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“I’d rather be married to someone I can control”: Female *Javānmardī* in Gulbadan Begum’s *Humayunnamah* as a Mirror for Princesses

Amanda Caterina Leong 

The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom
Email: Amanda.Leong@courtauld.ac.uk

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The mischievous quote making up this article’s title comes from the *Humayunnamah*, a chronicle written around 1587 in Persian by Gulbadan Begum (1523–1603). Gulbadan was a Mughal princess of Timurid heritage and the daughter of the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530).¹ In the *Humayunnamah*, Gulbadan recounts the response Hamidah Begum (1542–1605) gives upon being chastised by her future mother-in-law, Dildar Begum:

“Look whether you like it or not, in the end, you are going to be married to somebody. Who could be better than the Emperor?”
“Yes, you are right. But I’d rather marry someone whose collar my hand can reach.”²

Hamidah Begum’s refusal to be impressed by the status of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun (1508–1556), and her explicit declaration of intent to marry someone she could control, or share some equality of relationship, provides an example of when elite women from the Mughal empire perceived themselves as equal, or even superior, to their male counterparts. It also further highlights the active role elite women played in challenging the patriarchal norms that governed their lives.³ How were some Mughal women more powerful than their male counterparts? One answer lies in the concept of *javānmardī* (young-manliness). In the *Humayunnamah*, Gulbadan devotes significant attention to remembering the multifaceted ways elite Mughal women embodied *javānmardī*. Her recollection of this event raises another critical question: to what extent was Gulbadan effective in harnessing literature, specifically the “mirror for princesses” genre, as a weapon to assert women’s authority and navigate the prevailing male-centric order?⁴

Gulbadan was ordered by her nephew, Akbar, the third Mughal emperor and son of Humayun and Hamidah Begum, to construct the *Humayunnamah*. Akbar wanted Gulbadan

¹ I have chosen to abbreviate Gulbadan Begum’s name to Gulbadan throughout the article.

² This line is idiomatic for controlling someone. Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, trans. W. M. Thackston, Bibliotheca Iranica, no. 11 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2009). Citations of *Humayunnamah* will include the page reference to the Persian text followed by the page number of Thackston’s English translation preceded by the word “trans.”; 37, trans. 37, translation slightly modified.

³ For more information regarding women’s “control” in marriages, see Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 100–101.

⁴ The original manuscript has two titles: the *Humayunnamah* and the *Ahvāl-i Humāyūn Pādīshāh*. See Gulbadan Begum and Annette Susannah Beveridge, *The history of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)*, ed. Facsim (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001), 82.

to record the events of his father and grandfather's reigns to be used as reference material for his vizier, Abu'l Fazl (1551–1602), who was responsible for writing Akbar's chronicle, the *Akbarnamah*. In her study, Taymiya Zaman describes the *Humayunnamah* as a genre-crossing memoir that functions as a form of "instructive memory," since Gulbadan uses her memories of Humayun to instruct Akbar on his father's virtues, those worthy of emulation.⁵ Nasrin Askari coined the term "mirror for princesses" to describe literary works commissioned by elite female patrons in medieval and early modern Persianate contexts that used exemplary female characters to impart lessons on ideal behavior to other elite women.⁶

Expanding on Zaman and Askari's scholarship, this article explores the multifaceted role of the *Humayunnamah* as more than just a guide for elite males, but also a "mirror for princesses" by a princess: an instructional manual written by Gulbadan Begum in which she uses her memories to teach elite Mughal women on how to be *javānmardī*.⁷ By looking at the *Humayunnamah* through the lens of this genre, I demonstrate how Gulbadan employs and redefines the prevalent literary conventions of her time to remember not only her own but also other remarkable displays of *javānmardī* by elite Mughal women during the reign of Humayun, given that he was well-known for falling "short specifically in fulfilling gender roles appropriate to a warrior king."⁸ The *Humayunnamah* magnifies how an integrated matriarchy of female *javānmards* (manly youth) vastly contributed to the fabric of early Mughal empire-building.

Rethinking *javānmardī* from a historical female perspective

The archetype of the *javānmard* has roots in Sassanian and pre-Islamic Arab warrior traditions of the champion (*pahlavān*) whose duty is to protect his kingdom through selfless acts of valor. The Persianate notion of *javānmardī* is typically translated as "chivalry." It is an ethical concept of human perfection and has been used in literature from the Persianate world since Firdausi's *Shahnamah* (1010) to describe a person who possesses manly virtues ranging from courage, integrity, wisdom, martial prowess, and hospitality to generosity, piety, self-sacrifice, and fortitude.⁹ A *javānmard* is expected to know *adab* (proper conduct) such as how to dress and eat, pursue knowledge and wisdom, recognize good poetry, and be a good companion to a king.¹⁰

Javānmardī extends beyond the realm of men in Persianate culture, as the concept has also always been used in relation to women. One example is found in the earliest complete illustrated Persian manuscript, a 13th century copy of the romance *Varqa and Gulshah* by Ayuqqi, composed in the 11th century and transcribed circa 1225, which depicts the female heroine Gulshah as a powerful warrior fiercely engaging in battle with a rival clan to save her male lover, Varqa.¹¹

⁵ Taymiya R. Zaman, "Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, no. 5 (2011): 685.

⁶ Nasrin Askari, "A Mirror for Princesses: Mūnis-Nāma, A Twelfth-Century Collection of Persian Tales Corresponding to the Ottoman Turkish Tales of the Faraj Ba'd al-Shidda," *Narrative Culture* 5, no. 1 (2018), 140.

⁷ It is important to state that, just like the *Baburnamah*, apart from being a didactic mirror for prince/princesses, the *Humayunnamah* is also a historical chronicle, an autobiographical text, and many others. In fact, it can be even be characterized as a form of what Sholeh Quinn calls a "blended genre," a literary convention prevalent in early modern Persianate historiographical writing. See Sholeh Alysia Quinn, *Persian Historiography across Empires: The Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 155–207.

⁸ Ali Anooshahr, "The King Who Would Be Man: The Gender Roles of the Warrior King in Early Mughal History," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 3 (2008): 328–329.

⁹ Emma Flatt, "Young Manliness: Ethical Culture in the Gymnasiums of the Medieval Deccan," in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana University Press, 2010), 156. For more information on *javānmardī*, see Mohsen Zakeri, "JAVĀNMARDI," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (Brill, August 26, 2020), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/javanmardi-COM_3959.

¹⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 77.

¹¹ 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 (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 209.

Lloyd Ridgeon describes how, since the medieval period, “the ideal of *javānmardī* (bravery, loyalty, hospitality, and so on) were appropriate for women.”¹² Regardless, the scholarly consensus has taken the etymology of the word quite literally, predominantly associating *javānmardī* with the male-sexed body and thus producing an overwhelming corpus that associates *javānmardī* with male figures. As a result, an in-depth exploration of *javānmardī* in the premodern female body, particularly in the context of historical early modern Persianate female figures, has been understudied.¹³

Ridgeon also asserts that “chivalry” is an inadequate translation for *javānmardī*, because *javānmard* figures are often not simply defined by their ability to adhere to virtue. One example is the ‘*ayyār* (trickster) figure, who is renowned for using strength, bravery, and “deviousness,” specifically “cunning and trickery, drugs and disguises,” in the pursuit of justice.¹⁴ One of the most famous ‘*ayyār* in Persian medieval romance is Mardān Dukht (Manly Woman) from the *Samak-i ‘Ayyār*, whose name shares the same root as *javānmardī*.¹⁵ These diverse female characters, from warriors to tricksters, demonstrate the multifaceted nature of not just *javānmardī*, but also the female *javānmard*. Moreover, according to Ridgeon, definitions and understandings of *javānmardī* change according to the social, economic, and political factors of different times.¹⁶

Scholars working on gender and *javānmardī* in the Mughal context, such as Rosalind O’Hanlon, Ali Anooshahr, Emma Flatt, and Emma Kalb, have predominantly looked at how kings and male courtiers understood and redefined the elastic concept of *javānmardī* to communicate imperial power from a male-centered perspective.¹⁷ Sunil Sharma, in his study of 17th-century Persian poetry written by the Iranian male poet Nau’i Khabushani (1563–1610) for Akbar’s court, has uncovered how *javānmardī* was applied to the figure of the Hindu woman who shows unswerving fidelity to her beloved till the end.¹⁸ Anooshahr has also pointed out how female cross-dressing during the reigns of Humayun and Sultan Bahlul Lodi (r. 1451–1489) was not only condoned but also praised by male-composed

¹² Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, *Javanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 8.

¹³ For scholarship that briefly look at women in relation to manliness and *javānmardī*, see William L. Hanaway, “Persian Popular Romances before the Safavid Period” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970), 175; John R. Perry, “Blackmailing Amazons and Dutch Pigs: A Consideration of Epic and Folktale Motifs in Persian Historiography,” *Iranian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1986): 155–65; Marina Gaillard, *Le livre de Samak-e ‘Ayyār: structure et idéologie du roman persan médiéval* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1987), 23; Parvaneh Pourshariati, “The Ethics and Praxis of Mehr and Mithras and the Social Institution of the ‘*ayyār*s in the Epic Romance of *Samak-e ‘ayyār*,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6, no. 1–2 (2013): 1, 28; Marina Gaillard, “Alexander the Great or Būrān-Dukht: Who is the True Hero of the Dārāb-Nāma of Ṭarsūsī?,” *Iranian Studies* (2023): 1–14; Sahba Shayani, “The Representation of Women in Premodern Persian Epic Romance Poetry: A Study of Ferdowsi’s *Šāhnāme*, Gorgāni’s *Vis o Rāmin*, and Neẓāmi’s *Ḳosrow o Širin*” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2020); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 219–222; Babak Rahimi, “Digital Javanmardi: Chivalric Ethics and Imagined Iran on the Internet,” in *Javanmardi*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, *The Ethics and Practice of Persianate Perfection* (London: Gingko, 2018), 290, 292; Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi, “Female Sufis,” in *Sufism and Early Islamic Piety: Personal and Communal Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53–82, 66–67.

