Mawlānā Rūmī, the Early Mevlēvis and the Gendered Gaze: Prolegomenon to an Analysis of Rūmī’s View of Women

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A work of fiction took the Iranian reading public by storm in 2005. Though not the first novel to become wildly popular in Iran, this was historical, or purportedly historical fiction – not a particularly common or popular genre in Persian literature or Iranian cinema. This work, Lady Kīmiyā: A Tale from the Seraglio of Rūmī (Kīmiyā Khâtûn: Dâstânî az shabistân-i Mawlânâ),¹ was written by Saideh Ghods (Sa‘īda Quds, b. 1951), a first-time author at the age of 53. She claims the book to be based upon extensive research, though given the paper-thin and flimsy nature of the historical record, this seems more than a trifle hyperbolic, indicative perhaps of an urge to market the book or make it seem more urgent with its supposed verisimilitude. Indeed, the author’s somewhat imperfectly Englished website confesses the truth: ‘Even though excruciating effort has been put into telling the story exactly as it happened, scarcity of resources has made this work [the] truest imaginary image of Kimya Khatoon’s life.’²

Indeed, the documentary evidence contemporaneous with Kīmiyā’s lifetime can fit on a single page, in about six sentences, most of which do not contribute to a coherent narrative, and allude to her only glancingly. There does seem to be a story there, but the contours of any plot cannot be clearly outlined, other than to say that it involves Kīmiyā (d. 1246 or 1248), the famous Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī (d. after 1248), ‘Alâ al-Dîn (d.c. 1262), and the latter’s renowned father, Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (d. 1273). Two other sources, written down perhaps three generations later, do provide sketchy memes

¹ Saideh Ghods, Lady Kīmiyā: A Tale from the Seraglio of Rūmī (Kīmiyā Khâtûn: Dâstânî az shabistân-i Mawlânâ), Tehran: Nashr-i Chashma 1383 A.Hsh./2004; this 283-page novel had been reprinted thirteen times by 1386 A.Hsh./2007 and by 2015 was in its 29th printing.
or data points but give tantalizingly little information about her, much of it hagiographical in intent, with all the typological and symbolic features and polemics in which this genre engages. In the sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Kīmiyā is mentioned only in passing, as an incidental, one-dimensional character of interest solely because she figures in some anecdotal stories about the disappearance of Shams-i Tabrīzī from Rūmī’s life, and plays a quasi-explanatory role in the mythology surrounding it. But the ‘truest’ story Ghods’ novel purports to tell about Kīmiyā does not even conform to these few premordem reports with respect to several of its major premises.

Although Annemarie Schimmel took an interest in the women in Rūmī’s life, and made the first attempts at cataloguing the Mathnawi’s concept of Woman and women, this is not a topic that has been often, or systematically, engaged. In the scholarly literature about Rūmī, there are only scattered references to Kīmiyā (Furûzânfar, Gölpınarlı, Schimmel, Zarrînkûb, Şefik Can, and my own Rūmī: Past and Present), though individual women in Rūmī’s life are briefly discussed in this biographical and exegetical literature. However, there is no sustained or comprehensive analytical discussion of the general role and status of women in the circle of Rūmī and his immediate disciples; such a study would help to contextualize the symbolic, semiotic, and narratological functions that Kīmiyā fulfills in the early sources that mention her: namely, her husband’s quasi-diary, and two somewhat later hagiographies.

The few works that devote any attention to describing the women of Mawlâna Rūmī’s household do so mostly without analysis: there is a non-scholarly work written by a female devotee of a Mevlevi circle in California, which lists the names and a biodatum or two about the women in the proto-Mevlevi circle; and a 2006 monograph written in Persian by an Iranian scholar, Woman as Revealed in the Works of Mawlawī Rūmī, which focuses rather on pertinent passages in Rūmī’s poems and in the hagiographical literature about him to illustrate his literary orientation toward


4 The information about women in our sources is far too sparse, and does not provide the kind of basis for conclusions as does the anthropological fieldwork found in studies such as Kelly Pemberton, Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India (South Carolina Press 2010), or Pnina Werbner, Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2003).

women. One 2008 paper in English in an academic journal tries to remedy this situation somewhat, but in summarizing what is known about the women in Mawlānā Rūmī’s family it becomes indiscriminately mired in the pre-critical views of the hagiographical tradition. There is also one study of the bawdy tales of the Mathnawī through a Lacanian lens that attempts to establish a theoretical hermeneutics of eroticism and sexual symbols, which also touches glancingly on the notion of women as a conceptual category, and briefly mentions the historical women in Rūmī’s life, but not in a particularly clarifying manner for the point at hand. Finally, a 2013 article in the *Mawlana Rumi Review* provides a historical sketch of women and their involvement in the Mevlevi lineage up through the eighteenth century.

Hence, a space existed, and a need was felt, for an imaginative casting (or recasting) of the relationships between Rūmī, Shams, and the women in their circle through a fictional female gaze. This is the historical


10 Other fiction writers, all women, who have tried their hand at historical fiction based on Rūmī include Nahal Tajadod, who tells the saintly version of his life story from the perspective of Shams al-Dīn, Husām al-Dīn, and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in her *Roumi le brûlé* (Paris: Lattès 2004); translated into English as *Rumi: The Fire of Love*, trans. R. Bononno (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth 2011). Curiously, at about the same time as Tajadod in French, and Ghods in Persian, Muriel Maufroy wrote a novel in English also focused like Ghods’ book on Kīmiyā, called *Rumi’s Daughter* (London: Rider 2004), in which Kīmiyā is imagined to be from an Orthodox Christian family. Maufroy’s book was translated into Spanish (by Antoni Cutandi in 2006) and then into Persian (by Ru’yā Munajjim in 2007). More recently, Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* (New York: Penguin 2010) weaves the story of a Jewish woman in Massachusetts who reads a book about Shams and corresponds with the author; on this, see the review by Marcia Hermansen in the pages of *Mawlana Rumi Review* V (2014), pp. 204–07, which draws a thread between the perspectives of Tajadod and
Shafak as female émigrée writers from the Middle East. More recently, Holly Payne has also tried to capitalize on this theme, with a fiction about Rumi and a different girl (an orphan who makes rosewater) in her *Damascena: The Tale of Roses and Rumi* (Sausalito, Calif.: Skywriter Books 2014), which was translated into Hungarian in 2015 by Vera Bánki and Anna Szabó.

The website http://www.saidehghods.com/kimya-khatun claims 'For the first time in written literature, Kimya’s real story has been unearthed and brought into the attention of the (sic) Rumi’s scholars and the general public alike.'

