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Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi

ZULAYKHA AND YUSUF: WHOSE "BEST STORY"?

Some of the classical commentaries on the sura Yusuf[1] tell us that one day the Prophet Muhammad was reciting Qur$^{\supset}$anic verses for his companions. Bored and weary, they said, "'O Prophet of Allah! What if you told us a story, what if God Almighty would send a sura that did not contain commandments and prohibitions, and that sura would be a story that soothed our hearts?' God, Mighty and Exalted, said, 'I will narrate to you the best story.'"[2]

Indeed, sura Yusuf is one of the most complete and tightly knit chapters in the Qur$^{\supset}$an. It has also spawned a large number of commentaries—sometimes a commentary written about only this chapter.[3] It is referred to in literary and historical texts of various genres, including books of advice, mirrors of princes, and tales of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā$^{\supset}$*). It has inspired erotic/mystical love poetry in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic; it constitutes one of the most narrated popular tales of the oral tradition. It continues to the present day to be a centrally important narrative in Islamic cultures, in particular as it contributes first to the construction of the category "woman," with "guile" viewed as an essential female characteristic, and second to notions of the omnipotence and uncontrollability of a female heterosexual desire that posits men as its objects and as its targets of intrigue.

In the following pages, we examine the story of Yusuf and some of the discussion surrounding it in the Islamic tradition. In particular, we focus on the figure of Zulaykha, as the female protagonist in the story is usually called, and on how her role is interpreted by a variety of commentators and theologians. We will argue that the depiction of female sexuality in each interpretation, as embodied in Zulaykha, is related to the narrative logic of the larger story in that interpretation. The variations, however, are predominantly male-centered. We are therefore skeptical about the possibility of appropriating and reinterpreting the story in its present variations as an emancipatory narrative for female sexual liberation within an Islamic tradition, as some 20th-century critics have attempted to do.

Some important work has already been done on Zulaykha and her significance to the understanding of women's roles in Islamic societies. For example, Denise A. Spellberg has written about the political use to which the figure of Zulaykha was put

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by the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk.[4] Fedwa Malti-Douglas presents a wide-ranging analysis of Zulaykha's place in the construction of "womanly guile" in medieval Arabo-Islamic literature.[5] Finally, Barbara F. Stowasser gives a useful overview of the Arabic interpretations of the Yusuf story.[6] We agree with Stowasser's argument that the study of female figures such as Zulaykha help us to gain insights into how "religious ideas are linked with social reality in mutually affective relationships."[7] We also agree with her conclusion that neither of the two dominant views of Zulaykha—as representative of female guile and as lover—are sufficient to account for the complexity of the sura as it appears in the Qurʾan.[8] Our project concerns how these different views of Zulaykha are put to narrative use in the various genres.

An exhaustive survey of all the Islamic interpretations of the sura is outside the scope of this article. After an overview of the issues that Zulaykha has raised in Islamic literature and history, we present a cross-section of some well-known Arabic and Persian versions and analyses of the tale, beginning with the Qurʾan.[9] Many are by well-known "canonical" authors, but others are iconoclastic or little studied, including a few who have attempted to recast the notion of "guile." (Additional sources are included in the notes.) Our aim is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of Zulaykha's meanings in Islamicate literature, particularly for the understanding of representations of female sexuality.

The construction of the notion of womanly guile upon the foundation of sura 12 begins with the earliest known commentaries on the Qurʾan. These commentaries accomplish a shift from the Qurʾan's emphasis on a test-of-prophethood plot to one more concerned with producing a moral lesson about the dangers of female sexuality and women's guile (and thus the necessity for punishment). They do so by incorporating not only details from Hebrew interpretive traditions, the Midrash,[10] but also by integrating certain important features of another genre of literature: the moral tales about the guile of women (*makr-i zanān* or *kayd al-nisāʾ*), some of which predate biblical tales and may have had Egyptian, Pahlavī, or Indian origins.[11] By such incorporation, the Qurʾanic tale then becomes available for an Islamic grounding of those very stories, with verse 28, "Surely your guile is great" (12:28)[12] now acquiring a new significance and centrality, as testimony of God for the thematic of the tales.

As one of the stories of the prophets, the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha has often been studied in terms of these biblical and Midrashic—and in some instances its possible pre-biblical Egyptian—predecessors.[13] But there are strong textual hints that the narrative expansions in the commentaries—details such as the entrance of the wet-nurse figure into the narrative; Zulaykha's offer to kill her husband and replace him with Yusuf—may in part have become articulated through interconnections with the guile-of-women literature: the stories that existed as popular tales of ethics, in the form of an initial "frame" story within which many stories were told, each with appropriate moral lessons. The best-known example of this genre available in European languages is *One Thousand and One Nights*, the frame story of which is indeed a woman's betrayal of her husband to satisfy her sexual passion, for which all women are to be punished. Less well known are such cycles as *Sandbād-nāmah* and *Tūtī-nāmah.*

That these stories use sura Yusuf for their Islamic grounding is evident. Verse 28, "Surely, your guile is great," is recited within the frame story of *One Thousand and*

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One Nights and appears in story number seventeen of *Sandbād-nāmah.*[14] The question that has remained uninvestigated is whether there have been substantial textual movements in the other direction. Have some of the expanded details of *tafsīr* and *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāᵓ* versions of the sura Yusuf come from the guile-of-women literature? This question is perhaps unanswerable. And as John D. Yohannan has argued, it serves little purpose to try to establish a single common origin for all of the stories.[15] The issue of intertextuality, however, points to a different argument: that the pervasive and multiple lives of the Yusuf and Zulaykha story in so many genres of Islamic literature (in the broadest meaning of that term) do not simply arise from its religious sanction and its Qurᵓanic power. On the contrary, the story draws its attraction in part from its ability to travel between genres, and, in its travels, move from being a story of a prophet, to a story about the guile of women, to a love story, to a moral tale. Through its citation in the Qurᵓan; in the books of commentary, history, mythohistory, and ethics; in the mirrors of princes; in love poetry; and in popular tales, it has come to saturate the cultural construction of gender in Islamic societies.

The intertextuality between the Qurᵓanic and biblical tale and the genre of guile-of-women stories is possible because of their shared concept of female sexuality as an uncontrollable threatening force that men have to be wary of, not seduced by—a force that needs to be strictly controlled to ensure social order and political cohesion in a male-dominated culture. Moreover, this concept is far from absent in more contemporary discussions of the sura Yusuf. For example, the Egyptian intellectual ᶜAbbas Maḥmud al-ᶜAqqad (d. 1964) reads the sura as a parable illustrating the fundamentally negative characteristics of women. The salient feature of this parable for ᶜAqqad is the Qurᵓanic reference to *kayd*, or guile, which he associates with *riyāᵓ* (duplicity), and which he considers the defining attribute of women everywhere.[16]

In an attempt to provide the reader with a more "woman-friendly" approach, ᶜAqqad's contemporary, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, a Tunisian intellectual, has argued that the Yusuf story in both its Qurᵓanic version and later commentaries is a sign of Islam's forgiveness of both men and women for the sin of temptation. Zulaykha's marriage to Yusuf in the commentaries, for instance, he reads as the ultimate expression of Islam's forgiveness of her and as a tacit approval of female sexuality. In Islam, he argues, men and women are "hardly ever condemned when they love to excess."[17] This is, he says, because Zulaykha is recognized as a helpless victim of Yusuf's stunning beauty. In the end, she is forgiven by arriving full circle at his side as his wife. Bouhdiba argues that Islamic women, in particular the feminists among them, may glean from this tale the message that the Islamic God, unlike perhaps his Hebrew and Christian counterpart, is willing in the end to allow a way out for women in the expression of their sexuality, evidenced by a forgiveness and a new beginning for Zulaykha. By extension, Allah is unwilling to condemn women in general to eternal damnation for the crime of seduction, because he recognizes and forgives them their overpowering sexuality.