¹⁴ Lloyd Ridgeon, “Introduction: The Felon, the Faithful and the Fighter: The Protean Face of the Chivalric Man (*Javanmard*) in the Medieval Persianate and Modern Iranian Worlds,” in *Javanmardi*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, *The Ethics and Practice of Persianate Perfection* (Gingko, 2018), 3–4.

¹⁵ For a more detailed understanding of the different ways Manly Woman performs *javānmardī*, see Roxana Zenhari, *The Persian Romance Samak-e ‘ayyār: Analysis of an Illustrated Inju Manuscript*, *Beiträge Zur Kulturgeschichte Des Islamischen Orients*, Bd. 42 (Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2014), 226, 262–265.

¹⁶ Ridgeon, “Introduction,” 19.

¹⁷ Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 1 (1999): 47–93; Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Kingdom, Household and Body History, Gender and Imperial Service under Akbar,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 5 (2007): 889–923; Flatt, “Young Manliness,” 153–169; Ali Anooshahr, “The King Who Would Be Man: The Gender Roles of the Warrior King in Early Mughal History,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 3 (2008): 327–340.

¹⁸ Sunil Sharma, “The Indian Woman in a Persianate World,” in *Reflections on Mughal Art & Culture*, ed. Roda Ahluwalia and K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, Seminar on “Mughal Art and Culture” (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, The K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 2021), 313.

Indo-Persian chronicles of the 16th century, especially in times of dire need during combat.¹⁹ Sharma and Anooshahr's scholarship demonstrate the fluidity of gendered concepts – such as *javānmardī* – and roles during the reigns of Akbar and Humayun. Both allow us to see how manliness was understood as a performative act that could be embodied by both men and women from different backgrounds in various ways, especially during the early Mughal period.

Expanding on these various scholarships, this paper conducts a close reading of Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunnamah* in an effort to better understand how *javānmardī* operated from a historical female perspective. Royal women of the early Mughal context not only embodied traditional *javānmardī* virtues in order to ensure dynastic continuation and defend Mughal patriarchal kingship. In fact, they also established new associations with the concept itself to showcase their agency and authority. *Javānmardī* offers a more nuanced and concrete lens to analyze the reach and expressions of early modern Mughal female power.

Contextualizing Gulbadan's *Humayunnamah*

To understand Gulbadan's gender politics in the *Humayunnamah*, one must consider the historical circumstances of her life, the *Baburnamah*, and other female-centered literary traditions, such as the mirror for princesses genre. In her study of the *Humayunnamah*, Ruby Lal asserts:

we cannot know, therefore, what literary models Gulbadan drew upon to write her own text. It certainly does not show any adherence to any available format [...]. It is without any didactic purpose and lies outside the “mirror for princes” genre, which seems to be prevalent then. [...] [It] might thus be classified as an “open” text belonging to no recognized genre.²⁰

While Lal is right about the uniqueness of the *Humayunnamah*, she overlooks the broader literary and historical context within which Gulbadan crafted her authorial persona and text. I seek to demonstrate how, just as Gulbadan did not write in a vacuum, the *Humayunnamah* is not a purposeless, unrecognizable anomaly. In fact, Gulbadan's purpose was to write in mixed genres in order to influence the historical memory of Mughal imperial lineage and legitimacy; a memory made “official” during Akbar's reign.²¹

Akbar and unmanly men

Firstly, it is important to remember that Akbar was the one who requested that his aunt, Gulbadan, write the *Humayunnamah*. Akbar was well-known for being innovative when it came to expanding, even breaking free from, imperial traditions.²² Thus, it is not surprising that he would ask his aunt, who was not only well-known for her storytelling skills but also close to both his father and grandfather, to contribute to the official history of his reign, considering that she had unique memories of early Mughal history that were inaccessible to other (male) chroniclers. Ram Sharma observed that Gulbadan's account of Babur sacrificing his life for Humayun stands out as the “more important” telling – used by other chroniclers, including Abu'l Fazl – crucial to legitimizing the kingships of Humayun and Akbar.²³

¹⁹ Anooshahr, “The King Who Would Be Man,” 338–339.

²⁰ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 58–59. Lal also makes the same argument in another book, see Ruby Lal, *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 482.

²¹ I expand more on the *Humayunnamah*'s purpose in later sections.

²² For more information on Akbar's various innovations, see A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 132–172.

²³ Ram Sharma, “The Story of Babar's Death,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1926): 296.

Furthermore, Timurid women like Gulbadan were highly revered by their male counterparts not simply for lending legitimacy to their Turko-Mongol lineages, but also for such women's ability to excel and even surpass men in various literary, scientific, and architectural traditions.²⁴ Most importantly, some Timurid women were even remembered for their ability to utilize *javānmardī* to defend patriarchal kingship. In *Habib al-siyar*, a chronicle written by the early modern historian Khvandamir (d.1535/6), Agha Begi is remembered for defending Shah Rukh's (r. 1405–1447) kingship. She is described as a lioness whose manliness amazed Shah Rukh to the extent that he regarded her as manlier than some men.²⁵ Akbar is known for commissioning portraits of Central Asian/Timurid women to showcase his charisma, cultural prowess, and legitimacy.²⁶ Given Gulbadan's unique memories and Timurid lineage associated with intelligence, legitimacy, and even *javānmardī*, incorporating her work into the official history would have enhanced Akbar's prestige.

Gulbadan would also have been aware that Akbar was deeply invested in *javānmardī*, as it formed the backbone of his imperial ideology.²⁷ Not only did he maintain a large number of wrestlers, traditionally understood as *javānmardī* icons, but he also commissioned the production of illustrated manuscripts, such as the *Hamzanamah*, which contained visual representations of cross-dressing female *javānmards* and female wrestlers.²⁸ Wrestlers are symbols of *javānmardī* in Persianate culture. He also commissioned an illustrated manuscript of the *Tutinamah*, an instruction on ideal womanhood – Gulbadan would have seen the folios of both manuscripts both before and after she returned from Kabul in the late 1550s.²⁹ Akbar's interest in instructing women on ideal behavior and female *javānmardī*, along with his reverence for and reliance on women of Timurid heritage, can be seen as other factors enabling Gulbadan to create a mirror for princesses instructing women how to be *javānmards*.

Furthermore, Gulbadan was acutely aware of Akbar's efforts to physically and conceptually institutionalize the imperial harem, placing royal women in a strictly segregated space in Fatehpur-Sikri, a move intended to reinforce his masculine image.³⁰ By highlighting Mughal female *javānmards*' public contributions supporting the reigns of Babur and Humayun, alongside these rulers' public recognition of female *javānmards*, as explored below, Gulbadan sought to negotiate power with Akbar within the context of the increasingly segregated harem. The *Humayunnamah* can be interpreted as a reminder to Akbar and future rulers of the significant political influence wielded by elite Mughal female *javānmards* and the importance of recognizing and permitting their political participation to the prosperity of Mughal patriarchal kingship.

On the note of Humayun, a major catalyst driving Gulbadan to create a mirror for princesses within the *Humayunnamah* was her firsthand encounters with the failure of her male counterparts, particularly Humayun, to embody the *javānmardī* qualities expected of an ideal king. It was well-known that in the last years of his life, Humayun's father, Babur, was plagued by uncertainty about Humayun's ability to be a manly leader, able to

²⁴ Priscilla Soucek, "Timurid Women: A Cultural Perspective," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly, The New Middle Ages, vol. 6 (London: Macmillan, 1998), 199–226.

²⁵ Khvandamir, "Habib Al-Siyar," in *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art*, ed. W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1989), 141.

²⁶ Mika Natif, "Preliminary Thoughts on Portraits of Mughal Women in Illustrated Histories from Akbar's Time," in *Reflections on Mughal Art & Culture*, ed. Roda Ahluwalia and K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, Seminar on "Mughal Art and Culture," (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, The K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 2021), 39.

²⁷ O'Hanlon, "Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India," 55.

²⁸ Emma Flatt, "Young Manliness: Ethical Culture in the Gymnasiums of the Medieval Deccan," in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, ed. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Indiana University Press, 2010), 164–165; Amanda Caterina Leong, "A Study of Female Javānmardī in the Premodern Persianate World (945-1800)" (PhD diss., University of California Merced, 2024), 43–49; Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 439.

²⁹ Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 480–481; Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (November 1997): 486.

