE, The British Library, London, Or. 4122, fol. 155v



Figure 3.44. Bizhan and Maniza from *Shahnama*, Iran, 1621 CE (1030 A.H.), National Museum of Asian Art, S1986.485



Figure 3.45. Consummation of Khusraw and Shirin, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz and Tabriz, 1475-6 CE (880 AH) and March 1481 CE (Muharram 886), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 762, fol. 89v



Figure 3.46. Detail of Consummation of Khusraw and Shirin, from *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz and Tabriz, 1475-6 CE (880 AH) and March 1481 CE (Muharram 886), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 762, fol. 89v



Figure 3.47. The consummation of Khusraw and Shirin, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami, Iran, Shiraz; c. 1560, The David Collection, Copenhagen, 94/2006

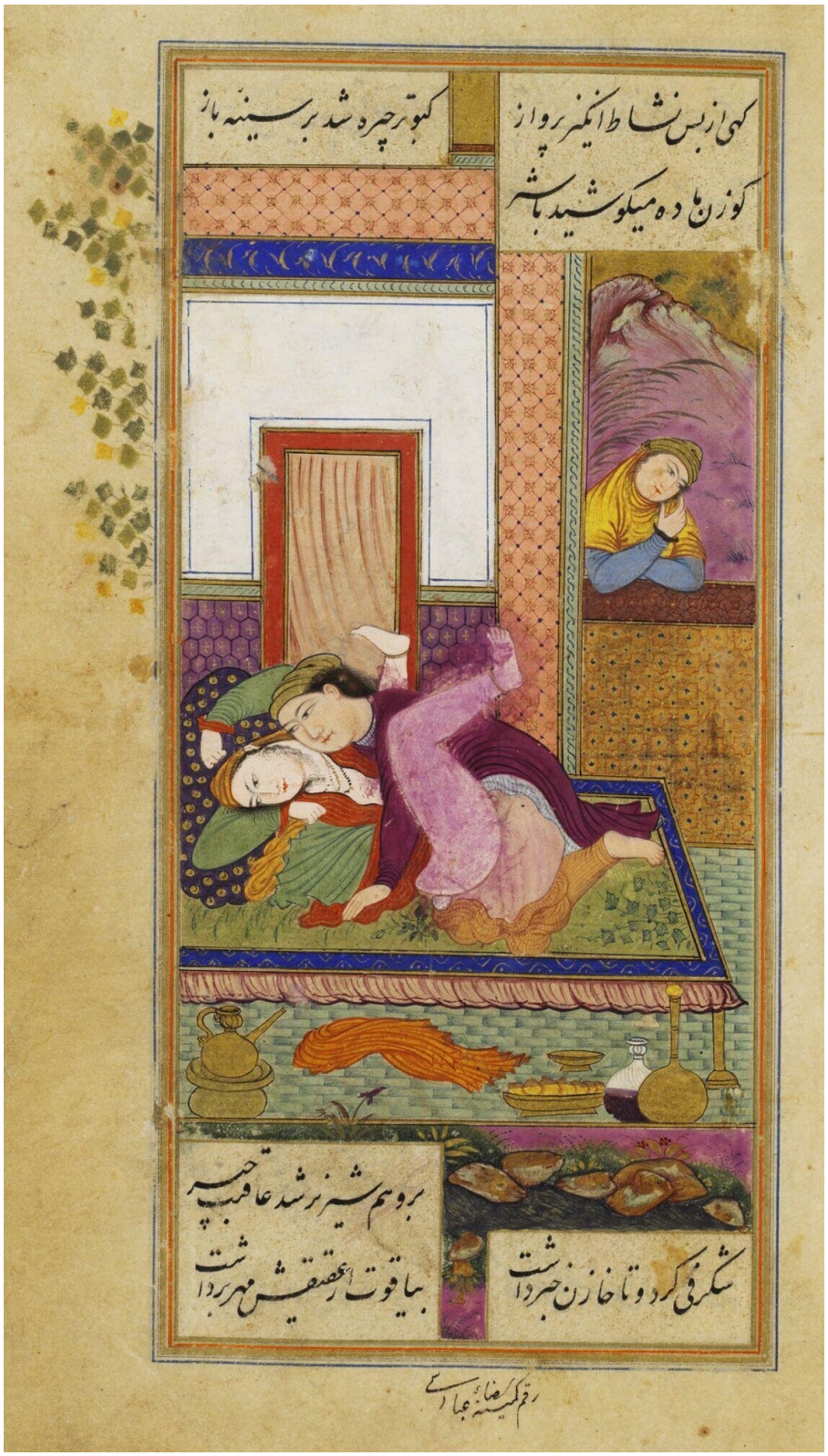


Figure 3.48. Riza Abbasi, Consummation of Khusraw and Shirin, from *Khusraw and Shirin* of Nizami, 17th century, Victoria and Albert Museum, MSL/1885/364, fol. 211r



Figure 3.49. The husband avoiding his wife, from *Kulliyat* of Sa'di, Iran, 1566 (974 AH), British Library, London, Add. 24944, fol. 333r