Ghods serves on the director’s board of MAHAK, which aims to promote cancer treatment and access to healthcare for the poor. She became a cancer-care activist when her own two-year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer. See the English version of the MAHAK website (available at http://mahak-charity.org/main/index.php/en/home-en), accessed 28 November 2012.


It is difficult to establish cumulative sales of individual books, and therefore also comparative statistics for novels published in Iran. There is no established industry standard for measuring this, according to ‘Ali-Riḍā Ramāḍānī, director of Nashr-i Markaz Publications in Tehran (personal communication to Zuyā Pirzād, 27 November 2012), and statistics of sales totals are generally based upon the random reports of about ten bookstores. The author’s information about Sa’īda Quds on Amazon.com (https://www.amazon.com/Kimya-Khatun-Rumis-Daughter-Philips/dp/9642667606/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_product_top), accessed 28 November 2012, which is apparently provided by the author, pegs sales ‘in excess of 80,000’, which seems quite credible.

Translated into Turkish as *Mevlânâ Cêlaeddîn-i Rûmî'nin hareminden kimya hatun,*
into English, as *Kimya Khatun: The Mystic and the Dove*.\(^{16}\) It has also been turned into an unpublished screenplay (with a working title of *Rūmī’s Kimiya*) by the founding figure of Iranian new wave cinema, Dariush Mehrjui (Daryūsh Mihrjū’i); he was angling for Golshifteh Farahani (Gulshīfta Farahānī) to play the role of Kimiya, though the project funding remains as yet unsecured.\(^{17}\)

Surveys taken in the United States, Canada, and Britain suggest that men account for only about one in five readers of fiction.\(^{18}\) I have yet to read any serious study of the gender demographics of Iranian fiction-reading equivalent to Jacqueline Pearson’s *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation*,\(^ {19}\) or Belinda Jack’s *The Woman Reader*,\(^ {20}\) though I am confident we can safely dismiss the picture that inadvertently emerges from Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*\(^ {21}\) as being

\[\text{trans. Veysel Başçi (İstanbul: Sonsuz Kitap Yayınları 2007). This translation came out before the prominent Turkish novelist Elif Shafak wrote her own fictional treatment of the historical setting of Mawlānā/Mevlana entitled *Aşk* (İstanbul: Doğan 2009); translated into English by the author as *Forty Rules of Love* (New York: Viking 2010).}\]

\[\text{Translated by Sara Phillips and published by an Anglo-Iranian company in London called Candle and Fog Ltd. in 2011. The translation is entitled *Kimya Khatun: The Mystic and the Dove*, somewhat divergent from Ghods’ Persian title (literally ‘Kimiya Khatun: A Tale from Mowlana’s Women’s Quarters’). Meanwhile, the title ‘Rumi’s Daughter’ was already taken by Muriel Maufroy.}\]

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\[\text{17 Doniphan Blair, ‘Middle East Epic Emerges by the Bay: Producer’s Interview’, *CineSource*, 30 October 2012 (available at http://cinesourcemagazine.com/index.php?/site/comments/middle_eastern_epic_emerges_by_the_bay), accessed 28 November 2012. The screenplay is by Daryūsh Mihrjū’i in Persian, translated into English by Dorna Khazeni, with locations scouted out near Mumbai, India. I provided, at Mihrjū’i’s request after his visit to Chicago, translations of several quatrains by Mawlānā for the script, though I note that it now seems as if they hope to use Coleman Barks’ English versions (and influence) as part of their fundraising efforts. The producer, currently raising money for the film, is Marjaneh Moghimi.}\]


unrepresentative of the general economics of fiction reading and writing in Iran. Not only do Iranian women read fiction, perhaps in greater proportions than men, but several novels written by women stand out among the acknowledged bestsellers of Iranian publishing history: Simin Daneshvar’s *Savushun* (1969),²² Fattāna Hajī Sayyid-Javādī’s *Bāmdād-i khumār* (*The Morning After*, 1998), Zoya Pirzad’s *Chirāgh-hā rā man khāmūsh mikunam* (2002),²³ which had sold 130,000 copies in Persian by its 44th printing in 2012; and now Ghods’ *Kīmiyā Khātūn* (2005). While I have no statistical evidence about the gendered specifics of the readership that has made the fictional tale of Kīmiyā – or any other Persian-language novel about a female protagonist – a popular success, my hunch from anecdotal observation (in social fora, such as goodreads.com, for example)²⁴ is that women may well form a majority of this readership.²⁵

But regardless of the precise gender demographics of reading in Iran, *Kīmiyā Khātūn* reverses the male-gendered gaze, the dominant vantage point from which the Sufi tradition generally – and the circle of Rūmī’s teachers specifically – view the world, religion and the spiritual path; (I refer here to Sulṭān al-‘ulamā’ Bahā al-Dīn Valad, Burhān al-Dīn Muḥaq-qiq-i Tirmidhī, and Shams al-Dīn-i Tabrīzī, as well as Rūmī himself and his early community of followers and expounders in Konya, represented by his son Sulṭān Valad, and the two hagiographers, Sipahsālār and Aflākī). As such, Ghods’ fictional character Kīmiyā Khātūn returns a regendered gaze that looks back from the vantage point of a critique, viewing with implicit accusation an Iranian and Sufi patriarchy that is complicit in thwarting the realization of Kīmiyā’s desires, and beyond that in creating systemic inequality for women. It perhaps recalls, to an extent, Virginia Woolf’s

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²³ Translated by Franklin Lewis into English under the published title of *Things We Left Unsaid* (Oxford: Oneworld 2012), although my own original translation of the title was ‘I’ll Get the Lights’.


²⁵ Nahid Mozaffari has suggested that this may be due in part to the influence of women’s reading circles in Iran, as well as Sufi study circles (personal communication, 29 November 2012). It should be noted that a large number of modern Persian fiction works written by men, beginning in the 1920s, have focused on female protagonists as representatives of the body politic of Iran. See Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2002), pp. 68–73.
thought experiment about Judith, Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister, although the creative outlets for the fictional Kīmiyā are not time and a room in which to write, but love and independent self-determination regarding her affections.