³⁰ Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 176–177; Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 43.

keep the empire and his brothers united.³¹ Bayazid Bayat, one of Humayun's soldiers whom Akbar also ordered to write what he knew, describes Humayun as a "delicate king," who lacked manliness compared to his father and rivals, such as Shir Shah and his half-brother Kamran Mirza. Another chronicler, Jawhar Aftabchi, a soldier serving in Humayun's camp, repeatedly emphasized in his text how Kamran was a "manly," tireless warrior compared to Humayun.³²

Gulbadan herself sheds light on Humayun's deficiencies as a *javānmard*, recounting the tragic fates of royal women, particularly his wives, and children who perished due to his military deficiency. Indeed, Humayun was unable to secure his kingship in battles against Shir Shah (1472–1545), an Afghan nobleman who sought to control northern India:

During these troubles absolutely no trace could be found of several persons. Among them was Sultan-Husayn Mirza's daughter Ayisha Sultan Begim, my father the Padishah's deputy Bichka, Bikā-Jan Koka, Afifa Begim, Chand Bibi, who was seven months pregnant. Three of these were wives of the emperor. In no way how they searched, what happened to them was never discovered. The emperor was ill for forty days, but he recovered.³³

Humayun's lack of *javānmardī* is further seen in how Gulbadan remembers his rudeness to female family members. She describes him as "very annoyed" (*bisyār a'rāz*) and showing "vexation" (*kalfatī*) when royal women – such as Afghani Agacha, one of his father's wives, and Mahchuchuk Begum, one of his own wives – made mistakes such as falling off or failing to control their horses, which affected the flow of his sightseeing outings.³⁴ Moreover, he would even get "angry" (*qahr*) at his wives' requests to spend more time with him, as seen in the case of Bikā Begum.³⁵

Apart from the various consequences Mughal women endured as a result of their male counterparts' lack of *javānmardī*, elite Mughal women also frequently found themselves as the linchpins that kings, including Humayun and Babur, heavily depended on to enable and defend their rule.³⁶ A better understanding of the various anxieties around royal Mughal women, exemplified by Gulbadan's own experience with the unmanly king Humayun, allows us to see why she would have wanted to create a mirror for princesses within the space of the *Humayunnamah* aimed not only to teach women how to be *javānmards*, but also to ensure Mughal women's own survival in the various struggles of the court for Mughal dynastic continuation.

Like father like daughter: Gulbadan as Babur's literary heir

Examining how her father's memoir, the *Baburnamah*, functioned as a model for her *Humayunnamah* enables a better understanding of Gulbadan's ability to craft a memoir that also serves as a mirror for princesses. Lal asserts that, while Gulbadan read her father's self-authored memoir, "it was clearly not the literary model for" the *Humayunnamah*.³⁷ But this might not be the case. Sholeh Quinn has mentioned that "imitative writing" was a standard practice of early modern historiographical writing. Imitative writing involves a

³¹ Munis D. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719*, First paperback edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26.

³² Anooshahr, "The King Who Would Be Man," 331.

³³ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 31; trans. 30.

³⁴ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 63–64; trans. 59.

³⁵ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 25; trans. 27. For more information and analysis of this story, see Amanda Caterina Leong, "If Only That Pitiless Blade Had Pierced My Own Heart and Eyes': Mughal Royal Women's Grief as a Form of Political Rhetoric," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (2024): 699.

³⁶ I talk more about this later in the paper, in the section on Khanzada Begum and Haram Begum.

³⁷ Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 58–59.

chronicler choosing an earlier history as a model, then proceeding to not just imitate it, but also change it for political or stylistic purposes.³⁸ Gulbadan makes it clear to her readers at the beginning of the *Humayunnamah* that she intends to repeat what her father did in the *Baburnamah*:

In the first part of this story, the story of his Holiness the king, my dear father, shall be written. Although events are recorded in the memoirs of his royal Highness my dear father. Nevertheless, with blessing and fortune, I will write them down here.³⁹

Stephen Dale argues that the *Baburnamah*'s uniqueness lies in its complexity: not only does it function as a memoir, but also as an "unusual example" of a mirror for princes.⁴⁰ Unlike traditional mirror texts such as the *Qabusnamah*, which are overtly didactic, the *Baburnamah* uses an intimate tone and candid writing style that fosters a sense of intimacy and subtlety while also encouraging greater receptiveness to its lessons. Furthermore, the *Baburnamah* is also a "self-serving piece of propaganda."⁴¹ As Lisa Balabanliar points out, "the very structure of Babur's memoir reflects an extraordinary degree of public respect for the position of women in his own family and dynasty."⁴² Louise Marlow mentions how the mirror genre is "almost infinitely flexible" and can range from brief sentences to collections of stories to long epic poems. In addition to providing advice to monarchs, writers have always used the mirror for princes for different purposes, ranging from "intervening in dynastic politics [...] to professional advancement."⁴³

The flexible nature of the mirror genre, coupled with the *Baburnamah*, paved the way for Gulbadan to unapologetically create a memoir that also serves as a mirror for princesses, in which both she and her female counterparts were the main *javānmardī* characters, on a quest to promote masculine perfection in kings. While Humayun never wrote his own memoir, Akbar appears to have been "unlettered."⁴⁴ Through the *Humayunnamah*, Gulbadan positioned herself as a significant authorial figure, filling a literary void left by her kingly male relatives who did not produce self-authored works in the manner of the *Baburnamah*. In fact, the *Humayunnamah* allows us to see her as Babur's literary heir, capable of continuing and expanding his mirror for princes literary legacy.

Building on this collaboration, the first lesson the *Humayunnamah* teaches, as a mirror for princesses, is that women should embrace literacy not solely for the sake of asserting superiority, but also as a means to perpetuate and preserve the various virtues and literary traditions linked with female *javānmardī*. Only by doing so can they secure patriarchal continuity in the Mughal dynasty and be remembered in history. Gulbadan died in 1603 and the *Akbarnamah* was completed by Abu'l Fazl in 1590. This means that she, along with other Mughal court ladies, would have been aware of the enduring legacy of her work in her lifetime. The significance of the *Humayunnamah* in shaping the *Akbarnamah* demonstrates Gulbadan's triumph using her literary talents to solidify her identity as a Mughal kingmaker.

³⁸ Quinn, *Persian Historiography across Empires*, 7–8.

³⁹ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 1; trans. 1, translation slightly modified. More information on how Gulbadan modifies her father's text and how it reveals her motives will be talked below in the later section titled "Textual trickery".

⁴⁰ Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Bābur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483–1530)*, Brill's Inner Asian Library, vol. 10 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27. For more information on how Akbar and Babur's other descendants understood Babur's text as a mirror for princes, see *Ibid.*, 43–44.

⁴² Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia*, Paperback edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 129.

⁴³ Louise Marlow, *Medieval Muslim Mirrors for Princes: An Anthology of Arabic, Persian and Turkish Political Advice*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 5–6.

⁴⁴ I have chosen to follow Zaman's use of the word "unlettered" in order to avoid the pejorative modernist connotations of the adjective "illiterate." See Zaman, "Instructive Memory," 682.

“Mirrors for princesses” and the *Humayunnamah*’s female readers

Gulbadan follows in the footsteps of a long tradition of medieval elite women, aware of their power in the upbringing of future monarchs. These women patronized male writers to construct mirrors for princesses, so that other elite female readers from various cultural backgrounds could learn the virtuous qualities embodied in such mirrors’ exemplary characters. In her study of an illustrated manuscript of folk tales titled *Kitab-i-dastan*, Askari mentions that the manuscript might have been commissioned by an elite woman during the reign of the Safavid king Shah Tahmasb (1514–1576) and hypothesizes it could be seen as a mirror for princesses that was probably meant to be read aloud to women.⁴⁵ Gulbadan would likely have encountered this mirror for princesses writing in the course of her readings and education, drawing freely upon it in her own composition.⁴⁶ Lal has shed light on how Gulbadan was educated by female teachers to understand the allusions and lessons in didactic poems such as Persian poet Sa’di’s *Gulistan* and *Bustan*.⁴⁷ She would also have known various text mirrors, such as the *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* and the *Qabusnamah*.⁴⁸ Gulbadan’s interest in instruction is further reflected in one of her surviving poems: “Be sure that girls who treat their lovers badly/ Are apt to find their lives will end up sadly.”⁴⁹

Furthermore, Maria Szuppe suggests that Akbar’s wet nurse, Mahim Anaga Begum (d. 1562), stands out as an example of a powerful woman during his reign, even commissioning the male chronicler Fakhri Heravi (d. 1563) to create a compendium entitled *Tazkirat al-nisa*.⁵⁰ This work details legendary 12th and 14th-century poetesses and saintly women from across the Muslim world, providing subsequent generations with a valuable reference on women’s contributions.⁵¹ Mahim Anaga was one of Akbar’s highest-ranking officials and is described in the *Akbarnamah* as striding “in wisdom like a man.”⁵² Mahim Anaga’s patronage of the *Tazkirat al-nisa* is an example of how “manly” powerful women of Gulbadan’s time leveraged their influence to record the achievements of other women for later generations; a tradition in which Gulbadan also participated with the *Humayunnamah* as a mirror for princesses.

Regardless of the fact that she wrote the *Humayunnamah* under Akbar’s orders, for him and his vizier, Gulbadan makes it clear that a female reader was involved in creating the *Humayunnamah*. Gulbadan’s repetition of “Hamidah Begum says” (Hāmidah Bānū Bīgum mīgūyand) throughout the *Humayunnamah* shows that Hamidah was a secondary source substantiating the authenticity of various events.⁵³ Hamidah’s role as a reader, fact-checker, and even one of the *Humayunnamah*’s main characters allows us to see the different ways Mughal women both preserved and enriched their medieval predecessors’ mirror for princesses legacy.

⁴⁵ Askari, “A Mirror for Princesses,” 125, 122; Nasrin Askari, “Élite Folktales: Munes-Nāma, Ketāb-e Dāstān, and Their Audiences,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 12, no. 1 (December 5, 2019): 55.

