


The topic of sex is hardly new, when it comes to writings on Iran. From European travel accounts fetishising harems, to manuals on sexual etiquette, to divine poetry that straddle sexualities, to even the bawdy jokes popular throughout the land, that most powerful human urge—following eating and drinking—continues to fascinate and agitate.

While the source material for studies on sex is rich, interestingly until recently there has been a paucity of secondary studies. In the last few years there has been an explosion, with the publications discussed in this review, all being published in 2008 and 2009. They represent a small sample of such works, in years that according to World Cat have produced over twenty. With varying disciplinary and theoretical underpinnings, they do provide insight into various ways of dealing with sexual politics and the politics of sex in Iran.

The genesis of *Islamicate Sexualities* was a 2003 seminar held at Harvard, titled “Crossing Paths of Middle Eastern and sexuality Studies: Challenges of Theory, History, and Comparative Methods”. As stated by the editors in their preface, the goal of the volume is “queering” the Islamic historiography from the insular Middle Eastern Studies (p. vii). Complicating Foucault’s binary of a European *scientia sexualis* and Eastern *ars erotica*, the authors use theoretical frameworks pioneered by comparative literary studies and queer theory to extend, complicate, and destabilise heteronormative historiographies. Employing Hodgson’s term “Islamicate” to refer to the cultures and societies that live by various versions of Islam, while eschewing “other” categories and typologies—homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, queer, effeminate—the anthology deals with theory and praxis. The collection includes nine chapters by those within and without Middle Eastern studies. Particularly interesting to this journal are the two chapters by the editors, Babayan
and Najmabadi, that relate to Iran and their respective interests in the Safavid and Qajar periods.

Babayan in her “In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran”, recounts a late Safavid hajjnāme, written by an anonymous Isfahani woman. Comprising 1200 verses, the travel-account (see Alam and Subrahmanyam, Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1700 (2007)) is highly unusual and written in the mathnavi form, with a style explicitly influenced by the great poet Nizami Ganjawi. Through a close-reading of the text, the woman’s travel to the Hajj takes a stop in Urdubad (near Tabriz), where she is reunited with her rafīq [generous companion]. The two had previously had underwent the ritual of sisterhood or companionship (xvāhar-xvāndağı). However, their friendship was to be forbidden and they were forced to separate. Through a homo-erotic reading, Babayan is able to relocate a female space in Safavid Iran, although one that was socially unacceptable. The chapter is illuminative and important lens to social history of the late Safavid period. One question left unresolved is the success of the late Safavid “imperial-level project of regulating the sexuality of Isfahan’s subjects” (p. 245). While contemporaneous manuals by those close to the seat of power do exist and illustrate an attempts by Shi’a clergymen that had the ear of the Shah to regulate such behaviours, whether they could effectively project and enact their discourse upon the subjects, especially as their domains were under siege and it would not be long before they were to be defeated by the Ghilzai troops led by Mir Mahmud Hotaki.

Afsaneh Najmabadi uses a late 19th century Qajar text to destabilise ideas about praxis and theory in her “Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Iran”. Vali Khan’s Risalah-‘i fujriyah (an essay on debauchery) describes his sexual adventures with Qajar princesses, female prostitutes, amrads, male and female servants, as well as virgins. How would we classify a person like Vali Khan?

The text reveals a hierarchicalisation of pleasure with the anus being greater than the vagina, and the male’s being greater than the female’s. Vali Khan inhabits a world that is far too complicated to classify based on acts or types, or even practices and erotic desires. However, within this same milieu, there is the relatively rapid disappearance of the amrad. Najmabadi locates this within the debates by two influential late Qajar modernist socio-cultural critics of the Qajar state—Mirza Fath-‘Ali Akhundzadah and Mirza Agha Khan Kirmani. Aware of Europeans’ perceptions of Iranian society, these two men represent a move that came to understand these practices on European terms and were