Alongside the literature and commentary that seeks to draw lessons about womanly guile from the story, there exists also a body of erotic/mystical love poetry in which Zulaykha and Yusuf are both portrayed as beings in search of true mystical love. The trials and difficulties of both are rearticulated as tests for true lovers, and Zulaykha's ultimate union with Yusuf and conversion to the true faith represent the

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triumph of her love. Most famous in this genre is *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, by ᶜAbd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492), which in its illustrated versions has also provided the text for many portrayals of the story in Persian and Indian miniatures as well as in coffee-house wall paintings.[18]

The major variations on the sura Yusuf which are the focus of this essay—Yusuf the prophet tested; Yusuf the man threatened by feminine guile—are all male-centered. Yusuf and Zulaykha as lovers is perhaps less evidently so, although, as we will argue when analyzing Jami's version, a number of important inversions occur at the closure of the story that establish Yusuf as its center. There have, however, been attempts by women to reappropriate Zulaykha and decenter the notion of guile, which may offer new interpretive possibilities.

THE QURʾANIC STORY

The story of Yusuf begins, "We narrate unto thee the best of narratives" (12:3). Yusuf, the son of Yaᶜqub, is one of the chosen, descended from a male lineage that includes Abraham. As a child, he dreams that eleven stars and the sun and moon prostrate themselves before him (12:4); his father tells him, "You shall be chosen by your Lord. He will teach you to interpret visions, and will perfect His blessing upon you and to the House of Yaᶜqub, as He perfected it to your forefathers Abraham and Isaac before you" (12:6). The dream is an omen, the celestial bodies representing his parents (sun and moon) and eleven brothers.

In the course of the heroic tale, Yusuf is repeatedly tested. His first ordeal is a test of his ability to endure hardship without losing faith in his lord. His brothers, jealous of him, drop him into a pit. God assures him that he will be avenged later: "We revealed to him Our will, saying 'You shall tell them of all this when they will not know you'" (12:15). A caravan saves him from the pit, and he is sold to an Egyptian, referred to as al-ᶜAziz,[19] who brings him home, saying to his wife, "Be kind to him. He may prove useful to us, or we may adopt him as our son" (12:21). Al-ᶜAziz's wife attempts to seduce Yusuf, and the women of the town cut their hands with knives at the sight of his beauty.[20] For unclear reasons, he is imprisoned; his endurance is tested yet again. In the end, he is vindicated. He is released from jail, demands that he be exonerated of the accusation of betrayal, and receives a confession of guilt from the wife of al-ᶜAziz. He becomes ruler of Egypt and a prophet. He eventually avenges his brothers and takes care of his elderly father.

The seduction of Yusuf is narrated as part of this series of tests of prophethood. Yusuf is actually tempted: "and he desired her, except that he saw the proof of his Lord" (12:24). As Yusuf flees the scene of temptation, the woman tries to grab him and tears his shirt from behind. Confronted by her husband, she accuses Yusuf of attempted transgression. The torn shirt is suggested, by "one of her people," as a test of truth: had Yusuf attacked her, the shirt should have been torn from the front. Yusuf is vindicated, and the wife is chastised by her husband, not only in her own name, but in the name of all women: "This is but one of your tricks. Surely your guile is great," he says (12:28). The Arabic word used for "your" here is feminine plural. He asks Yusuf not to speak of the incident, and the matter presumably would have rested here had it not been for more women's intrigues. We are told that,

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In the city, women were saying: "Al-ᶜAziz's wife has sought to seduce her servant. She has conceived a passion for him. It is clear that she has gone astray." When she heard of their intrigues, she invited them to a banquet prepared at her house. To each she gave a knife. She then ordered Yusuf to present himself before them. So struck were they by his beauty that they cut their hands with the knives, exclaiming: "God preserve us! This is no mortal, but a gracious angel." "This is he," she said, "on whose account you blamed me. I attempted to seduce him, but he was unyielding. If he declines to obey my orders, he shall be thrown into prison" (12:30–32).

Yusuf asks for help, "'Lord,' said Yusuf, 'sooner would I go to prison than give in to their advances. Shield me from their guile, or I shall yield to them and lapse into folly.' His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guiles from him" (12:33–34). Again in this verse, "their"—as in "their" advances and "their" guile—is feminine plural. However, Yusuf is sent to prison: "Yet, for all the evidence they had seen, they thought it right to jail him for a time" (12:35).

The scene in which Yusuf appears before the women of the town deserves some attention. Unlike much of sura 12, it has no parallel in Genesis,[21] though its origin may be a Hebrew Midrashic source transmitted to the Arabs through Jews from Yemen.[22] The simultaneous cutting of hands, triggered by the sight of Yusuf's beauty, is a dramatic image.[23] Later commentaries have interpreted it as a scene of collective menstruation and a display of female sexuality.[24] What in the text has lent itself to this overwhelming popular interpretation? In fact, it is Yusuf's reaction to the cutting of hands, his pleading to the Lord to shield him (12:33)—using exactly the same word as was used in the earlier seduction scene, when he had been approached by al-ᶜAziz's wife and the Lord had shielded him (12:23)—that defines the women's bleeding as a sign of sexual threat. His words thus transform the scene from one of collective empathy by the women of the town for Zulaykha into a scene of collective seduction. This interpretation and the consequent association of female heterosexual desire with danger and guile become cemented more firmly and explicitly in later commentaries, as we shall see.

When finally through his power of interpreting the dream of the king (*malik*) Yusuf is ordered released, he asks for clearance of his name. He tells the king's envoy, "God back to your master and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My master knows their guile" (12:50). When asked by the king, "What made you attempt to seduce Yusuf?" the women reply that, "We know no evil of him" (12:51). The king's chastisement of the women also confirms that the previous scene of cutting of hands stood for seduction. At this point, the wife of al-ᶜAziz confesses, "Now the truth must come to light. . . . It was I who attempted to seduce him. He has told the truth" (12:51). Yusuf displays prophetic truthfulness and humility, admitting that he was also tempted. He thanks the Lord for his assistance, strongly implying that, left to his own, he would have given in (12:52).

In the Qurᵓan, therefore, the episode of Yusuf's temptation, rejection, imprisonment, and vindication is above all a story of a future prophet who is tested by God and who passes the test, paving the way for his eventual greatness. Although female seductive sexuality, woman as teaser and tester, is at the center of this plot, this test is one among many that Yusuf faces and passes throughout the story. In other words, the larger message of the story is Yusuf's victorious emergence. The ambiguity of

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the Qur᾽anic text vis-à-vis the woman's role and responsibility is linked to the narrative irrelevancy of the matter.