⁴⁶ Following his expulsion from India in 1540 by Shir Shah, Humayun, along with his female family members, sought refuge at Shah Tahmasb’s court. From this period until 1555, both Humayun and Hamidah reportedly looked at various illustrated manuscripts in the libraries of Herat. Not only did Gulbadan document in the *Humayunnamah* the tour Humayun and his entourage had in Safavid Iran, but she was also very close to Hamidah. It is highly likely Gulbadan was aware of the mirror for princesses genre that was part of medieval and early modern Persianate cultures. See Abolala Soudavar, “Between the Safavids and the Mughals: Art and Artists in Transition,” *Iran* 37 (1999): 49.

⁴⁷ Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 205, 482.

⁴⁹ Dick Davis, ed., *The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), 155.

⁵⁰ Maria Szuppe, “The Female Intellectual Milieu in Timurid and Post-Timurid Herāt: Faxri Heravi’s Biography of Poetesses, ‘Javāher Al-’Ajāyeb,’” *Oriente Moderno* 15 (76), no. 2 (1996): 149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵² Henry Beveridge, *The Akbarnama of Abul Fazal Vol 3* (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2010), 307.

⁵³ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 33, 48; trans., 34, 47.

Akbar's establishment of a physical imperial harem in Fatehpur-Sikri provided Gulbadan with a settled lifestyle. She no longer had to live a life constantly on the move – something she did for the majority of her life. Instead, she was now a settled matriarch, highly respected amongst the various “elder and younger Mughal women, Hindu Rajput wives of the emperor, princes and princesses of many generations, sons and daughters of wives and concubines, eunuchs and midwives” who lived together in the harem.⁵⁴ This situation could have motivated Gulbadan to create a mirror for princesses within the *Humayunnamah* to teach *javānmardī* virtues to these diverse women so that, just like herself and other female predecessors, they could support Mughal kingship and courtly administration while also ensuring dynastic continuity. Furthermore, when Gulbadan wrote the *Humayunnamah*, Persian was the language of the royal household and court.⁵⁵ Accessibility to the harem's diverse female audience could be another reason why the *Humayunnamah* was written in unadorned yet eloquent Persian, instead of Gulbadan's native language of Turkic.⁵⁶ Most importantly, considering the homosocial dynamics prevalent among elite Mughal women and the oral tradition of political discussions and storytelling in the domestic space, it is reasonable to suggest that women familiar with Gulbadan's *Humayunnamah* potentially participated in reading, listening to, and even editing its narratives.⁵⁷

On women being *javānmards* and writing about *javānmardī*

To further understand the *Humayunnamah*'s goal of remembering and teaching female *javānmardī*, it is also crucial to recall Gulbadan's elite female predecessors' relationship with *javānmardī*. One example is Padishah Khatun (1256–1259), who ruled Kirman in the 13th century and was raised “like a man,” as a *javānmard*, by her formidable mother.⁵⁸ Padishah Khatun was also a talented poet.⁵⁹ Even after her death, she continued to inspire other elite female poets. Jahan Malik Khatun (c.1324–1382), a princess from the Injuid dynasty (1335–1357), credits Padishah Khatun as an influence. By also skillfully using “the language and style of her male contemporaries” in her poems, Jahan Malik Khatun asserted her connections with manliness.⁶⁰

Dick Davis believes that Jahan Malik Khatun's work was relevant to the powerful Timurid empress Gohar Shad (1376–1457) and influenced other Timurid poetesses, such as Mehri, an intimate of Gohar Shad. Mehri utilized her poems to articulate her discontent with patriarchal norms and unmanly men, notably her forced marriage to a much older court doctor and his lack of virility.⁶¹ According to Didem Havlioğlu, early modern elite women such as the Ottoman poet Mihri Khatun wrote poems to showcase how “manliness does not inherently belong to the male gender; [...] it happened to be historically claimed by men [...] based on [Mihri Khatun's] skills as a poet, [manliness] can also legitimately belong to a woman.”⁶² As demonstrated throughout this paper Gulbadan's *Humayunnamah* shares a similar sentiment.

The interconnectedness evident in the poems of medieval and early modern elite Persianate women writers reveals how they enabled and influenced each other to use

⁵⁴ Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 42.

⁵⁵ Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 58.

⁵⁶ M. A. Scherer, “Woman to Woman: Annette, the Princess, and the Bibi,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6, no. 2 (1996): 201; Sabiha Huq, *The Mughal Aviary: Women's Writings in Pre-Modern India*, Series in Literary Studies (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022), xv.

⁵⁷ Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 90.

⁵⁸ Fatima Mernissi and Mary Jo Lakeland, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 100.

⁵⁹ Davis, *The Mirror of My Heart*, 113–115.

⁶⁰ Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, “Odes of a Poet-Princess: The Ghazals of Jahān-Malik Khātūn,” *Iran* 43 (2005): 177–178.

⁶¹ Davis, *The Mirror of My Heart*, 138.

⁶² Didem Z. Havlioğlu and Mihri Hatun, *Mihri Hatun: Performance, Gender-Bending, and Subversion in Ottoman Intellectual History*, 1st ed., Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 116–117.

literature to challenge traditional gender norms; a literate woman can also be an ideal man, a *javānmard*. Gulbadan was able to contribute to this intellectual tradition of female *javānmardī* and expand these women's legacy by writing poems and creating a mirror for princesses showing both her and her female counterparts' embodiment of *javānmardī*. In doing so, she exemplifies knowing how to adhere to and expand on male-dominated modes of writing. This is further seen in how the *Humayunnamah* teaches female readers not only the traditional virtues of bravery, intelligence, kindness, hospitality and martial prowess, but also – given the flexible nature of *javānmardī* – other “unconventional” virtues ranging from “textual trickery,” “glamor politics,” gender-bending, and coquetry. These are the lessons I delve into further in the following sections.

Textual trickery

In the Mughal context, the ability to not only imitate but surpass a master's model, by incorporating innovations, was considered a hallmark of accomplishment (*adab*).⁶³ Moreover, being adept at trickery is a virtue very much associated with *javānmardī*. Through showcasing her ability to incorporate innovations, or what I call “textual tricks” ranging from rule-breaking, intimate language, re-writing, diversions, selective memory, and paradoxically, adherence to literary norms in the *Humayunnamah*, Gulbadan asserts her own identity as an accomplished *javānmard*. Indeed, Gulbadan's textual trickery is seen in the opening paragraph of the *Humayunnamah*:

A royal order was issued to me saying “Write down whatever you know of the lives of Firdaws Makani and his Majesty Jannat-Ashyani.” When his Majesty Firdaws Makani departed this mortal world for the realm of eternity, this poor one was eight years old, and events may not have remained so well in my memory. In obedience to the royal order, however, what I heard and remembered will be written. In the first part of this story, the story of his Holiness the king, my dear father will be written. Although the events are recorded in the memoirs of his royal Highness my dear father nevertheless, with blessing and fortune, I will write them down here.⁶⁴

Typically, mirror for princes texts begin with a “profession of humility” and “insistence in the author's lack of relevant qualifications.”⁶⁵ Gulbadan seemingly adheres to these norms, describing herself as a “humble servant” (*ḥaqīr*) obeying Akbar's “royal command” (*ḥukm*) to craft the *Humayunnamah*. This is further seen in her highlighting of her own limitations, as she mentions that she was merely eight years old when her father passed away and her recollection of events might thus be somewhat vague. Rebecca Gould, in her study of Gulbadan, describes her as “alienated from formal historiographical conventions.”⁶⁶ However, a detailed examination of Gulbadan's self-effacing rhetoric, in addition to her assertion that she carried out imitative writing based on her father's work, reveals that not only was she familiar with formal historiographical conventions, but she was also adept at utilizing them to assert herself as part of the elite literati. In her opening lines, Gulbadan teaches female readers the need to be well-versed in literary conventions to legitimize their work.

⁶³ Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630*, Studies in Persian Cultural History, vol. 15 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 77–84. See also, Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Bibliotheca Iranica, no. 5 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1998); Quinn, *Persian Historiography across Empires*, 3–5.

⁶⁴ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 1; trans. 1, translation slightly modified.

⁶⁵ Louise Marlow, “Advice and Advice Literature,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* (Brill, 2007), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/advice-and-advice-literature-COM_0026.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Gould, “How Gulbadan Remembered: The ‘Book of Humāyūn’ as an Act of Representation,” *Early Modern Women* 6 (2011): 187–93.

Gulbadan's textual trickery is seen, however, in how she immediately subverts these conventions in the next sentence, intimately calling Babur "His Royal Highness My Dear Father" (*ḥazrat-i pādshāh-i bābām*), something she continues to do throughout the entire text.⁶⁷ Addressing a king such as Babur in such an intimate manner is something no official chronicler could do. Gulbadan's use of intimacy, especially in relation to her father, who was also famous for his use of intimacy in the *Baburnamah*, can be interpreted as a strategic move to assert how this "uncensored" text possesses greater authority than the works of the non-kin male chroniclers who documented Humayun's life, cementing her status as a reliable and trustworthy narrator.⁶⁸ In just a few opening sentences, Gulbadan performs a rhetorical power stemming from her knowledge of literary conventions and ability to push their boundaries without facing any repercussions, something female readers could emulate.