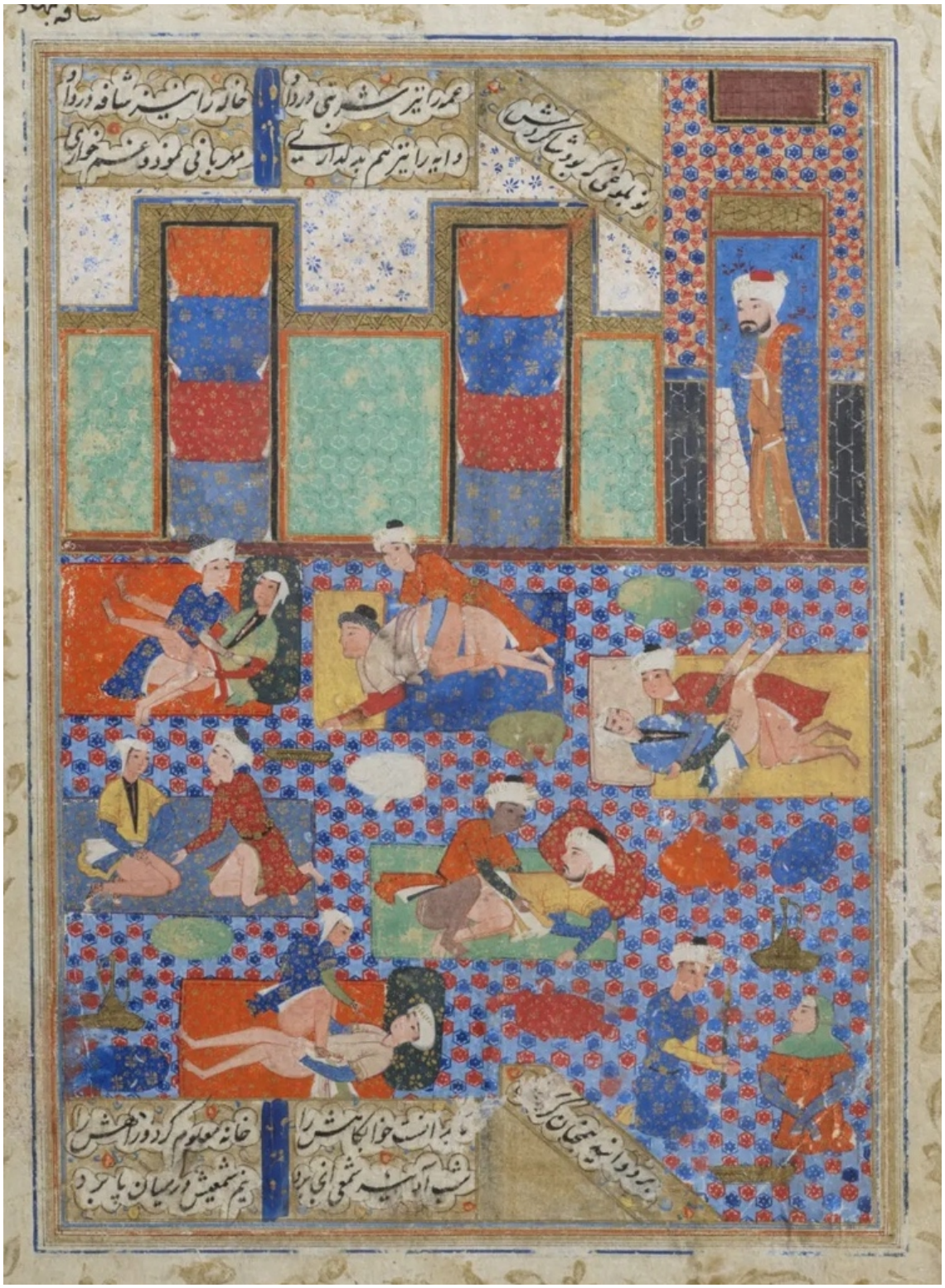


Figure 3.50. The husband avoiding his wife, from a poem by Sa‘di, Iran, Shiraz, second half of 16th century, Kent Antiquities, accessed 1 December 2024, https://www.kentantiques.com/portfolio/an-extremely-rare-erotic-illustration-of-a-poem-by-sadi-shirazi-d-1292-ce/



Figure 3.51. Nushin Ravan executes a young man and his half-sister in his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, Tabriz, 1570 CE, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Manchester, Persian MS 910, fol. 438r



Figure 3.52. Nurshin Ravan finds a young man in his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi*,* Iran, Shiraz, 1333 CE (733 AH), National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 329, fol. 296v



Figure 3.53. Nushin Ravan hangs the youth found in his harem, together with the youth's half-sister, from the Second Small *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, possibly Baghdad, ca. 1300 CE, Khalili Collection, Geneva, Switzerland, MSS 1021.3



Figure 3.54. 'Abd al-Mu'min al-Khuyi, Resurrection of Varqa and Gulshah, from *Varqa and Gulshah* by 'Ayyuqi, probably Anatolia, c. 1200 CE, The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H. 841, fol. 70r



Figure 3.55. Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, c. 1585 CE with later overpainting, Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, RCIN 1005013.cc, fol. 237r



Figure 3.56. Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1603 CE, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Supplément Persan 490, fol. 363v



Figure 3.57. Nushin Ravan inspects his harem (currently identified as “Nushinravan interviews the intruder to his harem”), from a dispersed *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, c. 1600 CE, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington D.C., S1986.224



Figure 3.58. Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi Iran, Shiraz, November 1330 CE (Safar 731 AH), The Directorate of National Palaces, Topkapı Palace Manuscripts Collection, Istanbul, H.1479, fol. 222r



Figure 3.59. Attributed to Muhammad Yusuf, Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1648 CE, The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, RCIN 10005014, fol. 607r



Figure 3.60. Detail of Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1648 CE, The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, RCIN 10005014, fol. 607r



Figure 3.61. Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1650 CE, National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 333, fol. 746r



Figure 3.62. Detail of Nushin Ravan inspects his harem, from the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, Iran, 1650 CE, National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Dorn 333, fol. 746r



Figure 3.63. Riza Abbasi (ca. 1565-1635 CE), Reclining Nude, Iran, Isfahan, ca. 1590 CE, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C., F1954.24



Figure 3.64. Attributed to Riza ‘Abbasi, Kneeling man offering wine, Iran, Isfahan, 1630-35 CE, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Per 260.

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