YUSUF AND ZULAYKHA IN THE COMMENTARIES

From the Abbasid period, when Qur᾽anic commentators became concerned with interpretation of the Qur᾽an to produce moral guidelines for a growing community of Muslims, this ambiguity in the Qur᾽an is removed by treating the woman, known in the earlier commentaries as Raᶜil and later as Zulaykha, not simply as a seductress, but also as a scheming and vengeful woman.[25] The commentaries turn the story, as a whole and verse by verse, into a moralizing narrative. Once the story is no longer simply plotted around the power of female sexuality, but becomes an exemplary moral tale about the threat of female sexuality, then a judgment on the woman's behavior becomes an integral part of the narrative. She is subjected to severe punishment; later in the story, she repents, converts into a faithful believer, is saved, and is rewarded with marriage to Yusuf and the birth of children.

Islamic exegesis, *tafsīr*, probably dates from the time the Qur᾽an was actually recorded, in the mid-7th century. The *tafsīr* by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), probably written around the turn of the 10th century, is the earliest available to us in its entirety.[26] Like most commentators, Tabari breaks the Qur᾽an into its component chapters and verses and, after each verse, asks questions that in his view a reasonable reader would ask or that previous commentators have raised. He then answers them by assembling the answers of other authorities. Tabari's importance lies in the unique combination of his thoroughness and the early date of the work.

Sometimes, in the interest of explaining a particularly interesting or difficult text, commentators including Tabari would add so much material to the story in the process of verse-by-verse explication that they would create a new episode—a process that Kugel calls "narrative expansion."[27] If sheer volume of explanation is any indication of importance, then Zulaykha indeed assumes a greater importance in Tabari's *tafsīr* than she has in the Qur᾽an.[28] In the Qur᾽an, the verses in the sura Yusuf that concern Zulaykha number sixteen, or 14 percent of the sura. In Tabari's *tafsīr*, more than one-fifth of the commentary on the sura (23% measured in pages) consists of commentary on those sixteen verses. Despite the increased attention that Zulaykha receives, the focus in Tabari is still on Yusuf. Like the Qur᾽an, Tabari continues to call her "the wife of al-ᶜAziz" throughout his commentary.[29] If he does not name her, however, he fills in her description. Unlike in the Qur᾽anic story, in Tabari's *tafsīr* she has beauty and possessions (p. 34, para. 19014). The presence of these attributes becomes narratively expedient for explaining the young Yusuf's possible desire for her.

In addition, her feelings about Yusuf are more carefully described. For example, the verse, "Now the woman, in whose house he was, attempted to seduce him" (12:23), is interpreted as "she loved him," or "she wanted him" (p. 25, para. 18965, *aḥabbathu*). She is also a more articulate voice. In the Qur᾽an, the only conversation with which she attempts to entice him consists of the word "Come." In the *tafsīr*, Tabari supplies a more lengthy conversation, in which she tries to win Yusuf with flattery. He responds with proper prophetlike dourness:

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She said to him: O Yusuf, how beautiful your hair is!
He said: It will be the first thing on my body to fall out.
She said: O Yusuf, how beautiful is your face!
He said: It belongs to the dust, which will consume it. (pp. 33–34, para. 19013)[30]

Tabari also reports that, depending on the regional pronunciations and vowelling, her command, "Come!" in the Qur^ɔan can also connote, "make love to me" (p. 30, para. 18998). Finally, the suggestion that her husband "did not approach women" (p. 19) places her desire for Yusuf in the context of a beautiful woman frustrated by her own husband's lack of attention, a victim of unfulfilled sexual desire.[31]

When Yusuf protests, the Qur^ɔan says that he says, "I seek refuge with Allah; surely my lord blessed me with my shelter" (12:23). Who is "my Lord"? Tabari lists a variety of experts who say that "my lord" refers to Yusuf's master, al-^cAziz, Zulaykha's husband. Although "shelter" (*mathwā*) has been variously translated as "blessing" (Khan), "provision" (Pickthall), and "kindness" (Dawood), Tabari's sources use the fact that it literally means "dwelling" as a way of supporting their contention that Yusuf is referring to the master in whose house he resides. The distinction is important. Is Yusuf's refusal motivated by a religious concern (rejection of fornication, *zinā*^ɔ), or is it a sign of his loyalty to the master, who bought him and treated him as a son? Is he fearful of God or of al-^cAziz? Both interpretations share the theme of female seduction threatening the homosocial bond between two males: in the first, woman coming between Yusuf and his male God; in the second, between him and his male master.[32]

The greatest amount of commentary in this entire collection of verses, until the group of women of the town come to visit, has to do with the verse that says, "she desired him, and he desired her, except that he saw the proof of his Lord" (12:24). Tabari begins by questioning the word "h/m/m" which is usually translated in this passage as "desire." How did she show her desire, and, much more problematic, to what extent did Yusuf desire her?

Several of the learned cited by Tabari say that he "loosened his trousers" (p. 34, para. 19013; p. 35, para. 19015 and para. 19016) or that he "loosened his clothes" (p. 35, para. 19019); that "he loosened her clothes" (p. 36, para. 19020); that "he removed his clothes" (p. 36, para. 19021; p. 37, para. 19026); that "he undid his waistband" (p. 37, para. 19030); that "he removed his clothes as far as his buttocks" (p. 36, para. 19024); that "he sat between her legs" (p. 37, para. 19026); that he sat as a man by his wife (p. 36, para. 19025); and that he sat in the position of a circumciser (p. 25, para. 19015; p. 27, para. 19028). Dwelling on the logistics in such detail and repeating some stories several times highlights their importance to the scene. More important, it also builds a sense of suspense so that as the commentary continues, the number of testimonials to Yusuf's compromising position grows until the reader is left with no doubt that Yusuf was indeed tempted.

Having put Yusuf in a compromising position, Tabari then goes on to the next question: "How is it permitted that Yusuf is described like this, when he is a prophet of Allah?" (p. 37).[33] The learned differ on this question, Tabari reports. Some say that it is part of God's plan to instill fear in His prophets (p. 38). Others say that it allows God to forgive them, showing that they are objects of His blessing (p. 38).

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Third, God may want to make the prophets examples to the people, so people know that they may ask mercy of God and not to despair of His forgiveness of them if they repent (p. 38). Other commentators say that "desire" means something different for him and for her. She desired him sexually, but he only desired to show his hatred of her (p. 38). Still another interpretation is that he did not desire her and that the proof of this is in the phrase beginning with the word "except" (p. 38). That is, the sentence might read, "He would have desired her except that he saw the proof of his Lord."[34] This interpretation, despite Tabari's criticism of it—that it doesn't sound natural to an Arab ear (p. 39)—is common and survives in English translations of the verse. For example, Pickthall translates, "He himself would have succumbed to her had he not seen a sign from his Lord" (p. 237), an interpretation that actually erases any mention of his desire at all.[35]

According to the Qur^can, Yusuf stopped because he saw "the proof of his lord." What was this proof? In the first category of interpretations, the proof is a "call," a voice from another world telling Yusuf not to commit fornication (p. 39, para. 19033). Sometimes this call comes from an indeterminate source; sometimes it is the voice of his father, Ya^cqub. The voice tells him that if he persists, he will be like a bird that has lost its feathers and cannot fly (p. 40, para. 19034), which could possibly be interpreted as a symbolic threat that he will lose his sexual prowess if he uses it in the wrong circumstances. In two places, the authorities say that all of the sons of Ya^cqub had twelve sons themselves, except Yusuf, who had eleven (p. 43, para. 19052). Could this have been a punishment for an unwarranted desire or a long-term consequence of an unsatisfied desire? Is reduced fertility or sexual desire a result of the reining in of male heterosexual desire, yet another evil consequence of women's seductive sexuality for which men suffer?