Gulbadan becomes bolder in her textual trickery in her rewriting of memories from her father's *Baburnamah*. In her rewrite, she recenters women as the superior *javānmards*, driving the inception of the Mughal empire. In the *Baburnamah*, for instance, when recounting his loss of Samarkand to Uzbek leader Muhammad Shaybani Khan (1451–1510), Babur depicts the event in the following manner:

The second time I took Samarkand, although I had suffered a defeat at Sar-i-Pul, I held the fortress for five months. The Padeshahs and Begs from the surrounding territories gave me no aid or assistance whatsoever. Despondent, I gave up and left. During that interregnum, Khanzada Begum fell captive to Muhammad Shaybani Khan.⁶⁹

In this, Babur downplays the role of his sister, Khanzada Begum, stating only that she "fell captive" to his enemy, Muhammad Shaybani Khan (1451–1510). While Gulbadan's recollection of the Samarkand incident shares similarities with her father's account, she, in contrast, subtly places her aunt at the center of the story:

[The last time] he was besieged (in Samarkand) for six months. The likes of Sultan-Husayn Mirza "Bayqara," his uncle, was in Khurasan; he was unhelpful. Sultan-Mahmud Khan, who was his maternal uncle, was in Kashgar, and he was unhelpful also. When aid or assistance was forthcoming from any quarter, he despaired. At such a time Shahi Beg Khan had sent a message saying, "If you would marry your sister Khanzada Begum to me, there will be peace and unity between us and you, and a relationship of unity will be established. Finally, he was forced. He married Khanzada Begum to the khan and departed with two hundred persons on foot, shepherds' cloaks over their shoulders, rough boots on their feet, and clubs in their hands. Under such conditions, unarmed, they put their trust in God and set out for Badakshan and Kabul."⁷⁰

Due to her Timurid-Chaghatay heritage, Khanzada was highly valued by Uzbek leaders such as Muhammad Shaybani Khan, as she could bolster their Jochid ancestry and thus legitimize their rule of the Timurid-Chaghatayid territories of Mawarannahr and Mughulistan.⁷¹ In her narrative, Gulbadan highlights Khanzada Begum's selflessness and sacrifice, seen in how she is married off, without a say, to an enemy, as the main reason why Babur could

⁶⁷ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 1; trans. 1, translation slightly modified. For more information on this quote, see Leong, "If Only That Pitiless Blade Had Pierced My Own Heart and Eyes': Mughal Royal Women's Grief as a Form of Political Rhetoric," 692.

⁶⁸ Other chroniclers of Babur's life included the Timurid historian Khvandamir, who wrote the *Qanun-i Humāyūni* (1534); Jawhar Aftabchi, who wrote the *Tazkirat al-vaq'at* (1587); and Bayazid Bayat, who wrote the *Tarikh-i Humāyūn* (1590).

⁶⁹ Babur and W. M. Thackston, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, Modern Library pbk. ed (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 11.

⁷⁰ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 1–2; trans. 1–2, translation slightly modified.

⁷¹ Balalinbar, *Imperial Identity*, 162.

escape Samarkand and acquire the manpower and weaponry to build his empire in South Asia. The absence of Khanzada Begum's own thoughts and voice on her forced marriage in Gulbadan's account can be seen as a way to highlight Khanzada's unquestioning self-sacrifice and unthinking loyalty to her beloved brother in times of war – virtues that make one a *javānmard*.⁷²

Regarding imitative writing, Quinn has highlighted the importance of carefully studying the way a writer added a single word, short phrase, or even significant passages to their model, as such may reveal the author's political agenda.⁷³ By describing Babur's uncles as unhelpful – or more precisely, in her father's own words, “did not send help” (*kumak nafiristādand*) – and juxtaposing their action with Khanzada's sacrifice, Gulbadan implicitly casts elite Mughal women as manlier exemplars of *javānmardī* than men. By repositioning Khanzada as the pivotal figure in the Mughal empire's establishment, Gulbadan disrupts the dominant narrative of early Mughal history described by her father. Moreover, she reminds readers that Mughal women's power did not merely lie in their lineage. Of greater importance was their ability to embody *javānmardī* virtues better than men, exemplified in the depth of Khanzada's loyalty and self-sacrifice for the cause of Babur's empire-building.

To further motivate female readers to become *javānmards* like Khanzada, Gulbadan employs the literary trick of diversion in her recollection of Humayun's coronation party, known as the Tilism Feast. Rather than making Humayun the central figure, Gulbadan draws attention to the way Khanzada was celebrated as the co-sovereign at his coronation: “His Majesty the Padeshah and Khanzada Begum sat together on one cushion in front of the throne”.⁷⁴ In doing so, Gulbadan demonstrates how adhering to the principles of *javānmardī* could enable Mughal women to be publicly celebrated as Mughal co-rulers. Humayun eventually bestowed Khanzada with the imperial title “Padishah Begum” (Lady Emperor), to express his gratitude for her enormous sacrifices on behalf of Babur and other members of the royal family.⁷⁵ Furthermore, by textually surrounding Humayun with a long list of the various *begums* present at the coronation party and leaving out the male guests, Gulbadan uses “textual exclusion” to emphasize that kingmaking was a female-led enterprise.⁷⁶ Gulbadan's textual tricks can also be seen as examples guiding women on specific ways to use and break literary conventions in order to distinguish themselves as accomplished *javānmards* capable of contributing to the development of literary traditions, specifically the mirror for princesses genre.⁷⁷

Despite her subtle criticism of Humayun, Akbar's father, in the *Humayunnamah*, her overt promotion of Mughal women's *javānmardī* performance, and their contributions to patriarchal kingship, Akbar's continued reliance on and respect for Gulbadan, both before and after her death, demonstrates the success of her textual trickery in the *Humayunnamah*, as she made it a broadly palatable mirror for princesses text even to a male audience. This is evident not just in how the *Akbarnamah* incorporated parts of the *Humayunnamah* into its narrative, but also in how Akbar entrusted Gulbadan with a pilgrimage to Mecca to consolidate

⁷² In Gulbadan's other memories of Khanzada Begum, she directly quotes Khanzada's words and ideas. For an example, see Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, trans. 44. For more information on how this scene is a good example demonstrating Khanzada's sacrifice for Babur, see Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 130.

⁷³ Quinn, *Persian Historiography across Empires*, 8–14.

⁷⁴ Khanzada Begum was also affectionately called *Ākājānim* by Gulbadan. Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 20; trans. 20.

⁷⁵ Lisa Balabanlilar, “The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (2010): 133.

⁷⁶ For a detailed list of the royal women who sat beside Humayun, see Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 20–21; trans. 20.

⁷⁷ For more information on tricks and *javānmardī*, see Dick Davis, “Women in the Shahnameh: Exotics and Natives, Rebellious Legends, and Dutiful Histories,” in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman, *The New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 75.

his image as a great and blessed Muslim emperor, his bestowal of Bulsar as her land grant, his carrying of her bier after her death, and his making of lavish gifts and good works for her soul's repose.⁷⁸

Political wisdom and rhetorical cunning

In the mirror for princes genre, possessing intelligence is one of the crucial factors to one becoming a *javānmard*. Gulbadan reminds readers that what makes Khanzada a *javānmard*, enjoying kingly treatment, is not just her sacrifice for men, but also her active wisdom. Right until her death, she was traveling around the Mughal domains at the request of several of her nephews, who greatly relied on her to resolve their various conflicts around succession and alliance-building.⁷⁹ By describing how the Mughal royal family perceived Khanzada as possessing insight into “the truth behind the *khutbah*” (*ḥaqīqat-i khutbah*), Gulbadan presents Khanzada's wisdom in such a way as to make her appear divine. The *khutbah*, literally meaning “sermon,” is delivered during Friday prayers and is of “both religious and political significance,” affirming a ruler's legitimate claim to kingship.⁸⁰ In doing so, Gulbadan writes Khanzada into history not merely as a sacrifice to facilitate an alliance between men, but as a *javānmard* possessing the divinely ordained wisdom defining legitimate kingship.

Gould also argues that Gulbadan “is concerned with lives other than her own, and she narrates them to the exclusion of herself.”⁸¹ However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Gulbadan also strategically selects memories that showcase herself as a *javānmard* role model, from whom female readers could glean new ways of being brave, tricky, and intelligent.⁸² One such instance is her recollection of a critical moment, when Kamran captured and attempted to coerce her into supporting his fight against Humayun for the kingship, seeking backing from her husband Khizr-Khwaja Khan:

To me he said, “This is your house. You stay here.”

“Why should I stay here?” I asked. Wherever my mother is, there will I be too!”

In reply to me he said, “Then you write a letter to Khizr-Khwaja Khan and tell him to come join us and to be easy of mind. Just as Mirza Askari and Mirza Hindal are my brothers, he too is my brother, and this is a time when I need his assistance.”

“Khizr-Khwaja Khan doesn't know how to read that he could recognize my writing,” I said in reply to him. “I have never written anything to him. When he is away he writes me through his sons. You can write whatever you want.”

In the end he sent Mahid Sultan and Sher-Ali to summon the khan. Straightaway I said to him, “Your brothers are with Mirza Kamran. I hope you don't think you'll do the same and go to him to join your brothers. Don't imagine you can separate yourself from the emperor!” Thank God, the khan did not go against what I said.⁸³

Gulbadan's bravery is seen in her fearless defiance of her captor, Kamran, despite being his prisoner. Her refusal to comply with his demands, cleverly exploiting her husband's illiteracy (*nīsāvād*), demonstrates to female readers the power of rhetorical cunning and utilizing

⁷⁸ Lal, *Vagabond Princess*, 47–48, 261–262; Gulbadan Begum and Beveridge, *The history of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)*, 77.

⁷⁹ For some examples of how Khanzada Begum helped her nephews, see Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 44; trans. 44.

⁸⁰ Mernissi and Lakeland, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 28.

⁸¹ Gould, “How Gulbadan Remembered,” 188.

⁸² For more information on other instances of Gulbadan promoting herself in the text, see Leong, “‘If Only That Pitiless Blade Had Pierced My Own Heart and Eyes’: Mughal Royal Women's Grief as a Form of Political Rhetoric,” 699–701.