The novel gently calls into question the behaviour of an icon – perhaps the icon – of Persian spirituality: Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. He is often seen and represented as an exponent of an expansive and ecumenical Iranian form of Islamic mysticism and personal relation to the divine, as opposed to a more narrow, doctrinal, and restrictive set of clerical concerns identified with the theological state.26

The basic plot of ‘Kīmiyā Khātūn, the novel’ concerns a young girl in the extended family of Rūmī, purportedly his step-daughter through his second wife, Kīrā Khātūn. The novel is divided into two parts, the first wholly imagined, in which the protagonist is not greatly discontented. Kīmiyā somewhat fancies ‘Alā’ al-Dīn, Rūmī’s older son from his first marriage to Gawhar Khātūn, and he seems to return her affection. After the arrival of Shams in Konya, Shams hankers for Kīmiyā, and Rūmī’s devotion to Kīmiyā, and Rūmī’s devotion to Shams leads him to capitulate to Shams’ concupiscent interest in Kīmiyā, and he marries her off to him, even though Shams is old enough to be her father. It is thus a Laylī and Majnūn-like tale of patriarchal oppression, a classic pre-modern love triangle in which the older man gets his way over the woman he desires and the younger man who desires her. In this iteration of the triangle, the younger man, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn, is constitutionally unable to challenge his older rival, Shams, but nevertheless succeeds in rousing his jealousy, which Shams then takes out in a fit of rage on Kīmiyā, losing all affection for her and leading her from resigned and cultivated contentment to death.

The historical evidence for Kīmiyā’s life is so slight (much slighter than that for Socrates, whose very existence was once called into question) as to tempt us to consider her to be a symbolic foil, a character with a Hawthorne-esque and conveniently allegorical name, ‘Lady Alchemy’. Ghods suggests that her version of events is based on research she did ‘unearthing Kīmiyā’s long-forgotten young body from amidst the piles of worn-out historical documents that had languished for centuries’ (birūn kishidan-i paykar-i javān va farāmūsh shuda-yi Kīmiyā Khātūn az lā-bi-lā-yi awrāq-i

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pūsīda va farāmūsh-shuda-yi tārīkh az pas-i qurūn va a'ṣār), which allowed her to ‘iron out [the] discrepancies in the story’ based on available documents (bi-liḥāţ-i kambūd va tidād-i manābī‘ va mutūn). This research was supposedly carried out in the National Library in Iran and ‘Qanj Bakhsh in Islamabad, Pakistan’ where there are no known unpublished documents pertaining to the historical Shams-i Tabrīzī or Kimiyā Khâtūn; nor are there any in the shrine/tomb dedicated to Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī in Multan, Pakistan – a shrine that has absolutely no known historical association with Shams, and where Shams is most unlikely to be buried (he has other burial sites at Konya in Turkey, and at Khuy and Tabrīz in Iran!). The jealousy and anger of Shams toward Kimiyā, though not the beating, can find interpretive support, depending on how one construes the sketchy allusions in the six scattered and largely indecipherable mentions of Kimiyā by Shams al-Dīn himself. These occur in the disjecta membræ of the Muvaţ tid edition of Shams’ Discourses (Maqālāt), and in three small anecdotes in two fourteenth-century hagiographical sources: first, Shams al-Dīn Aflākī’s The Acts of the Gnostics (Manāqib al-‘arifīn), compiled between 718/1318 and 754/1353, a record of oral lore circulating in Konya between forty and eighty years after Rūmī’s death, and collected without comment about the reported anecdotes’ authenticity; and second, Sipahsālār’s Risāla, a treatise about the early Mevlevis, dating to between 720/1320 and 739/1338, though the later sections may have been completed by a second hand. Sipahsālār, who claims to have served as a disciple in Rūmī’s circle for forty years, is generally more discriminating in his reporting than Aflākī, though both pertain to hagiographical-biographical genres of Perso-Arabic literature (known as maqāmāt or manāqib), and purport to present not so much earthly history as spiritual feats – the symbolic intervention in the phenomenal world of saints connected to the invisible world.

I have described the problematics in reading these sources for historical detail elsewhere. For the present purpose of reconstructing a history of Rūmī’s life and circle, and understanding his attitude toward the role of women, we may only add that the sources of reports are varied and include


29 Ibid., especially ch. 6 (‘The Mythological Rumi’), pp. 242–68.
anecdotes attributed to female members of the extended household; while the attributions are often dubious, some reports could well have been transmitted largely in female circles for two or three generations before being recorded by Aflakî or Sipahsâlâr. In this regard it is worth noting the death dates of two of the significant female figures in this circle – Kirrâ Khâtûn, Rûmî’s second wife, in 691/1292; and Malika Khâtûn, Rûmî’s daughter by Kirrâ Khâtûn in 705/1306, who may have been in a position to provide first-hand family lore. While these reports must be used very judiciously, a systematic study of them might allow us to make some interesting observations and intimations, which although not necessarily historical, are nevertheless less novelistic and imaginal than the portrait that Ghods’ Kîmiyâ Khâtûn presents. I am belabouring the point about the source material for the novel here in part because the popular discourse on Mawlânâ Rûmî seems largely resistant to scholarly correction; even among scholars, information that has been disproved or discounted – such as Rûmî’s father’s supposed fame in Balkh – continues to pass as historical fact. This is unfortunately true of one article that attempts to describe some of the women of Rûmî’s household, credulously and inexplicably using the fictional account of Saideh Ghods as evidence for the lives of Kîmiyâ and Shams.


31 See Dahlén, ‘Female Sufi Saints and Disciples’.

linking the anecdote to Sultan Valad may have been provided by Aflaki or ‘remembered’ by the individuals reporting it to him, in order to invest the story with greater authority; however, since the purported authority (Sultan Valad) did not choose to narrate this in his own voice in his book-length presentation of the events of Shams and Rumi, a hermeneutic of suspicion seems warranted. The anecdote is likely to have come into existence sometime after 1291, when Sultan Valad versified the history of his father, and quite possibly after Sultan Valad’s death, when he would not have been able to refute or confirm it.

The anecdote itself, as recorded by Aflaki, indicates only that Shams al-Din Tabrizi ‘had a wife named Kimiyah, who one day leaves for the gardens of Maram (a locale outside Konya) after becoming angry with Shams. Mawlana Rumi instructs the women of his ‘madrasa’ (which functioned more like a Khanaqah) to go and find Kimiyah and coax her to return to her husband’s side, because Shams is greatly attached to her. Rumi thereupon enters the enclosure or pavilion (khargah) where Shams is quartered, and sees that, lo and behold, Kimiyah is with him, wearing the same clothes she was last seen in before she disappeared, though the women dispatched to fetch her had not yet set off for Maram (despite the hagiographical implications, this hardly seems to qualify as even a minor miracle). Since Rumi espies Shams touching and fondling her (dast bazi mikunad), Rumi discreetly exits the building and paces around the madrasa to allow them time to fulfil their desires and engage in lovemaking (dar madrasa tavafi mikard tâ ighân dar dhawq va mulâ’iba-yi khwâd mashghul bâshand). However, a bit later Shams calls Rumi to come in, who now finds there is no one there but Shams. Rumi asks him what happened to Kimiyah, and Shams answers that God manifests himself to Shams in whatever form Shams desires, and at that moment He had just taken on the form of Kimiyah /alchemy (bisurat-i kimiyah âmada bûd u mušavvar shuda).