Other interpretations suggest that the sign was his father's image (p. 42, para. 19043) appearing before him, biting his fingers, beating his breast, calling to him "Yusuf! Yusuf!" or calling him a "fool" (p. 45, para. 19069) and an "adulterer," which made Yusuf feel ashamed (p. 45, para. 19071). All of these pleas from his father cause the loss of desire.

Finally, some interpretations hold the proof to be the appearance of verses from the Qur^can on the wall (p. 47, para. 19084), such as, "You shall not commit adultery" (17:32).

The phrase "proof of his lord" also raises the question, "Which lord?" The most common interpretation, because of the "sign," is that the lord is God. Nevertheless, there are a few authorities who say that "his lord" may again refer to al-^cAziz. Ibn Ishaq, who can always be counted on to provide the most colorful interpretations, says that Yusuf actually saw al-^cAziz, not just a vision of him, standing in front of the door, at which point he fled, with Zulaykha in pursuit (p. 50). Tabari seems uncomfortable with this interpretation, preferring Yusuf's primary loyalty to be to God. What these interpretations share is again the figure of male authority—the father, the master, or the Lord—neutralizing the disruptive effect of female seduction and bringing Yusuf back into the male homosocial fold.

When in the Qur^can Yusuf tries to leave Zulaykha and she tears his shirt, someone, a "witness" from "among her people," says, "If his shirt was torn from the front, she is speaking the truth and he is among the liars; if his shirt was torn from

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the back, she is lying and he is among the truthful" (12:26–27). Tabari raises the question of who this witness from "among her people" could be. His first candidate is a baby, in support of which he cites a hadith about four speaking babies, including Jesus (pp. 53–54, para. 19099). In doing so, Tabari recalls another story in the Qurʾan—namely, the one in which the baby Jesus speaks out to defend his mother against charges of sexual license by the community. The analogy is not accidental—in the case of Jesus, the miracle of a baby speaking, particularly a prophet, gives validity to its words, which affirms Maryam's virginity and innocence. Here Tabari implicitly reminds the reader that on another occasion when a baby spoke, it was to vindicate someone (Maryam), who was, like Yusuf, falsely accused of sexual impropriety—someone not only innocent but chosen and blessed by God.

Although we see an expanded role for Zulaykha in Tabari's commentary, this is still clearly a story about a prophet, not about a woman. The exemplary message of the story is still the strength and humility of a prophet tested by God. The woman enters the narrative as a figure of temptation and exits at the close of that episode. It is in the later commentaries that the story ceases to be the story of Yusuf and becomes the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha. Not only are new details added that give Zulaykha a more active and willful presence, but, more important, the addition of punishment brings into the narrative a moral dimension: uncontrolled female heterosexual desire, combined with feminine guile, has caused years of suffering for a prophet; the woman must therefore be punished. The commentary of Baydawi (d. 1286?) is one of those that incorporates this theme. Baydawi adds not only punishment but redemption through Zulaykha's conversion to the faith. Only then is she rewarded with marriage to Yusuf and the birth of two sons by him.[36] This ending is also found in Zamakhshari's *tafsīr* and in Tabari's *Tārīkh*, discussed later.[37] The message could not be clearer: female sexual desire is a potential source of danger to men; it will cause them to sin, because it will come between them and God. It must, therefore, be punished. Only when satisfied within the bonds of marriage is female sexual desire redeemable and, indeed, rewarded, bringing happiness and sons to men. What more could a good woman want?

HISTORIES AND STORIES OF PROPHETS

In other Islamic literature, such as sacred histories and biographies and, particularly, stories of the prophets, the rules of textual authority are not as rigorous as in the *tafsīr* and hadith. It is here therefore that writers have more freely become storytellers, and it is from these versions that storytellers (*naqqāls*) draw their tales. It is also through these stories that sacred history, biography, and chronology seeped into moral exemplary tales, love stories, and Sufi mystical literature and became intertextualized with pre-Islamic legendary tales.[38]

Two examples of these works are Tabari's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk* (History of the Prophets and Kings), a history of the world from the beginning of time to Tabari's own day, and the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Stories of the Prophets) by Kisaʾi, about whom little is known.[39] The *Tārīkh* provides an interesting comparison to Tabari's *tafsīr*; in the former, Tabari retells the stories of the prophets, but without methodological constraints; he plays with the details more liberally. The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*

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exist in many editions and are considered to have been relatively widely known. For this reason, they constitute "sources of great value for . . . investigations of the popular religious life of the Islamic world."[40] The story of Yusuf and Zulaykha in this literature, as well as in the historical genre, becomes elaborated with significant variations and is fleshed out as a fully narrated drama.

To emphasize the trials of Yusuf, for instance, the trials are portrayed as much more onerous. In Tabari's *Tārīkh* the brothers do not simply put him in a well; they first beat him, then lower him halfway and drop him the rest of the way. Furthermore, they consider sending a rock down after him to smash him.[41] It is also reported that they are the ones who sell him, not a traveler. The brothers, then, have evolved into more evil characters. The corresponding narrative in Kisaʾi includes Yusuf being slapped and refused water before being dropped into the well; when dropped, he is saved from death only when Gabriel intervenes to catch him.[42]

The woman in Tabari's *Tārīkh* is named Raʿil. In the Kisaʾi narrative and many others, the wife of al-ʿAziz is named Zulaykha. Whereas Yusuf's goodness and gifts are foretold in a long string of omens and dreams at the beginning of the story, Zulaykha in contrast becomes a more cruel and evil character. She also acquires further agency by instigating Yusuf's purchase in the first place. Having heard about (or seen) his beauty, "Zuleikha sent word to her husband, Potipher, saying, 'Buy him whatever the price, and let nothing deter you!' So he bought Joseph for a price beyond reckoning."[43]

In some of the later narratives, Zulaykha actually looks after the young boy for seven years before making any advances—thus bringing her closer to the theme of "lustful stepmother."[44] A new figure is also introduced: an old wise woman, in some versions referred to as Zulaykha's wet nurse.[45] Passionately in love with Yusuf, Zulaykha asks the wet nurse for advice. She is the one who tells Zulaykha to approach him. Alternatively, she instructs Zulaykha to build a most beautiful palace and decorate the walls and the ceilings with painted mirrors, which show Yusuf and Zulaykha in various intimate poses, and invite Yusuf to these chambers.[46] In another version, Zulaykha turns to her mother, who is said to be queen of Yemen, and her brothers for help. Her mother sends her loads of gold and famous master artists to help in the construction of the palace.[47]

In Kisaʾi's narrative, when Yusuf refuses Zulaykha's demand, she screams and threatens that she will commit suicide: "'If you do not do as I wish,' she screamed, 'I shall kill myself this very instant, and you will be put to death on my account!' and she put her hand on a knife as if to kill herself (but it was just a ruse on her part to trick Joseph)."[48]

Yusuf's desire for Zulaykha is thus replaced by his fear that if he does not respond to her sexual demand, she will make good on a threat to kill herself. To reinforce Yusuf's total innocence, it is now Zulaykha who, after Yusuf snatches the knife from her hand, throws herself upon him and unties "seven of the knots in his trousers, one after the other."[49] Yusuf's positive response to Zulaykha's advances—inscribed in Tabari's commentary as natural and normal, if misplaced—by the 12th/13th-century Kisaʾi has become cruel psychological warfare on Zulaykha's part, with Yusuf a victim and a hero. In other versions, she tries to seduce him by offering to kill her husband and make him the ruler of the land—an offer that Yusuf rejects in anger.[50]