⁸³ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 58–59; trans. 55–56.

men's weaknesses as strategic tools for self-preservation.⁸⁴ This incident underscores the importance of literary skills for women, as Gulbadan's proficiency in writing becomes her shield, making her valuable to Kamran. Furthermore, Gulbadan's ability to influence her husband's decisions in political matters once again highlights the significance of royal women choosing a spouse they could exert control over. Gulbadan's narrative further underscores how the pen can be a weapon, as elite Mughal women are urged to embrace the literacy that will enable them to control their male counterparts and potentially even safeguard their political future.

Masculine honor in royal Mughal women

During Humayun's twenty-six-year reign (1530–1556), Gulbadan and her female counterparts endured various hardships. They were constantly on the run from his enemies, wandering the wastelands of Sindh and Baluchistan, in exile in Iran, and caught amidst his rivalry and wars with his brother Kamran, who also aspired to be king.⁸⁵ Given the number of royal women captured, killed, and dishonored as a result of Humayun's reign, Gulbadan draws on the martially powerful and honorable figure of Haram Begum to instruct elite women how to become *javānmards* capable of safeguarding their honor, especially when their men are unable to do so.

Haram Begum was wedded to Babur's cousin, Sulayman, the governor of Badakhshan. However, other sources claim that Haram Begum was in fact the real ruler of Badakhshan.⁸⁶ Haram Begum was sister-in-law to both Humayun and Kamran, as the latter was married to her sister. Moreover, her lineage traced back to illustrious men such as Timur and Alexander the Great.⁸⁷ Rather than dwelling on her lineage, Gulbadan attributes Haram Begum's greatness to her ability to be an honorable *javānmard*. This is evident in Gulbadan's recounting of Kamran's futile attempt to seduce Haram Begum in an effort to gain her support for his challenge to Humayun's kingship:

While Mirza Kamran was in Kolab, there was a woman named Tarkhan Bika who was a trickster. She persuaded Mirza Kamran, saying, "Make a proclamation of love to Haram Begum which will benefit you." Acting on this weak minded woman's advice, Mirza Kamran sent a letter and a handkerchief to Haram Begum by Begi Agha. She took the letter and handkerchief and placed them in front of Haram Begum, expressing the Mirza's deep desire for her. "Keep this letter and handkerchief," Haram Begum said, "and bring them when the mirzas return." Begi Agha wept and wailed, trying to coax the lady saying, "Mirza Kamran has sent this letter and handkerchief to you. He has been in love with you but you are unchivalrous to him." Haram Begum vexed and with vehemence, immediately sent for Mirza Sulayman and Mirza Ibrahim and said, "Mirza Kamran must think you both are wimpy to think he can send such a letter to me. Do I truly deserve to be written to in this manner? Mirza Kamran is your older brother, and I am to him a younger brother's wife. Send off a letter for me about it and rebuke him. As for this woman, tear her to pieces so that no man can have bad thoughts coming from the evil eye seeking to corrupt the wife of others. How can it be right for anybody to bring such unworthiness to me, a humane woman, and have no fear of me or my son?"⁸⁸

⁸⁴ For more information on stories of female tricksters and their positive effect on female readers, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Reading – And Enjoying – 'Wiles of Women' Stories as a Feminist," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 203–222.

⁸⁵ Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 108.

⁸⁶ See Bayazid Bayat, *Tarikh-i Humayun*, trans. W. M. Thackston, Bibliotheca Iranica, no. 11 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2009), 60.

⁸⁷ Gulbadan Begum and Beveridge, *The history of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)*, 242.

⁸⁸ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 66–67; trans. 61–62, translation slightly modified.

Murūvatī, a term synonymous with *javānmardī*, comes from the Arabic word *mūrūwā* (manliness) and is used to describe a collection of traits that define the honorable man or young man.⁸⁹ Begi Agha's use of the adjective "*bīmurūvatī*" (unchivalrous) in her attempt to persuade Haram Begum to accept Kamran's proposition reveals, through a female Mughal perspective, how manliness was equally associated with female identity.⁹⁰ Haram Begum's bristling response to being called unchivalrous shatters *javānmardī* as a purely male-only ideal, revealing how elite Mughal women – such as herself – demonstrably held themselves to the same ethical code and aspired to be, what she calls, a chivalric, "humane woman" (*zān-i ādamzād*).⁹¹

The word *ādamzād* (humane) is derived from the Persian term *ādami*, which can be translated as "humanity" or even "humanism."⁹² In the Persianate context, this word refers to the upholding of *javānmardī* ethical codes of conduct, especially in the face of evil.⁹³ By calling herself a "humane woman," Haram Begum implies her identity as a *javānmard*. As a mirror for princesses, the *Humayunnamah* offers concrete strategies for female *javānmards* to navigate potential traps. This is seen in the way Haram Begum, to avoid any misunderstandings, tactfully redirected Kamran's tokens of affection, ensuring they were kept with Begi Agha and later passed on to her husband and son upon their return. The grim fate of Begi Agha, the messenger, who is described as being "torn to pieces," warns of the unforgiving consequences awaiting women from lower social backgrounds who partake in ploys seeking to corrupt female members of the Mughal imperial class.⁹⁴ Acts associated with adultery can be seen as the threshold for losing one's *javānmardī* status and be punished by death. This also allows us to see what is not *javānmardī* behavior from Gulbadan's standpoint.

As a result of Kamran's inappropriate behavior towards Haram Begum, her husband and son – Kamran's crucial allies – shifted their allegiance to Humayun, causing Kamran to lose Balkh.⁹⁵ Balkh carried profound importance in Humayun's battle for kingship, primarily due to its strategic position along the Uzbek border. Balkh served as a crucial demonstration of Humayun's capability to be a strong leader reconnecting the Mughals with their Central Asian roots.⁹⁶ Through the figure of Haram Begum, Gulbadan underscores the considerable influence female *javānmards* wielded in shaping military conquests, diplomacy, and the fate of kings.

It is intriguing to note the absence of any consequences Tarkhan Bika may have faced, despite the fact that she was the instigator, planting the idea of seducing Haram Begum in Kamran Mirza's mind. The way Gulbadan calls Tarkhan Bika an "*ayyār*" provides us with a clue.⁹⁷ By associating Tarkhan Bika with this celebrated icon of *javānmardī*, Gulbadan implicitly suggests that her tricks, while unconventional, were deemed virtuous since they enabled Humayun to gain new alliances. The figure of Tarkhan Bika highlights the complex interplay between loyalty, cunning, and the pursuit of power within the Mughal court, shedding light on the acceptance of unconventional tricks, especially the utilization of men, as a means for women from lower social standings to participate in empire-building.⁹⁸

Haram Begum's lament, criticizing her husband and son for being "wimpy" (*nāmardī*) and bringing "unworthiness" (*nālāyiq*) to her, reveals Mughal women's anxiety around their

⁸⁹ Cyrus Ali Zargar, "Virtue and Manliness in Islamic Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, no. 1–2 (2020): 1–2.

⁹⁰ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 67; trans. 62, translation slightly modified.

⁹¹ I have based my translation of "humane woman" on Thackston's translation, which uses the phrase "respectable woman." See. Gulbadan Begum et al., *Three Memoirs of Humayun*, 62.

⁹² Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 6.

⁹³ Rahimi, "Digital Javanmardi," 293–294.

⁹⁴ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 67; trans. 62.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Richard Foltz, "The Mughal Occupation of Balkh 1646–1647," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (1996): 49–61.

⁹⁷ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 66; trans. 61.

⁹⁸ In folktales, it is women, and especially lower class women that make excellent trickster-heroes. See Margaret Mills, "Whose Best Tricks? Makr-i Zan as a Topos in Persian Oral Literature," *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 265.

men's ability to have masculine honor, also known in Persian as *ghayrat*. In the Persianate context, *ghayrat* is a gendered social construct based on a man's sense of honor, possessiveness, and protectiveness of certain female kin.⁹⁹ For one to be considered a *javānmard*, they are expected to have *ghayrat* for their female family members.¹⁰⁰ Gulbadan's recollection of Haram Begum's retaliation against Kamran Mirza provides a new understanding of *ghayrat* as a virtue not solely confined to men:

The emperor sent a message to Haram Begum saying, "Tell our sister-in-law to equip and send the army to Badakshan as quickly as possible." In only a few days, the begum gave several thousand men horses and arms, outfitted and equipped them, and escorted them herself as far as the pass. From there she dispatched them forward while she turned back. The army came and joined the emperor. [...] The emperor's forces were victorious, and Mirza Kamran was defeated.¹⁰¹

The way Haram Begum "outfitted, equipped and escorted [her army]," causing Kamran to be "defeated," is a good example of how some Mughal women utilized their military knowledge to become *javānmards* exemplifying *ghayrat*. In doing so, they could punish men who sought to undermine their honor.¹⁰² Rather than passively waiting for men to avenge them, Gulbadan uses Haram Begum as an example to instruct royal Mughal women to have *ghayrat*, avenge themselves, and develop the martial skills to defend themselves and their male counterparts who lack the same level of *javānmardi*.¹⁰³ One such man was Humayun, who is depicted as relying heavily on Haram Begum to obtain military support, defeat Kamran Mirza, and consolidate his kingship. Haram Begum also reveals women's active contribution to warfare and kingship in the early Mughal context, which continued into the later Mughal period.¹⁰⁴

Female homosociality and cross-dressing

In light of their male counterparts' shortcomings in embodying ideal *javānmardī* virtues, the *Humayunnamah* guides women to redefine gender norms and even embrace female homosociality in becoming ideal *javānmards*, safeguarding themselves and the Mughal empire.¹⁰⁵ This is evident in Gulbadan's description of the cross-dressing female *javānmards*, Shad Begum and Mihrangez Begum, present at the Tilism Feast:

Shad Begum, granddaughter of Sultan Husayn Mirza on her mother's side and the Padeshah's paternal aunt; Mihrangiz Begum, daughter of Muzaffar Mirza and granddaughter of Sultan Husayn Mirza. They loved each other a lot, and wore manly clothes. They were adorned with all kinds of arts like carving thumb rings, polo-playing, archery, and they also played all kinds of musical instruments.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Mostafa Abedinifard, "Persian 'Rashti Jokes': Modern Iran's Palimpsests of Gheyrat-Based Masculinity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 4 (2019): 566.