Although Kimiyah and Shams figure prominently in the narrative, the purpose of this anecdote is not actually to provide biographical information about Kimiyah (who proves at the end not to have been Kimiyah at all, but rather an act of Shams’ divine alchemy). The whole episode functions rather as a parable or analogy, which provides information (a kind of saintly hadith) about the behaviour of Mawlana and the spiritual station of Shams, perhaps also including some commentary about Rumi’s attitude toward...
sexuality. In fact, the anecdote constitutes the bulk of Sulṭān Valad’s putative memory of Rūmī’s response to a question once posed by some Sufis about the meaning of the Arabic words of the great Sufi saint Bāyazīd: ‘I saw my Lord in the face of a beardless youth’ (ra‘aytu rabbī fi ṣūrati amrada).\(^{33}\) Here we may affirm what gender studies has been illustrating in recent decades: that studies of the representation of women and the performance of femininity as embedded in cultural texts and societal roles should not attempt in isolation to recover a full picture of what it meant at any given cultural-historical moment to be a woman. Gender operates on a continuum that must be contextualized by establishing normative roles or constructs of ideal masculinity and ideal femininity, and what lies between these poles. This particular anecdote therefore also begs an investigation into Rūmī’s statements about homoeroticism, the practice of witnessing beauty in the faces and bodies of young boys (shāhid-bāzī), and homosexuality – but that is for another study.\(^{34}\)

In our anecdote, Rūmī chooses to answer the question about Bāyazīd and the contemplation of beautiful boys by making a comparison with Shams and Kimiyā and their imagined love-play. He first postulates that Bāyazīd’s words mean one of two things: either he saw God in the face of a prepubescent boy, or God actually projected Himself into the image of the beautiful boy before Bāyazīd (khūd-i khudā pīsh-i ī bi-ṣūrati amrad muṣavvar mīshud).\(^{35}\) Because Kimiyā was manifested as the outward form of Shams’ desire, Bāyazīd’s statement must likewise mean that God (haqq) appeared before him (Bāyazīd) in the guise of an amrad. Thus, the implicit antinomian purport of this story is that there are no sanctions about homo- or hetero-normativity in contemplating the forms of human beauty – whether in a youthful male beauty or a female matrimonial beauty – as long as the amorous observer is a saint and the beloved is God. The imagined anecdote about Kimiyā would seem to indicate this (though the change from homoerotic to heterosexual desire may be theologically and/or doctrinally significant, demonstrating the early Mevlevi community’s understanding of Rūmī’s attitude), and it is also reinforced by another story about wine drinking in the same cluster of anecdotes (which seeks to defend Shams


\(^{34}\) See Lewis, Rumi: Past and Present, East and West, pp. 320–24.

al-Dīn from a real accusation of drinking). Aflākī’s anecdote concludes that as it was with Shams and Kimiyā, so it was with Bāyazīd.

Interestingly, this cluster of anecdotes in Aflākī’s hagiography includes several about miracles, and about exaggerated or heroic sexuality. Two stories later, Shams is reputedly relating (again, according to Sūltān Valad’s authority) about the qualities of virtuous and chaste women (ṣifat-i zanān-i nik va ‘iffat-i ʾishān). He asserts, in a description that seems more suggestive of a Shiva lingam than a scenario we would visualize in an Islamic context, that if a pious woman’s place were higher than the Throne of God (ʿarsh), ‘if her gaze were by hazard to alight on the lower world (nāghāh naẓārī bi-dunyā ʾuftād) and she saw there an erect phallus on the surface of the earth (dar rā-yi zamin qaḍibī rā bar khāsta bīnād), she would cast herself madly down upon the phallus (divānāvār khūd rā partāv kunad va bar sar-i qaḍib ʾuftād), because in their creed there is nothing higher than that (az ānka dar madhhab-i ʾishān bālātār az ān chīzī nīst)’.

Shams goes on, according to this phalophilic report, to mention the story of Shaykh ʿAlī Ḥarīrī of Damascus, a Sufi of spiritual rank (ṣāhib-qadam), whose gaze had a miraculous effect on people when he performed samaʿ. The son of a caliph came to watch him and became his disciple, which angered the caliph enough to want to kill the shaykh; but the gaze of the shaykh on the caliph converted him as well, leading to the caliph’s wife wanting to visit

36 Ibid., anecdote 41, pp. 639–40.
37 Whether it is possible that Sūltān Valad would have told an account of this nature is difficult to say. Aflākī heard that it was attributed to Sūltān Valad, apparently some years after the latter’s death in 1312 (since Aflākī only began his work of compiling anecdotes in 1318). In any case, there are many such tales of dreams and miracles, as well as hearsay evidence about members of Rūmī’s extended household (one is tempted to call them by the old appellation ‘wives’ tales’, although they are not attributed only to the women of the early Mevlevi community). These tales are repeated verbatim without judgment as to their veracity by Aflākī, who was as much a collector of folklore as of historical anecdote; as such, he left us with something of a mixture of legend, fable, and rumor with a kernel of history, in his efforts to construct a genuine biography of Mawlānā the man.
38 Ibid., anecdote 42, pp. 640–41.
40 One may recall here that St Francis of Assisi went with the fifth Crusade to Damietta, Egypt, in 1219, where he attempted to see the Ayyubid Sūltān al-Kāmil (r. 1218–1238), nephew of Saladin, and convert him to Christianity. See John Tolan, Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian–Muslim Encounter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), esp. pp. 40–53.
the shaykh, too. She invited the shaykh to her house. She laid her head on the shaykh's feet and tried to reach up to kiss his hand, but he instead put his penis in her hand, explaining that 'my hand is not the object of your devotion, but this is', whereupon he began to perform *sama*’ — which only increased the caliph's devotion to him. Tales of the Dervishes, indeed! The contention that 'Rumi is the only mystic of medieval Persia whose work includes representation of the phallus as an esoteric symbol' seems rather too exclusive a claim, but there are several stories in the *Mathnawī* where the penis figures as the butt of a joke or a pointed representation (either symbolic or overtly stated) of something else.