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The "sign" that Yusuf saw from his lord and that prevented him from succumbing to the woman's temptation is similar to *tafsīr* versions. As far as Yusuf's imprisonment is concerned—a problematic issue in the Qur᾽an, because he is sent to jail *after* proof of his innocence—Tabari explains in the *Tārīkh* that Potiphar, despite the evidence of the shirt, was disgusted with himself for letting Yusuf go free, and that he imprisoned Yusuf to save his wife's face.[51] In Kisa᾽i, Zulaykha has him imprisoned because of his impertinence in telling her before her friends that he would rather go to prison than give in to their demands, and her husband simply goes along with her. Finally, in an important omission, although Zulaykha finally tells the king of her evil and Yusuf's honesty, there is no mention in Kisa᾽i of the Qur᾽anic verse in which Yusuf, too, admits some culpability in being tempted.[52]

In some of the later versions, Zulaykha and women of the town share responsibility for sending Yusuf to prison. For instance, in a 10th-century Persian rendition of Tabari's commentary, it is the women in their collectivity who first ask Yusuf why he refused to satisfy Zulaykha's request and, upon hearing his reason (that he would not betray his master), tell Zulaykha that she has no other recourse but to have him put in jail. It is upon this consensus of women—of womankind—that she asks her husband to put him in jail.[53] In the Qur᾽an, as has been shown, Zulaykha is unnamed. It is this unnamedness that allows the interpretation of the Qur᾽anic verse to shift from the narration of "*one* woman's guile" to the condemnation of the "guile of women" in general. What the Qur᾽anic narrative accomplishes through the unnaming of the woman, projecting her onto a general female type, the later commentaries, stories, and histories accomplish by inserting an actual episode of collective female guile. An episode that in its Qur᾽anic version could be read as a proof of Yusuf's beauty, a tale that could justify Zulaykha's passionate love for him and bring the gossiping women into a state of solidarity with Zulaykha, is thus turned into grounds for the condemnation of womankind.

In some versions, this is reinforced through a preliminary scene of collective seduction. Upon hearing Yusuf reiterate his refusal to obey Zulaykha, the women suggest that if he does not take to her, he can have any one of them, because they are all a thousand times more infatuated with him than is Zulaykha.[54] He repeats his adamant refusal; the women threaten him with prison, at which time he states his preference for prison over yielding to their temptation. It is at this point that they recommend to Zulaykha that she have him imprisoned. Thus, all women become implicated in his seduction and imprisonment, and "Your guile is great, indeed" becomes meaningful yet again in its plural feminine form.

The uncontrollability of female sexual desire is further reinforced in the later narratives by the stories of collective menstruation of women: in one version, Zulaykha selects forty women of Egypt to come to her banquet. Upon setting eyes on Yusuf, they cut their hands and bleed. This bleeding is, in the commentary following it, linked to spontaneous menstruation of women when they are overwhelmed with lust.[55] In another, a young girl comes of age and menstruates, thus unexpectedly bloodying her garment, whereupon Gabriel guides the other women to cut their hands to hide the shame of the chaste young girl.[56]

Zulaykha is punished and then redeemed by Kisa᾽i and other narrators. During the seven lean years, she is forced to sell all of her possessions and eventually becomes

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one of Yusuf's slaves, from which state she begs his mercy. He agrees to marry her, and God restores her beauty and youth.[57] In Nayshaburi's 11th-century *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, after her affirmation of Yusuf's innocence upon his departure from jail, Zulaykha is divorced by al-ʿAziz. She weeps for seventeen years out of love for Yusuf and becomes blind from weeping, "like Yusuf's father." She loses her fortune—spending it on whoever will bring her any news of Yusuf. She becomes old and loses her beauty; all her kin abandon her.[58] In other versions, her period of suffering for Yusuf is extended to forty years, during which she turns away from her idol and becomes a believer in Yusuf's God. Upon meeting Yusuf, the first thing she does is inform him of her conversion.[59]

The scene in which Zulaykha and Yusuf meet again in an inverted position of power and wealth has provided many commentators with an occasion to expand on the nature of Zulaykha's love for Yusuf and on Yusuf's prophetic powers. She meets him after she has been reduced to a pauper and he has become wealthy and powerful. They meet on the street, where he is passing with his attendants and soldiers, not within the walls of her palace, where she controlled the space and could bolt the doors. She is blind; he is sighted. When she hears that Yusuf has gone out hunting,

> Zulaykha asked to be taken to his way, poor, weak, blind and humbled. . . . When Yusuf came close by, Zulaykha was told. Like a begger she stood on a height and said, "Know that whoever has patience and does not commit treason, even if he be a slave he becomes a king. And if he were king and not patient and went after passion and desire, he would lose kingship and become a slave."
>
> When Yusuf heard Zulaykha's voice, he lost consciousness fearing God Almighty. Then he got up, halted his horse and said, "O Zulaykha!" Zulaykha passed out, hearing Yusuf's voice and from joy. Yusuf shed tears. When Zulaykha came to, Yusuf said, "Where is your grandeur, your splendour, and your generosity?" Zulaykha answered, "I lost them in grief for you."
>
> He said, "Where is your wealth?"
>
> She said, "I sacrificed it, giving it to whoever brought me news from you."
>
> He said, "What made your back bent?"
>
> She said, "The severity of grief of being separated from you."
>
> Yusuf said: "What do you want now?"
>
> She said: "Give me eyesight so that I can see you. I have no desire in this world but to see you." Yusuf was surprised. He said: "O Wonders! You still have my love inside you, such that even after you have suffered thus, you still want me?" Zulaykha said: "If you want to know of the fire inside my heart give me a cane." Yusuf gave her a cane made of bamboo stalk. Zulaykha held it against her mouth and sighed. Instantly the cane burnt throughout. As Yusuf saw that, he felt sorry and wept, and ordered that she be taken home. Yusuf returned himself and asked his father to pray and Yusuf prayed too, so that Zulaykha's youth would be restored. Instantly, Gabriel appeared and told him that God Almighty has answered his prayers and restored Zulaykha's youth. Zulaykha became as she had been at the beginning. Yusuf took her for his wife and they both fulfilled their desire. The people of Egypt celebrated for seven nights and seven days. . . . They lived eighteen years and had seven children, five sons and two daughters.[60]

This rehabilitated/re-created woman, saved through Yusuf's prayers and his Lord's intervention, is rewarded by marriage to a prophet and the birth of children. Her sexuality is powerful and dangerous—a threat to Yusuf's prophethood, it must be pun-

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ished (through long years of suffering and loss of wealth, social status, beauty, and eyesight); redeemed (through Yusuf and his father's prayers—the same father whose visionary appearance had stopped Yusuf from giving in to her desire); and then controlled (through her conversion and marriage). It is this closure of the narrative that makes Bouhdiba's 20th-century attempt to salvage Zulaykha for an Islamic positive appreciation of female sexuality rather incredible.[61] Not only does Bouhdiba ignore the punishment and condemnation that Zulaykha suffers for a magnified version of feminine guile; it is in fact Yusuf who is rewarded in these versions by being offered the presumably ideal woman of men's imagination: Zulaykha becomes a miraculously young, virginal, subdued, and fertile woman.