¹⁰⁰ See footnote 27. Amina Tawasil, "Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman: The Howzevi (Seminarist), the Requisites of Marriage and Islamic Education in Iran," *Hawwa* 13, no. 1 (2015): 119.

¹⁰¹ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 68; trans. 63.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ For more information on Mughal women's participation in military activities, see Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan, Empress of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 116.

¹⁰⁴ For more information on the Central Asian female guards responsible for protecting the king and his harem in the later Mughal period and were highly prized for their skills with weapons, no-nonsense temperament, and strong physical frames, see Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, 89; Gavin Hambly, "Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers: The Case of Bibi Fatima," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly, The New Middle Ages, vol. 6 (London: Macmillan, 1998), 429–467.

¹⁰⁵ For more information on how Mughal women were highly homosocial, just like their male counterparts, see Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 20; trans. 21, translation slightly modified.

According to Balabanlilar, the Tilism Feast was Humayun's way of:

affirming Mughal imperial power and a public display of grandeur but also, and perhaps more importantly, a celebration of dynastic survival. The honored guests at the feast were the descendants of the Central Asian empire builders Timur and Chingis Khan.¹⁰⁷

Owing to their direct lineage to the esteemed late Timurid ruler of Herat, Sultan Husayn Mirza (1438–1506), whom the Mughals held in high regard, both women naturally commanded respect from both Mughal men and women and were among the honored guests at this feast. However, instead of merely listing their names and lineages, as she does with other elite women at the feast, Gulbadan chooses to describe Shad and Mihrangez Begum's attributes and actions in detail. This nuanced portrayal highlights Gulbadan's perception of their power, attributing it to their ability to bend gender norms or, as she eloquently puts it, how they "adorned" (*ārāstah*) themselves with virtues and practices associated with *javānmardī*. Shad and Mihrangez Begum embellished themselves with *javānmardī*-related practices drawn from the domains of sports, fashion, and musical arts.

In the premodern Persianate tradition, polo-playing and archery were known as "chivalric sports" practiced by royalty.¹⁰⁸ Having the ability to carve thumb rings (*zihgir*) worn on the right hand for protection during archery was regarded as an achievement of the "knightly arts."¹⁰⁹ Moreover, women who could play music were seen as embodiments of moral perfection.¹¹⁰ However, Gulbadan reveals that their bravery is what made women *javānmards* stand out, evident in their fearless public display of gender-bending identities, cross-dressing in "manly clothing" (*libās-i mardānah*) and openly displaying their homosocial relationships, as they are described to have "liked each other a lot" (*bisṯār dūst midāshand*).

Javānmardī is strongly associated with male homosocial bonding.¹¹¹ Gulbadan's description of Shad and Mihrangez Begum and their relationship is a good example of the different ways elite Mughal women co-opted various *javānmardī* associations to carry out their desired transgressions, such as publicly showcasing homosocial bonds.¹¹² This is seen in how, despite their perceived gendered transgressions, Shad and Mihrangez Begum are among the honored guests at Humayun's coronation feast. Gulbadan emphasizes Shad and Mihrangez Begum's celebration within the Mughal court by elaborating on their seating arrangement, positioned close to the emperor himself. Gulbadan's memories of Shad and Mihrangez Begum reveal how Mughal kings greatly valued elite Mughal women and permitted the strong homosocial bonds between female *javānmards* of esteemed Central Asian Timurid lineages because they legitimized patriarchal kingship.¹¹³

Chivalrous hospitality for the enemy

Surprisingly, Shah Tahmasb's sister, Shahzadah Sultanum from the rival Safavid empire, is another noteworthy woman Gulbadan elevates in the *Humayunnamah* as an exemplar of *javānmardī*. Gulbadan's decision to put Shahzadah Sultanum's performance of *javānmardī* alongside that of Hamidah provides another window through which to understand female

¹⁰⁷ Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast," 123.

¹⁰⁸ V. G. Lukonin and Anatolii Ivanov, *Persian Art: The Last Treasures* (New York: Parkstone International, 2015), 42.

¹⁰⁹ See footnote 2. Gulbadan Begum and Beveridge, *The history of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)*, 120.

¹¹⁰ Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnūn: Love, Madness and Mystic Longing in Nizāmī's Epic Romance* (Brill, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004492431>, 238–239.

¹¹¹ H. E. Chehabi, "Gender Anxieties In The Iranian Zūrkhānah," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 3 (August 2019): 395–421.

¹¹² It was not just elite women from the Mughal context, but also Safavid elite women who invoked the language of *javānmardī* in their homoerotic and homosocial relationships. See Kathryn Babayan, *The City as Anthology: Eroticism and Urbanity in Early Modern Isfahan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 186.

¹¹³ Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast," 125.

power, tensions, and even bonds in both Safavid and Mughal contexts. Humayun's repeated military failures led his brothers to abandon him. As a result, he had to seek refuge from his rivals in Safavid Iran. Seizing the opportunity, the Safavids exploited Humayun's circumstance and humiliated him to assert their superiority.¹¹⁴ However, Gulbadan notes that Shahzadah Sultanum, who exemplified the core tenets of *javānmardī*, was the exception. Gulbadan reminds readers that it was not simply Shahzadah Sultanum's ability to ride and hunt alongside her brother that made her a *javānmard*.¹¹⁵ In fact, what made Shahzadah Sultanum a *javānmard* was her ability to be "very kind and chivalrous" (*bisyār mihrabānī va murūvvat*) to her rivals, such as the Mughals, and be a good hostess.¹¹⁶ This is seen in her orchestration of a lavish party to make Hamidah Begum feel valued:

One day Shahzada Sultanum invited Hamida Banu Begum to a party. [...] All the shah's relatives, his aunt, sisters, and wives, the wives of all the khans, sultans, and amirs, around a thousand in all, were present, all beautiful and adorned. [...] They spent the whole day enjoying a pleasant outing and gathering. When it was time for food, all the amirs' wives stood to serve, and the shah's wives placed food before Shahzada Sultanum. Also, they were hospitable with gifting at this party – all sorts of gold spun brocade and many more, to Hamida Banu Begum, as was fitting.¹¹⁷

Shahzadah Sultanum's ability to be "hospitable" (*mihmānī*), making her a *javānmard*, is demonstrated in her entertaining of Hamidah through different outings, activities, and most importantly, lavish presents such as "gold-spun brocade" (*parchā-i zarduzī*), a notable and esteemed luxury commodity in Safavid Iran.¹¹⁸ The shiny exterior of Shahzadah Sultanum's party sheds further light on how Safavid women engaged in, what I term, "glamor politics." Gift-giving within the Safavid court was not only a diplomatic activity that created, preserved, and strengthened political relations, it was also a strategy to demonstrate the wealth, position, strength, and *adab* of the giver.¹¹⁹ Here, I seek to show how Safavid women, through gifting luxurious objects and feasting rituals, not only emphasized their connection with Islamic ideals of hospitality and virtue, where "welcoming often requires material wealth or goods to be given away or to be spent on others," but also asserted dominance over female rivals, to intimidate them.¹²⁰

By inviting a "thousand" (*hazār*) elite women to witness Hamidah's plight as a destitute refugee seeking aid, Shahzadah Sultanum orchestrates a powerful spectacle showcasing her own family's superiority. The way the Safavid female guests are described as being "beautiful and adorned" (*zibā va ārstah*) shows how elite women strategically used the conspicuous presence of wealth, luxury, and beauty to reinforce the vast disparity between Hamidah's current state and the opulent world of the Safavid court. The act of being served food ahead of the amirs' wives also communicates Shahzadah Sultanum's superior status in the court hierarchy to Hamidah.¹²¹ Gulbadan's decision to include this event in detail within

¹¹⁴ For detailed information on the Safavids' humiliation of Humayun, see Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 107.

¹¹⁵ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 50; trans. 48.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 50–51; trans. 48–49, translation slightly modified.

¹¹⁸ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 51; trans. 49, translation slightly modified. For more information on gold brocade, see Willem Floor and Patrick Clawson, "Safavid Iran's Search for Silver and Gold," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 3 (2000): 345–68.

¹¹⁹ For more information on how gifting can be used as a way to make others indebted, see Michael Morony, "Gift Giving in the Iranian Tradition," in *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts*, ed. Linda Komaroff, 1st ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 33–47. Also see Sinem Arcak Casale, *Gifts in the Age of Empire: Ottoman-Safavid Cultural Exchange, 1500–1639* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

¹²⁰ Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 41–42.

¹²¹ For more information on feasting and its political significance in the Safavid context, see Sussan Babaie, "Cookery and Urbanity in Early Modern Isfahan," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 129–53.

the *Humayunnamah* can be seen as a way to emphasize to her female readers the need to learn about and engage in glamor politics.