This strange story immediately precedes the only other brief anecdote in *Manāqib al-‘ārifīn* that mentions Kimiyā, which is conveyed by Aflâkî with no attribution — simply the anonymous *isnad*: ‘it is also related’ (*ham-chunān manqūl ast*). This second anecdote describes Lady Kimiyā as a beautiful and chaste woman who is lawfully wedded to Shams (*mankūha-yi Mawlānā Shams, Kimiyā Khattûn, zanî bûd jamila va 'afīfa*). One day, without Shams’ permission, she is taken along in the company of other women for recreation (*bi-tafarruj*) to see Sultan Valad’s grandmother (*jadd*) in her garden. Since Mawlānā Rūmī’s own mother, Mu’mina Khattûn, lies buried in Karaman and therefore most likely died some time before 1229, if there is any kernel of historical reality to this tale, the grandmother in question must be the mother of Rūmī’s first wife, Gawhar Khattûn (who seems to have died when her children were still young). When Shams returns home he asks for Kimiyā, and finding her absent, he becomes angry. Arriving home later, Kimiyā immediately feels a debilitating pain in her neck, such that she cannot move it. It leaves her screaming for three days, until she dies. Seven days later, Shams leaves Damascus, the month being Sha’bān of 644, corresponding to December–January of 1246–1247 (which does not tally with other dates for Shams’ final departure from Konya).

Of course, the point of such anecdotes in the hagiographical works about Rūmī is not to give a biography of the women who people the narrative, but rather to describe the masculinity of the spiritual champions who are the proper subject of the heroic life depicted. Real saints are real men and have a healthy appetite (here heterosexual) and virile jealousy (*ghayrat*).

The other hagiographical work (somewhat more sober than Aflākī) that mentions Kimiyā is the ‘Treatise’ (Risāla) by Farīdūn b. Ahmad Sipahsālār, compiled sometime between 1320 (or perhaps as early as 1312) and 1338. In the course of this work Sipahsālār twice asserts that he served as a disciple of Rūmī for forty years. If by this he means the actual personage Rūmī, and not the dervish community that he founded, Sipahsālār would have to have been a disciple of Rūmī (who died in 1273) in the early 1230s, perhaps even before Rūmī’s father passed away. It seems unlikely, then, that Sipahsālār could have lived until 1338, a date that is referred to in the text of his treatise. Perhaps, as has been argued, the latter section of the book (which covers the heads of the Mevlevi order after Sulṭān Valad) is a supplement added by another hand. This would allow us to believe that Sipahsālār’s actual portion of the work was completed by 1312, and would harmonize with a later report that Sipahsālār died during Sulṭān Valad’s lifetime (that is, before 1312). On the basis of the internal evidence of the text, it seems to me unlikely that Sipahsālār ever met Rūmī’s father or the father’s disciple, Burhān al-Dīn Muḥaqiq (d. 1243), and probably not Shams al-Dīn either; Sipahsālār himself makes no explicit claim to have met them. It is possible that he joined the community when Rūmī was alive, during Šalāḥ al-Dīn Zarkūb’s tenure as head, or figurehead of the community – that is, to put a date on it, sometime between about 1248 and 1258. This would mean that Sipahsālār’s information about Kimiyā Kháṭūn is also second-hand, but he gives us more of the skeleton of the story – which becomes the basis for the essential plot of the last few chapters of Saideh Ghods’ book – than does Aflākī. According to Sipahsālār,45 after the return of Shams from his first disappearance to Syria, Rūmī and Shams once again retreat from the company of the disciples and pass their days and nights in conversation with one another:

His Holiness Shams al-Dīn, God be pleased with him, after a long while, beseeched Rūmī (iltimās namūd) that a certain girl named Kimiyā, who had been raised in the women’s quarters of his Lordship, Rūmī’s, household (ki parvarda-yi ḥaram-i hadrat-i khudāvandgār būd), be bound to him in marriage (ki dar qayd-i nikāh āvarad).

Rūmī is asked for permission as the senior male in the household, and/or as the leader of the disciple community.

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His Lordship, Rûmî, accepted his entreaty with utmost glee (bi-khurrami-yi har chi tamântar), and the matter was announced (khitâb-i ışân râ bi-khuftba maqrûn kardand). Because it was winter, His Lordship had a pavilion (khargâhi) erected for the wedding night in the confines of the heated house that they lived in during the winter.

Whenever Rûmî's older son,46 'Alâ al-Dîn (from Gawhar Khâtûn, the full brother of Sulṭân Valad) – who is described as 'handsome, refined, learned, and sweet' – would pass by the pavilion on the way to greet and honour his father and mother, it would create a feeling of trespassing against the house and honor of Shams al-Dîn (Mawlânâ Shams al-Dîn râ ghayrat-i vilâyat dar jûsh mî-amad). He kindly counseled 'Alâ al-Dîn – who was already unhappy because his brother, Sulṭân Valad, received more attention from Shams – that he would have to stop coming through without knocking (ba’ad az in dar in khâna taraddud bi-ḥisâb farmâ’i). This counsel was difficult for 'Alâ al-Dîn to take, who went out and incited a crowd of people (who were doubtless already jealous over Shams' access to Rûmî) by saying that Shams was not permitting Rûmî's own son to see him. This initiated an extended series of insulting behaviours, which, according to Sipahsâlâr,47 were the reason for Shams' final departure from Konya toward 'Damascus.'

Here we find no story of the garden of Marâm, or of the death of Kimiyâ, and only the discreet in-between-the-lines intimation of a love triangle – whether it is the desire to visit his father that really motivates 'Alâ al-Dîn to pass by the quarters where Shams and Kimiyâ live within the larger compound is not known. And the dating Aflâkî provides for Shams' disappearance from Konya is off by a year according to Aflâkî’s other accounts for his final departure (or his murder, according to highly implausible accounts), which suggest early winter 1247–1248. Nevertheless, a modern biographer of Rûmî, Abdülbâki Gölpînarlı,48 offers that this discrepancy in the date can be explained away by a copyist's error, and speculates that 'Alâ al-Dîn may

46 There is a discrepancy in the birth order of Sulṭân Valad and 'Alâ al-Dîn in the sources. To Gawhar Khâtûn and Rûmî two sons were born. Some reports related by Aflâkî assume they were born in the same year, while others make 'Alâ al-Dîn the elder of the two. If we assume, however, that Sulṭân Valad was the elder, then 'Alâ al-Dîn could be considered Rûmî's middle son, with the third son being Muẓaffar al-Dîn Amîr 'Âlam Chalabi, born to Rûmî and his second wife, Kirrâ Khâtûn, in the mid-1240s. See Lewis, Rumi: Past and Present, East and West, pp. 71, 121–22.
47 Ibid., pp. 133–34.
48 Abdülbâki Gölpînarlı, Mevlâna Celâleddin, per its Persian translation by Tawfîq Subhânî, Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Dîn, pp. 155–56 and 156 n.1.
have blamed Shams for the death of Kimiyā (which we will recall happened telepathically, or figuratively, in the second anecdote transmitted by Aflākī), whom ʽAlā al-Dīn may have secretly loved and wished to marry himself.