"THE BEST STORY" AS A STORY OF LOVE

In the Qur^can, the women of the town describe Yusuf as "striking Zulaykha's heart with love" (*shaghafahā ḥubban*). In his commentary, Tabari uses the word "love," not simply as an allegation by women of the town, but as a characterization of Zulaykha/Ra^cil's feelings for Yusuf when she attempts to seduce him (p. 25, para. 18965). There is also a description of the love entering her pericardium and overpowering her heart. These references have provided the textual foundations for the later development of the story as a love story. As commentaries and stories of prophets expanded on one another, more complex discussion of Zulaykha's love for Yusuf preoccupied the authors. This is particularly true of commentaries written by Sufi writers.[62] The Sufi descriptions of Zulaykha's love for Yusuf introduced a narrative tension in the story, the authors fluctuating between condemning Zulaykha's attempt to take Yusuf's innocence and admiring her total love for him. By making her earthly love a *manifestation* of love for God, Jami (1414–92) relieves the story of this tension. No longer an evil temptation set against the purity of prophethood, Zulaykha's love occupies the story from beginning to end. Is it divine? Is it carnal? The radical ambiguity of Sufi love thus rescues Yusuf from having to choose between conflicting desires and loyalties and rescues the male reader from the tension of being simultaneously attracted to and frightened by the figure of Zulaykha.[63] The object of Zulaykha's desire is transformed from an earthly man to union with the divine. Or rather, the desire for sexual union with Yusuf represents a preliminary manifestation of Zulaykha's total desire to reach God. The trials and tribulations, including the temptation–rejection scene, become tests of an ever-ambiguous love.

In other texts of the period, the Yusuf stories usually open with praise of God, the Prophet Muhammad, and perhaps some caliphs, imams, and sultans. Then the author tells his readers what kind of story he is about to tell—the story of a prophet, "the best story"—and for what reason, often because it contains so many exemplary lessons. Jami, on the other hand, after praising God, the Prophet Muhammad, his sufi master, and the sultan, proceeds to praise beauty and love (*jamāl* and *^cishq*). This is not accidental. In the story he is about to tell, Yusuf stands for beauty and Zulaykha for love. Yusuf, through the concept of *jamāl*, thus stands in for the Divine; Zulaykha, through *^cishq*, for a Sufi burning with desire for union with the Divine. Among all the beloved, Jami tells us, there has never been one like Yusuf: his beauty superior to all; among the lovers there has never been one like Zulaykha, her love

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exceeding everyone else's.[64] Telling "the best story" as a story of love inscribes Zulaykha, the lover, as the active agent throughout the text, with a number of significant exceptions, as will be shown. She is taken over by love at an early age when she dreams of Yusuf; she lives her life in love; and dies in love from grief shortly after Yusuf's death. The story comes to its closure with her death.

Her passion for Yusuf not only saturates her life. It takes over Yusuf's life as well. Yusuf's young beauty is nourished with the water of Ya^cqub's eyes and the passion of Zulaykha's heart (p. 598). Zulaykha's presence always interrupts the story of Yusuf. After describing Yusuf's birth, his mother's death, and his early childhood, for example, the narrative shifts to Zulaykha, her genealogy and more than seventy verses in praise of her beauty, in which she is allegorized bit by bit from the hair of her head to the toes of her feet (pp. 601–4).

Considering earthly love as a preliminary experience of divine love, Jami freely uses barely disguised sexual metaphors throughout the text. At a young age, Zulaykha dreams for the first time "the sword of the sun of Yusuf's beauty and is slaughtered by the love of him though the sword was covered in its sheath" (pp. 604–5). On waking, she keeps the secret of her love and suffers in silence (pp. 606–7). She dreams about him a second time, in which he informs her that he shares her love, asking her to remain unmarried, to keep her sugar untasted, and to keep her jewels untouched by any cutting diamond. Zulaykha now loses all heart and mind, acting madly (pp. 612–14). One night, prior to going to sleep, she addresses a long plea to him, begging him to tell her more about himself, to tell her his name so that she can chant it all the time. In response to this plea, she has a third dream in which he identifies himself as ^cAziz of Egypt (pp. 615–16). Zulaykha is of course much in demand; many kings ask for her hand, but to her grief and dismay nothing is heard of ^cAziz of Egypt. She is disappointed and depressed (pp. 617–18). Zulaykha's father finds out about her love through Zulaykha's nanny and sends an envoy to Egypt to offer his daughter to ^cAziz of Egypt, who happily accepts the offer and sends an envoy of riches to bring her to Egypt (pp. 619–21). When she eventually reaches Egypt and catches a glimpse of him, she is deeply grieved that he is not the right man (pp. 626–32). It is only now that Jami brings Yusuf into the narrative by taking up the Qur^ɔanic story of his dream of the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars and the subsequent events that lead to his separation from his father. Whereas in other versions the story begins and ends with Yusuf (Zulaykha entering the narrative as merely one episode of his life), Jami reverses this accepted order of characters, a reversal that is consequent upon his choice of love as the central theme of the story. Now it is Zulaykha who frames the tale.

The details of Yusuf's life follow, with Zulaykha occasionally making an unexpected entry into the text, as if Jami wants the reader never to forget her presence. After Yusuf washes himself in the water of the Nile and emerges the most beautiful and radiant creature, everyone is stunned by his beauty, and a crowd gathers to watch him. Zulaykha, passing by, asks why the crowd has formed, sees Yusuf, and, recognizing him, tells her wise nanny who advises her to be patient. With Zulaykha back at the center of the narrative, some significant details change to make room for her powerful agency. It is not ^cAziz who buys Yusuf, but Zulaykha. In fact, ^cAziz is reluctant to buy him. When Yusuf is put up for sale and many buyers bid higher and higher, Zulaykha bids twice the highest price. ^cAziz says that he cannot afford that

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price. Now Zulaykha puts up her own "box of jewels," worth more than the taxes of Egypt, to pay for Yusuf. ᶜAziz gives another excuse, that the king has his heart set on Yusuf. Zulaykha sends her husband to tell the king that they have no son and to ask his permission to buy Yusuf so that he can become an adopted son to them while serving the king as a slave. The king agrees, and ᶜAziz ends up taking Yusuf to Zulaykha. Not only does she pay for him with her own "box of jewels," the suggestion of adopting him as a son comes from her, not from ᶜAziz. She masters the scene thoroughly. Zulaykha now devotes herself to Yusuf's total care and fulfills his every wish. When Yusuf asks to become a shepherd, Zulaykha makes the arrangements for him, preparing the way for his future prophethood. Gradually, Zulaykha begins to make advances to Yusuf, who continually runs away all the time and avoids her. Eventually, Zulaykha's nanny, playing the familiar role of go-between, intervenes on her behalf. Yusuf refuses her, telling her that he will not disobey God and commit sin, that he is the adopted son of ᶜAziz and will not betray his trust, that he is of the children of Israel and Gabriel has invested him with knowledge, that he will not do anything to endanger his prophethood (pp. 662–63). Zulaykha herself tries and is refused for the same reasons. Now her scheming begins. She sends him to the garden and tries to use her maids to seduce him, on the condition that they inform her of whom he chooses so that she can switch places with her. But her plan fails. Her beautiful maids do not succeed in seducing him; instead, he preaches his religion and wins them one by one from idolatry to his religion, each proclaiming the *shahāda* (pp. 669–70). In despair, Zulaykha turns to her nanny again, who suggests building an elaborate seven-chambered palace with ceiling, wall, and floor paintings that show the two of them in intimate positions. From here on the details of the narrative follow most versions of the story, except that in Jami's account Yusuf not only desires Zulaykha, he actually tells her of his love and passion but begs her to postpone its fulfillment to the right time, when they will be both rewarded a thousand times over. She, however, cannot wait to drink water later; she is dying of thirst now. Torn between his passion for her and his loyalty to his God and his master, he opens one knot, but ties two. Eventually, God comes to his aid through Zulaykha's covering of her idol in embarrassment, an act that awakens Yusuf's conscience. He heads for the doors, each miraculously unlocking in front of him.