What solidifies Shahzadah Sultanum's status as a *javānmard* in Gulbadan's eyes, however, is her ability to employ the principles of *ta'āruf* to demonstrate support, humbling herself for the sake of Hamidah's honor and comfort. This is evident in a conversation between Hamidah Begum and Shah Sultanum, Shahzadah Sultanum's aunt, that transpires during the party.

That day Shah Sultanum asked Hamida Banu Begum: "In India do they have such parasols and arches?" "They call Khurasan two sixth[s] of the world," the Begum replied, "and they call India four sixth[s] of the world. Now, what is in the 'two sixths' will certainly be done better in the 'four sixths.'" Shazada Sultanum, the shah's sister, then eloquently spoke in reply to her aunt and in support of Hamida Banu Begum's words, saying "Aunt, it is quite surprising that you would ask such a thing. What is 'two sixths' in comparison to the 'four sixths'? It is obvious that things are better there."¹²²

Mughal and Safavid societies were hierarchical, such that the complex concept of *ta'āruf* heavily guarded social interactions. *Ta'āruf* can be translated as "politeness," specifically the use of "polite language." It is the symbolic social elevation (other-raising) of the addressee and the symbolic lowering of one's self and was used to perform hospitality, generosity, and face-saving in relation to *adab*.¹²³ Shahzadah Sultanum's performance of *ta'āruf* is seen in how she admonishes her aunt for asking such a "surprising" (*'ajā'ib*) question of their guest and replying that it is "obvious" (*zāhir*) that things were better in Mughal India than Safavid Iran.¹²⁴ While *ta'āruf* has often been understood as insincere, Gulbadan shows Shahzadah Sultanum's *ta'āruf* as a kind of genuine "support" (*muqavvi*) for Hamidah, elaborating on how Shahzadah Sultanum "eloquently spoke" (*sukhan*) against her aunt and even denigrated her kingdom's reputation to defend Hamidah's honor. This deliberate focus demonstrates that Gulbadan viewed Shahzadah Sultanum as a genuine *javānmard*, a role model from whom female readers could learn diplomatic skills.¹²⁵

Gulbadan's recollection of Hamidah's reply to Shah Sultanum emphasizes to female readers the importance of being brave *javānmards* by embracing rule-breaking. Upon realizing the underlying implication of Shah Sultanum's inquiry, Hamidah deliberately rejects adhering to the norms of *ta'āruf*, opting instead to provide a straightforward response despite her vulnerable position as a refugee in the Safavid court: "They call Khurasan two sixth[s] of the world [...] and they call India four sixth[s] of the world."¹²⁶ In the premodern Persianate imagination, India was always perceived as a realm of marvels, enchantments, the exotic, and opulence.¹²⁷

By leveraging the stereotype of India as a land of extraordinary phenomena, Hamidah establishes Mughal preeminence to counter Shah Sultanum's politically charged question. As Hamidah continues, "Whatever is found in the 'two-sixths' will undoubtedly be executed

¹²² Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 50–51; trans. 48–49, translation slightly modified. Thackston has noted that there seems to be a mistake, a mix up of names in Gulbadan's account. I have corrected the mistake in the English translation. See footnote 1 in Gulbadan Begum et al., *The Three Memoirs of Humayun*, 49.

¹²³ William O. Beeman, "Ta'ārof: Pragmatic Key to Iranian Social Behavior," in *Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds. Jan-Ola Östman and Jef Verschueren (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2020), 203–224.

¹²⁴ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 51; trans. 49.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* Shahzadah's political ideology becomes evident in her correspondence with Hürrem Sultan, the Ottoman queen. Their letters often emphasized the importance of preserving peaceful relations. See Leslie Penn Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, Studies in Middle Eastern History (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 221.

¹²⁶ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 51; trans. 49.

¹²⁷ Sunil Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 63.

even better in the ‘four-sixths.’”¹²⁸ Hamidah’s departure from the conventions of *ta‘āruḥ*, driven by her commitment to safeguard the honor of the Mughal empire, presents a compelling example of a bold and tricky *javānmard*, but within the normative conventions of hospitality between strangers. Given Humayun’s humiliation by the Safavids and the absence of any documented affirmation from Shahzadah Sultanum regarding Mughal India’s superiority, Gulbadan’s adeptness at “putting words in her enemies’ mouths” becomes apparent. By directly citing Shahzadah Sultanum’s response, Gulbadan seemingly provides impartial validation of Mughal superiority. This can be seen as another textual trick that Gulbadan teaches female readers to employ in rewriting history according to their own agendas.

The imperial politics of love and romance

In Persianate poetic and mirror traditions, being a good lover and behaving fearlessly and courteously, regardless of all the challenges love brings, is what makes one a *javānmard*.¹²⁹ Gulbadan not only continues the Persian literary tradition of depicting strong women in the *Humayunnamah*, but also re-positions them as heroic *javānmard* figures capable of determining the trajectory of their own romances. Through revisiting the love triangle between Hindal, Hamidah, and Humayun, the *Humayunnamah* – as a mirror for princesses – imparts to female readers the need to be active agents fighting for their beloveds while also loving themselves by prioritizing their own aspirations and demands.

Humayun met Hamidah for the first time at Hindal’s residence, where, according to Gulbadan, Hamidah was a regular guest.¹³⁰ This suggests that Hamidah and Hindal, who was Hamidah’s father’s student at the time, may have been involved.¹³¹ Hamidah’s responses to Humayun’s order that she be involved with him instead show her as a *javānmard* capable of asserting herself and protecting her interests – one being her beloved, Hindal. In her first response, she states: “If it was to pay my respects, I was exalted by paying my respects to his Eminence the other day. Why should I come again?”¹³² After Humayun’s persistent demands, she retorts, “To see kings once is lawful; a second time is a breach of propriety. I am not a consort. I shall not come.”¹³³ Hamidah’s responses further show her as a *javānmard* capable of bravery, honesty, and wisdom, as seen in how she uses her knowledge of the “laws” (*jā’iz*) of courtly protocol to maintain her virtue and tactfully reject unwanted advances from men, including the king.

Gulbadan’s inclusion of Hamidah’s responses to Humayun can be seen as serving an additional pedagogical purpose: to educate female readers on how to use tricks, such as *nāz* (often translated as “coquetry”).¹³⁴ One of the most renowned heroines in Persian literature, Shirin from Nizami’s 12th century epic romance *Khusrau and Shirin*, is celebrated for her ability to perform *nāz*. Through being a coquettish figure, Shirin not only intensifies Khusrau’s longing for her but also skillfully deflects his unwelcome advances, thereby preserving her ideals.¹³⁵ Hamidah’s strategy of *nāz* becomes apparent in various instances, including her repeated rejections of Humayun’s request to attend his party and be with him. Another

¹²⁸ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 51; trans. 49.

¹²⁹ Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 300–301. For more information on love and *javānmardī*, see Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), X–XI.

¹³⁰ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 36; trans. 36.

¹³¹ Abraham Eraly, *Emperors of the Peacock Throne: The Saga of the Great Mughals*, Revised ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), 65. Hamidah’s romance with Hindal further reveals the freedom Mughal women enjoyed in pursuing their own romances.

¹³² Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 36–37; trans. 36–37.

¹³³ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 37; trans. 37, translation slightly modified.

¹³⁴ Robert Surieu, *Sarv-é Naz: An Essay on Love and the Representation of Erotic Themes in Ancient Iran*, Unknown Treasures, vol. 6 (Geneva, Paris: Nagel, 1967).

¹³⁵ Paola Orsatti, “Kosrow o Širin,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (London, 2012), <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kosrow-o-sirin>.

evident example of *nāz* is seen in her rejection of Humayun's initial marriage proposal by stating that he is unsuitable, considering that she wants a partner she can exert control over. Simultaneously, she keeps him in anticipation by prolonging the marriage negotiations for forty days.¹³⁶

To entice readers to learn how to use *nāz*, Gulbadan reveals its effectiveness by divulging Humayun's reaction to Hamidah's *nāz*, recalling his willingness to become the submissive partner ready to "accept" (*qabūl*) anything Hamidah and her family wanted. He offered everything ranging from paying any amount of dowry (*ma'āsh*) to making her his official wife, the empress of the Mughal empire, instead of a casual partner.¹³⁷ Gulbadan shows how using tricks, such as *nāz*, strategically could empower female *javānmard*s to assert dominance in the predominantly male-controlled political realm. After Humayun's death, Hamidah would even go on to act as the Mughal empire's de facto ruler when her son, Akbar, was engaged in political and military campaigns.¹³⁸

By contextualizing Gulbadan's *Humayunnamah* within its historical context, literary models, the mirror for princesses genre, and other elite female writers, this paper offers a fresh perspective on the concept of *javānmardī* and related concepts from a female viewpoint, as well as sheds new light on the influential dynamics of female relations within the Mughal court. Given that the *Humayunnamah* was even made into an illustrated manuscript by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan (r. 1592–1666), and the ways other powerful Mughal women – such as Jahanara Begum (1614–1681) and Nur Jahan (1577–1645) – knew of Gulbadan Begum and probably even read the *Humayunnamah*, more studies are needed on how royal Mughal women from the later period put Gulbadan's teachings of *javānmardī* into practice.¹³⁹

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¹³⁶ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayunnama*, 37; trans. 37.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, translation slightly modified.

¹³⁸ Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 30–31, 67.

¹³⁹ Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*, 59. For more information on the connections between the biographies of Gulbadan Begum and Jahanara Begum, see Huq, *The Mughal Aviary*, xvii.

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