This supposition is not, however, entirely ungrounded; it is based upon a statement that Shams himself makes in his Maqālāt, reflecting his anger over ʽAlā al-Dīn visiting his wife without his permission, which leads him to drive ʽAlā al-Dīn away.49 Losing Kimiyā, surmises Gölpınarlı, led ʽAlā al-Dīn to break with his father. Rūmī’s letters (Maktūbāt) do show that there was some familial tension and estrangement with ʽAlā al-Dīn (though we do not know the precise date of when this estrangement occurred). In these letters, Rūmī invites ʽAlā al-Dīn to return to the family home – he is sleeping elsewhere, and therefore not dwelling at home (az khāna birân mikhusbad), and he is furthermore ignoring the feelings of the women (dildārī-yi ān da’îfān nimikunanad). Rūmī clearly misses ʽAlā al-Dīn; he suggests that his son has been caught up in ephemeral worldly desires (havā va havas-i dunyā-yi fānî-yi bīvafā) and wishes him to return to the family fold. He seems to be living in a garden.50

I have belaboured this point to highlight how opaque the historical record is, how tendentious the terrain is, and how susceptible the fragmentary accounts are to construal according to our presentist concerns. What I would like to propose are a few factual pegs upon which to drape our interpretations, a few methodological considerations, and some tentative suggestions that I think hold out some hope for reaching at least an informed opinion on the question of the general dynamics of gender relations in the proto-Mevlevi community during Rūmī’s lifetime. This may help inform future scholarly work in uncovering and analysing information about specific women in the early Mevlevi circle, and about Rūmī’s social, theological, and emotional orientation toward Woman as a conceptual category.

The primary sources that give us direct access to Rūmī’s beliefs and attitudes are, of course, his poetry, and the surviving prose sources: personal letters, collected as Maktūbāt; his sermons (Majālis-i sab’a), thought to derive from the period before his encounter with Shams; and his Discourses (Fīhī mā fīh) – mostly records of lectures or meetings he had with


his disciples or important visitors, which were recorded by his disciples. Here, as in the Mathnawi, he does speak frankly about sexual desire and its dynamics, such as the story in Discourse 19 about a grocer infatuated with a certain woman (zanī rā āsīt midāsht), who conveys messages to the lady's maid (kanizak-i khātūn) divulging that he is in love and burning with passion for her, and he is like this and he is like that and has no peace, and this is greatly oppressive for him, and yesterday he suffered this, and last night was like that for him. The grocer goes on and on with these stories. The maid goes before her ladyship and says, 'The grocer sends his greetings and says he wants to do you like this and like that.' The lady asks, 'So coldly as that?' The maid explains, 'He went on at length, but that was the gist of it. The gist is the point, the rest of it just a waste of time. '

But Rūmī does not talk about his wives in the discourses or the Mathnawi – and social conventions would not lead us to expect that he would, though Rūmī's father, Bahā al-Dīn Valad, does speak quite openly about his own wife, or wives – for he names several different women, including Rūmī's mother, Mu'mīna Khātūn (who died in Larende/Karaman, where her shrine survives to this day). Another woman’s name is mentioned, Bibi 'Alavi, which some believe was simply a nickname for Mu'mina, whereas others take Bibi 'Alavi to be a separate wife. Bahā al-Dīn also speaks candidly about his sexual desire for the daughter of a certain Qādī Sharaf; since she was the daughter of a judge, we may assume that she was of a class and standing to be a legal wife of Bahā al-Dīn, and not a slave girl. Things do not end there, however; Bahā al-Dīn also speaks frankly about a desire for coitus with a certain Tarkān, which though it may be a nickname for one of the other women, would seem to be a fourth wife.

Despite all this forthright talk of lusting after the bodies of particular women, Bahā al-Dīn had an ascetic temperament and tried to control his passions; this is evident in an incident he relates when his concentration was disturbed in the midst of meditation, and his wife Bibi 'Alavi came over

55 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 175. [On Bahā al-Dīn’s startling views on sexuality, see also the article by Sassan Moqaddam in the present volume of the Mowlana Rumi Review – Ed.]
56 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 352.
to him, inadvertently stoking his passions. Bahā al-Dīn struggles against these feelings, but eventually realizes that they are promptings that God has inspired in him, and should not therefore be a cause of torment (ʼuqūbat) to him. As Bahā al-Dīn understands it:

> Reflect whether or not the incitement will lead to punishment and degradation and suffering; in which case pray to God that He not incite you so. And if it is the cause of grandeur and fortune, praise God so that He may always keep you in that state.\(^{57}\)

Of course, the genre of writing here is that of a spiritual diary – a \textit{rūz-nāma}, or journal, that helps one who is following a spiritual quest to watch over his motivations (\textit{murāqaba}). It was not likely to be intended for publication or for a wider audience, which is perhaps why there are such intimate and personal details (by which I mean primarily the names of his wives, and not necessarily the fact of feeling lust). We also know that Rūmī was privy to his father’s journal, and used it as material for his poetry in later life – so he was certainly familiar with these written intimations, even if the two never spoke candidly, father-to-son, about such matters in person. Clearly, however, the father adhered to the social norms of Islamic Persia about decorum and female modesty. He speaks of his astonishment at the behaviour of Khotanese women at a circumcision ceremony he attended, who appeared in public with no headcover, held hands with the men in public, drank wine (\textit{siyakī} – a mixture of water and wine), danced, and even bared their breasts.\(^{58}\)

Although Rūmī never mentions his own wife, Shams al-Dīn does, taking Rūmī’s willingness to have his wife treat Shams as if he were an extended family member as a sign of Rūmī’s great trust in him. In his \textit{Maqālāt} (a record of his conversations and lectures), Shams says the following about Rūmī’s wife, Kirrā Khātūn: \(^{59}\)

> Do you not consider my entrance into this household? He even permitted his own wife in my company! Though he was jealous even of the Angel Gabriel looking upon her, she would sit before me just as a son sits at his father’s foot until you give him a bit of bread. Do you not see how much power this is?

We may also conclude from this anecdote that Rūmī seems to have included his wife, at least some of the time, in his private discussions with Shams about spirituality and theology, whereas other disciples complained about being excluded from Mawlānā Rūmī’s company once Shams came to Konya. One may wonder if Shams, who pronounces himself as likewise strongly jealous in temperament (*bā ghayrat*), is not perhaps projecting here his own jealousy as he considers the idea of his own wife sharing the company of another man as if he were her father, brother, or husband (*mahram*). The presumption of such jealousy is also the motivating plot premise of Ghods’ novel, *Kīmiyā Khātūn*.