Zulaykha remains in the story even when Yusuf is in jail. Having put him there at the instigation of the women of the town, she regrets her action and grieves over being separated from him. Eventually, she begins to go to the jail at night with her nanny to look at him from afar, and then begins to go to the roof of her palace to watch him during the day.

In grief and suffering, she continues to be the master of Jami's narration. Once she has been restored to her youth and beauty, she again asks for Yusuf, with Yusuf remaining silent in hesitation until Gabriel tells him to marry her. He does. Here follows Jami's famous allegorical description of their sexual union. This and his agency in restoring Zulaykha's youth and beauty through prayer are the only scenes in which Yusuf is the actor and Zulaykha the character being acted upon. The first confirms God's mastery over His creatures and the mediating function of Yusuf as a prophet; the second, man's sexual mastery over woman—perhaps a reminder that the story is, after all, written by a man. In this climactic scene, Zulaykha suddenly

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loses her active position. Yusuf had been the object of her desire; now the situation is abruptly reversed. She becomes Yusuf's object of desire. She is adorned and prepared by her maids and sits waiting anxiously for Yusuf to enter their nuptial chamber. On entry, he is the one who is in charge of the scene. Zulaykha is subjected to his gaze, his touch, his kisses and bites, and, finally, penetration. He finds her jewel untouched. When he asks the reason, she tells him that her husband was sexually impotent, that when she had dreamed of him as a child, Yusuf had entrusted her with the safekeeping of the jewel, and thankfully she had succeeded in keeping it safe and submitting it to him unharmed.

This paradoxical anticlimax, reinscribing Zulaykha as the object of Yusuf's desire, is in fact a befitting reminder that in all of the story's various existing versions, including Jami's, Zulaykha is crafted by heterosexual male desire and imagination. Zulaykha's agency is a female agency as imagined and scripted by a male author. After all, what heterosexual man would not desire to be desired by a young, beautiful, wealthy, and powerful woman such as Zulaykha—and beyond that, by all the women of the town, who, upon seeing him, pronounce him as beautiful as an angel, cut themselves and bleed for him, and, one by one, attempt to seduce him? This is yet more reason to be dubious of Bouhdiba's interpretation. The story is not about female sexuality at all, but about female sexual desire as a heterosexual man might desire and imagine it to be. Bouhdiba's reading of the Yusuf story as one with a potential for construction of an emancipatory Islamic discourse for sexuality ignores some of the important parts of the story as far as punishment of female sexuality is concerned and misses the point that, even in the story's happy closure, it is Yusuf and his sexual desire that are rewarded.

In fact, one could argue that in an important sense, and despite the clarity with which the Qurʾan says "she desired him," Zulaykha remains the "object of desire" in all these narratives—namely, the desire and drive *of the narrative* to produce Yusuf's victory over her temptation and his own sexual desire, thus establishing his merits as a righteous prophet. To appropriate Zulaykha, one first needs to rescue her from the confines of male heterosexual imagination and ask how a woman might imagine that story. How is it to read this best story as a woman?

TO READ THE BEST STORY AS A WOMAN[65]

As we have already mentioned, in its most popular readings, the story is read as a love tale. Reading Jami's version, for instance, one can simply ignore the ambiguities of Sufi love, or rather reinscribe that love as earthly carnal love and read it for the pleasure of reading an erotic love tale. But as soon as such "dis-ambiguating" is done, the question of who is reading the text—or, rather, how the text is being read—poses itself. The power of this tale in its popular versions comes very close to some fairy tales and, perhaps, draws its attraction from similar sources. The story speaks to particular joys, anxieties, fears, and pleasures of life with which many readers could identify.[66] We have already referred to particular ways in which the story can be appealing to a male heterosexual reader. Reading the story as a woman, however, is more complicated. Though it is easy to imagine how a female reader might be attracted to the figure of Zulaykha as an assertive woman who knows what she wants

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and goes after it, the female reader is invariably betrayed by the closure of the narrative. Her figure of identification is chastised, punished, and saved only through submission to the right faith and marriage to the Truthful Yusuf. Even in Jami's version, the most generous one in its construction of Zulaykha, she loses agency in the end, demonstrating that female agency, authorship, and voice cannot be conflated. Though Jami's Zulaykha, for instance, is the dominant character of his narrative, and as David Pendlebury has noted, "there is no mistaking the love and passion he both feels for her himself and effectively arouses in his audience,"[67] even his text does not escape the negative construction of woman when he leaves Zulaykha, the allegorical woman standing in for Sufi love of the divine, for the "real" women. Like other writers and commentators, he follows the scene of ᶜAziz's declaration about the guile of women with his own verses in affirmation of this judgment.[68]

Yet, alternative readings are available to women. A reader has the liberty, and often exercises that liberty, to read a story outside and sometimes against the frame constructed for it by the writer. In other words, a pleasurable reading of Jami's tale need not imply that a female reader is suffering from "false consciousness" and has bought into male constructions of female sexuality. Even the anticlimactic scene of Zulaykha and Yusuf's sexual union could be read pleasurably by a woman: after all, one may take pleasure in momentarily imagining oneself as the object of a man's desire—as long as that desire is not the only one imaginable and available to a woman within the cultural framework. One can read in fragments, take the fragments that suit one's imagination outside the author's frame, and make them one's own. It is for fear of fragmentary and inventive readings of the story that commentators have recommended that women should not be permitted to read this best story, despite its overall frame that punishes and controls female sexuality: "It is said in the narratives [*aḥādīth*] that women should be prohibited from learning sura Yusuf, since hearing the parables of that tale may lead them astray from the law of chastity and they should also be completely forbidden from drinking wine, since it, even in small amounts, causes in them shamelessness and excites their passion, and nothing is worse than these two in women."[69]

If every woman read the story in the authored frames, there would hardly be any need for such prohibitions. Fragmentary and inventive readings could make the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha available for feminist appropriation and reimaginings in the same way that feminists have produced a variety of rewritings of old folk and fairy tales.[70] To be able to produce alternative readings and rewritings of this story, however, a number of issues need particular attention.

To begin with, what does a "woman reader" do with verse 28 of the Qurᵓan, "Surely your guile is great," which has become the common cultural wisdom on guile as an essentially female quality and has gone into the construction of woman as beguiling?