This second wife, Kirrā Khātūn, whom Rūmī married after the death of his first wife, Gawhar Khātūn (c. 1229), is only mentioned twice in Sipahsālār, but appears a score of times in Aflākī, from which comes most of what we know about her. This includes an anecdote whose typological purpose is obviously to illustrate that as a ‘saint’, Rūmī was one who had great virility. The ‘Perfect Man’ of the Sufis would apparently not be one who lacked sexual desire, but rather one who possessed it in great abundance, keeping it in check out of a developed ascetic temperament. This anecdote has Kirrā Khātūn complaining that Rūmī is obsessively occupied with fasting, performing *samā*’ and lecturing on mystical subjects and theology. She complains: ‘he does not even look in my direction and does not attach importance to physical beauty’ (*gird-i shāhid-bāzī nimīgardad*); this could also mean that not only is he uninterested in his wife’s feminine charms, but neither does he participate in ephebory – the lustful looking, or spiritual contemplation, of the beauty of young boys (*shāhid*). Kirrā Khātūn wonders if ‘any traces of human quality and marital lust are left in him, or his appetites have left him entirely and he has abandoned them’. Having read her mind, however (another kind of saintly miracle), Rūmī that very night performs conjugal acts with her like a wild roaring lion (*shīr-i gharrān-i mast*), penetrating her seventy times (*haftād nawbat dukhūl kard*). She has to flee up on to the roof of the madrasa in order to catch her breath. Rūmī explains in this anecdote⁶⁰ that the men of God do not neglect the needs

of people, though his contemplation of God has led to a decrease in the couple’s sexual activity.

We may also note that most of the women in these accounts are addressed with the honorific title Khâtûn, ‘lady’, which says something about the awareness or pretensions of class that the men and women in these circles have, and the eastern Persian sense of decorum about how one should speak politely and address women in mixed company, and in socially stratified contexts.

We may surmise a few things about this first wife, Gawhar Khâtûn, who is mentioned only twice in Aflâkî and not at all by name in Sipahsâlâr. She was married to Rûmî when both were quite young – in 621/1224, when Rûmî was only 17 years of age. This seems a rather young age for a man to get married, but the two may have been betrothed to one another even in childhood, before Bahâ al-Dîn and his family left Khurâsân, perhaps in around 1216. Gawhar Khâtûn was the daughter of a certain Khwâja Sharaf al-Dîn-i Lâlà from Samarqand, from which city Rûmî’s father emigrated with his family in 1213. This is mere speculation, but it was possibly here that Bahâ al-Dîn met her father, in which case the destiny of Rûmî and Gawhar Khâtûn may have been sealed at this time, when they were children; as a result, she (and perhaps also her father) migrated with the band of Rûmî’s family when she was not yet a teenager. In the 1220s she became the mother of Sultan Valad and ‘Alâ al-Dîn.

So there is no overt mention of these wives by Mawlânâ Rûmî. He does, however, more than once speak of his daughter-in-law, Fâ’tîma Khâtûn. She is the wife of his son Sulṭân Valad, and the daughter of Şalâh al-Dîn Zarkûb, the first successor to Shams al-Dîn as Rûmî’s choice of figurehead for the community of disciples. In addition to letters by Rûmî that seem to promise he will take Fâ’tîma’s side in any marital dispute between herself and Sulṭân Valad, Fâ’tîma appears, though not by name, as the public celebrant in two poems her father-in-law composed as epithalamiums on the occasion of their wedding. It would seem that she (and possibly also her sister Hidiya – both of whom, alongside their father, Şalâh al-Dîn, had been disciples of Rûmî since the time of Bahâ al-Dîn Valad) may have been thought of as a leading female disciple; as such, she may have taken on a quasi-public role, although apparently not so public as another Fâ’tîma, the much older sister of Mawlânâ Rûmî, whom Aflâkî describes as a religious scholar (‘âlima) issuing her own fatvâs; this Fâ’tîma, Rûmî’s sister, stayed behind in Balkh when the family emigrated, because she was married there with a family of

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her own. In any case, Fāṭima Khātūn, the daughter-in-law, does play a role in the public sphere as the bride and centre of communal attention at her own wedding, as reflected in the following ghazal, composed in celebration of the occasion:

May the blessings that flow in all weddings
Be gathered, God, together in our wedding!
The blessings of the Night of Power,
   The month of fasting
   The festival to break the fast
The blessings of the meeting of Adam and Eve
The blessings of the meeting of Joseph and Jacob
The blessings of gazing on the paradise of all abodes
And yet another blessing that cannot be put in words:
   The fruitful scattering of joy
   Of the children of the Shaykh [Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Zarkūb]
   And our eldest!
In companionship and happiness
   May you be like milk and honey
In union and fidelity,
   Just like sugar and halva.
May the blessings of those who toast
   And the one who pours the wine
Anoint the ones who said Amen and
   The one who said the prayer.  

Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Zarkūb would bring his daughters, Fāṭima and Hidiya, to the classes of Mawlānā Rūmī and his father, so Rūmī had known them from childhood. Aflākī reports Rūmī to have said, ‘All women who visit me come to me veiled, except Fāṭima Khātūn and Hidiya Khātūn; Fāṭima is my right eye and Hidiya my left eye.’ They were thus clearly members of the inner personal circle and among those who were privy to Rūmī’s esoteric teachings. Rūmī, indeed, had taken on Fāṭima’s spiritual upbringing out of the great interest he took in her (az ghāyat-i ‘ināyatī ki dar ḥaqq-i ū

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64 See Lewis, Rumi: Past and Present, East and West, pp. 211–12.
dāsht), teaching her to read and write, and to interpret the meaning of the Qur’ān (kitābat va Qur’ān). Indeed, Aflākī ascribes mystical powers and the performance of saintly miracles to her (karāmāt), and Sipahsālār calls her ‘God’s saint on earth’ (Valiyat Allāh fi al-ard). This is hardly unprecedented – Ibn ‘Arabī, for one, had been taught by several female shaykhs, though his Andalusian background may have made him more open to this than those coming from Khurāsān. Still, even though training of disciples in the Sufi orders was accomplished in a primarily homosocial environment, numerous Sufi authors did consider that women could attain the station of sainthood. Al-Sulamī (d. 1021) enumerates at least eighty female Sufis from the first two centuries of Islam in his work Dhikr al-niswa al-muta’abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt (Mention of the Female Sufi Worshippers). ‘Aṭṭār’s description of Rābi’a al-‘Adawiyya in his Tadhkirat al-awliyā is rather apologetic about her inclusion in a work that is clearly modelled on the Book of Men genre (Rījāl – though as Ruth Roded and others have shown, it is quite common for some women to be included in collections of the Tabaqāt al-rijāl). ‘Attār explains that God does not observe the forms of human beings, and that ‘Ā’isha (d. 58 AH /678), wife of the Prophet Muhammad, has transmitted a huge bulk of the Ḥadīth, and that on the plain of the Resurrection there will no longer be men and women – and therefore it should not be strange that a woman could be a saint. Indeed, in the opening story of his Ilāhī-nāma, ‘Aṭṭār describes at great length the trials and tribulations of a beautiful female saint who is the cause of redemption of all the men around her. As ‘Aṭṭār says: when a woman is a man on the path of God, she cannot be called a woman. However, women can be a snare of sexual longing and the preoccupations of the material world, even for ‘Aṭṭār; this is the case with Shaykh Ṣan’ān and a Christian girl, who drags the shaykh through the muddy degradation of swineherding and wine drinking before he is

68 Risāla-yi Sipahsālār, pp. 169, 179.
70 Ruth Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner 1994).

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restored to sanctity, and she sees the error of her Christian ways. Likewise, at the beginning of the Ilāhī-nāma, the first son wishes to possess – sexually or matrimonia l y – the virgin daughter of the king of the fairies, who is of incomparable and unparalleled beauty. He describes her as follows:

\[
\text{bi-zībā'ī-yi 'aql u lutf-i jān ast / nikū-rū-yi zamīn u āsāmān ast}
\]
\[
\text{agar in ārizū yābam tamāmat / murād-am bas buvad in tā qiyāmat}
\]

She is in beauty sharp as the intellect, and in subtlety fine as the soul. She is the perfect face of earth and heaven. If I attain this desire in its entirety, it will be enough fulfilment for me until the Resurrection.

His father, the caliph, vehemently retorts to this:

\[
pidar guft-ash zahī shahvat-parastī / ki az shahvat-parastī mast-i mastī
\]

What a slave to lust you are, completely inebriated by lust.

He goes on to explain that the man whose heart is fixed on the vulva has wasted the entire capital of his physical existence, whereas any woman who acts in a heroic, virile manner is wholly freed from the taint of such lust:

\[
dil-i mardi ki qayd-i farj bāshad / hama naqd-i vujūd-ash kharj bāshad
\]
\[
valī har zan ki ĕ mardāna āmad / az in shahvat bi-kul bīgāna āmad
\]

The heart of a vulva-fixated man his capital, his whole existence – spent! But any woman acting like a fearless man she is wholly untainted by this lust.

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73 Ki dārad shāh-i paryān dukhtarī bīk / ki natvān kard mithl-ash māh rā dhikr.

This introduction leads in ‘Aṭṭār’s Ilāhī-nāma to one of the longest tales he tells – and it is a tale of heroic feminine spirituality, linked to beauty and chastity. This is the tale of Ma’ṣūma the Chaste (or in some manuscripts, Marḥūma the Deceased, or gratia plena), a chaste wife (zan-i pārsā) whose husband leaves on a journey, commending her to the care of his brother. Upon glimpsing her beauty, the brother attempts to cajole and coerce her into infidelity, as do a series of other men whom she encounters. She eventually frees herself from their clutches and becomes a crowned monarch (while disguised as a man), and then a holy woman; in this role, she redeems all her erstwhile persecutors by making them confess their sins.75

Parallel to ‘Aṭṭār’s caliph and his condemnation of his son’s lust, Mawlānā Rūmī in the Mathnawī describes male sexual desire (al-hawā) as a constitutional weakness, which he calls in Arabic the ‘menstruation of men’.76 Rūmī’s Mathnawī does not give us major tales in which women act on their own, in roles not socially defined by a male counterpart; his heroines enjoy considerable agency, but remain bounded in the stories by a socially gendered role: slave girl, lover, wife, mother, and so on, but not heroine tout court. As such, it lacks a female gaze, except where it is a complement or a balancing response to a male gaze. The major exception to this in the lyrical as well as the narrative oeuvre of Rūmī is Mary the Madonna. She too, of course, is defined by the parameters of the Qur’ānic verses and the lore about her in the ‘Tales of the Prophets’ (qiṣṣa al-anbiyā); in lyric tableaux and narrative pericopes she appears in the various paradigms of the chaste and wronged woman, or the fearful woman (preyed upon by God or an angel), or the saintly and even quasi-prophet woman – even before becoming the Theotokos and giving birth to Jesus. However, her symbolic function always anticipates her becoming the mother of Jesus, and a genetrix of mystic spirit (rūḥ Allāh) who shows us that we too must give birth to our inner Jesus of the spirit.77 Here then, we the readers are asked to engender ourselves with the female gaze, a maternal gaze, vis-à-

77 For examples of this idea in Rumi’s poetry, see my chapter ‘Poems about Birthing the Soul’, in Rumi: Swallowing the Sun, pp. 151–65. For the use of this metaphor in Rumi’s discourses, see Fatemeh Keshavarz, ‘Pregnant with God: The Poetic Art of Mothering the Sacred in Rumi’s Fīhi Ma Fih; Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 22/1–2 (2002), pp. 90–99.
vis our own spirit. And as this is essentially what the Mathnawī and the ghazaliyyāt of Rūmī urge us to achieve, this rebirthing may in some sense be both the culminating moment and the supernal vision to which Rūmī intends to guide us.

The effort to recover the story of the actual women in the life of Mawlānā Rūmī and his circle – insofar as the sources and textual structures allow us to do so – is an admirable and intellectually significant goal, and one to which students of Sufi communities, lineages, and brotherhoods (and sadly under-documented sisterhoods) ought to devote concerted attention.78 While the imaginal fictions built up around Kīmiyā Khâtūn may indulge our presentist concerns and clearly speak to a contemporary need, they make for a poor mirror by which to see the unrefracted past and understand historical actors and their motivational dynamics in Konya in the mid-1200s. Understanding social networks, family alliances, and the role of women in this and other such communities will create a much fuller and more accurate picture of specific individuals, the development of orders, and the important role of women in the development of Islamic spirituality. Moreover, an understanding of this social context will in turn help us understand the significance of the social situations depicted in Rūmī’s Mathnawī, as well as the symbolic import of the feminine in his ghazals. As such, grappling with the actual content of the sources and recognizing their limitations provides an important preliminary background for reading the literary creations of Rūmī himself.

**Bibliography**


78 As one example of how to theorize and strategize the recovery of female voices from premodern narratives of the Islamic world, see Omaima Abou-Bakr, ‘Articulating Gender: Muslim Women Intellectuals in the Pre-modern Period’, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 32/3 (2010), pp. 127–44.


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