Though we do not know of any premodern commentaries on this story by women, in more recent times we do have female writers who have attempted to deal with this question. For instance, in *Maᶜāyib al-rijāl* (Vices of Men), written in 1894, Bibi Khanum Astarabadi ascribes guile to men, connecting it to their unjust treatment of women. She argues that it is men who are beguiling, and "Despite the fact that men, using the Qurᵓanic verse 'Surely your guile is great,' ascribe guile totally to women,

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reason makes it clear that women's guile also comes from men: if they know any guile, they have learnt it from men."[71]

There are a number of ways to destabilize the power of verse 28 of the sura Yusuf. *Kayd* (guile) is not restricted to women, although it is associated with them. In the Qur᾿an *kayd* is used, both in this sura and elsewhere, by men and by God. In sura Yusuf, for instance, God (the narrator "we" of the Qur᾿an) contrives for Yusuf (*kidna li-Yūsuf*) (12:76) in order to kidnap Benjamin from his older brothers. *Kayd* is thus not necessarily a negative character trait. Depending on who engages in it and under what circumstances, it can in fact be a prophetic and divine quality, cunning verging on wit.[72] The construction of *kayd* in this narrative as a negative characteristic for Zulaykha (and for all women) depends on the later commentaries that moralized the story and punished Zulaykha. To reinscribe *kayd* as wit, one can play a "cat-and-mouse" game with this tale. In fact, in one cycle of tales by Shaykh Bahā᾿i, *Mūsh va gurbah* (Mouse and Cat), there are a number of guile-of-women tales not unlike the unforgettable cartoon series *Tom and Jerry*, in which the guile is the guile of a weaker victim who escapes from threatening situations by using clever tricks.[73] If the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha, and other guile-of-women tales, can be retold from the mouse's point of view, women's guile can be transformed into women's wisdom and wit.[74] New readings can make the tales available for new framings. To avoid the witty female undoing herself within the overall frame of the story, she needs to be jettisoned out of that frame. In traditional versions of "guile" stories, the male-centered closure of the narrative drives the female role: Shahrzad saves her own life and becomes a bride to Shahrayar; Zulaykha helps to establish the supremacy of the Truthful Prophet. Even in a story such as Fatima Mernissi's rendering of "Who's Cleverer: Man or Woman?" which is driven by a female character, the ending parallels the ending of *One Thousand and One Nights*. In both, the heroine's wit allows her to become a mother and, by extension, a good wife.[75] But other frames are possible. In Salwa Bakr's short story "*Kayd al-rijāl*" (Wiles of Men), a selfish man outwits his two scheming wives but immediately drops dead afterward, disrupting the pattern of female guile punished and male desire satisfied.[76] It can hardly be said that the man's desire for a wife and children frames or drives this narrative as it does in older "guile" stories.

One also should point out the beguiling activities of those commentators who have turned the pronouncement of an earthly man, perhaps an angry, jealous husband at a particular time and place, into a divine judgment about womankind for all times and places. Reading the famous verse 28 ("Surely your guile is great") in context makes it evident that it is not a pronouncement of God, the omniscient narrator of the Qur᾿an, but of al-ᶜAziz of Egypt. What is indeed beguiling is the thorough reascription of this verse to God in later commentaries. Harawi, for instance, follows this verse by saying that God has named twelve things great, beginning with His own essence, and including the heavens, the temperament of the Prophet Muḥammad, the sacrifice of Ismāᶜīl, the day of resurrection, and finally, at number twelve, the guile of women.[77] Books of ethics that repeat this phrase to warn men against women often ascribe it to God, and not to al-ᶜAziz of Egypt.[78] Interestingly, the 11th-century *adab* writer Thaᶜalibi (d. 1038) in fact acknowledged that God did not say it but insisted it was nevertheless God's opinion. The chapter on women in

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his *Thimār al-qulūb fī al-muḍāf wa-al-mansūb* opens with a discussion of *kayd al-nisāʾ*, in which he argues that the proof that women's guile is great lies not just in the numerous examples "in every time and place" but, more important, in the Qurʾan itself, in which the guile of women is said to be greater than the guile of Satan. For in the Qurʾan, God says, "Indeed the guile of Satan is weak" (4:76) and "Indeed your [feminine plural] guile is great" (12:28). Regarding the latter phrase, Thaʿalibi goes on to contend that, *"Although God did not relate this phrase himself*, he related it through someone else [that is, al-ʿAziz]. . . . [H]ad these words been objectionable, God Almighty would have proscribed them, and had they been defective, God Almighty would have taken exception to them, and yet God Almighty said them and did not take exception to them."[79] Does Thaʿalibi mean to say that God implicitly sanctions all the dialogue of all speakers in the Qurʾan? If so, our incredulous response can only be, "Surely his guile is great!"

However, not to play naive, the story needs more than factual correction to lose its power in the construction of woman as beguiling. Taking a lead from those commentators who feared the consequences of women's readings of the story, we would imagine that it is precisely such readings and rewritings that are called for in order for women to be able to appropriate this best story from the predominantly misogynistic work to which it has been put. Like the "guile" stories by Bakr, Mazdapur, and Mernissi mentioned earlier, such retellings, we imagine, could be vastly different from those that have been told so far, and might contribute to destabilizing the notions of women's sexuality as a social and individual threat to the Islamic community.[80] Our own rereading of the classical sources with gender skepticism, we hope, will contribute to these efforts. Perhaps Zulaykha and the women of the town will tell us *their* best stories.

NOTES

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[1]Qurʾan, sura 12.

[2]Lit. "the best of stories." Abū Bakr ʿAtīq ibn Muḥammad Sūrābādī, *Yūsuf va Zulaykhā az tafsīr-i Fārsī-i Turbat-i Jām* [Joseph and Zulaykha from the Persian Commentary of Turbat-i Jām], ed. Parvīz Natl Khānlarī (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, n.d.), 7.

[3]Among such commentaries are Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Zayd Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr-i sūrah-i Yūsuf: Al-sittīn al-jāmiʿ liltāʾif al-basātīn* (Commentary on Sura Yūsuf: The Comprehensive Sixty [Chapters] about the Pleasant Things of the Gardens [of Knowledge]), ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Tehran: Bungāh-i tarjumah va nashr-i kitāb, 1977); Muʿīn al-Dīn Farāhī Hiravī, *Ḥadāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq dar tafsīr-i sūrah-i Yūsuf* (Gardens of Truth in Commentary on Sura Yūsuf), ed. Sayyid Jaʿfar Sajjādī (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1985); Aḥmad Māhir, Maḥmūd Al-Baqarī, *Yūsuf fī al-Qurʾān* (Yūsuf in the Qurʾan) (Beirut: Dar al-Nahḍa al-ʿArabiya, 1984); Aḥmad Nawfal, *Sūra Yūsuf: Dirāsāt Taḥlīlīya* (The Sūra Yūsuf: An Analytic Study) (Amman: Dār al-Furqān li-l-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿa, 1989).

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[4]Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ʿAʾisha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), chap. 4.

[5]Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), chap. 3.

[6]Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan, Tradition, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50–56.

[7]Ibid., 4.

[8]Ibid., 56.

[9]Arabic and Persian are the languages that between us we feel competent to use. For a discussion of this story in Turkish literature, see Stephanie Bowie Thomas, "The Story of Joseph in Islamic Literature With an Annotated Translation of the Pre-Ottoman *Destan-i Yusuf* by Seyyad Hamza" (M.A. thesis, Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, Columbia University, 1992).

[10]See *Encyclopaedia Judaica Jerusalem* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 202–18, s.v. "Joseph."

[11]The most important among these tales is perhaps *Sandbādnāmah*, which is considered to be the "mother tale" of many related ones of this genre, such as *Tūtī-nāmah* and *Bakhtīārnāmah*. The most intact Persian version of *Sandbād'nāmah*, by Muḥammad al-Ẓahīrī al-Samarqandī (A.D. 12th century), is now available in several editions. The version edited by Ahmed Ateş (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Basimevi, 1948) contains an Arabic and a Turkish version of *Sandbādnāmah*. An early English translation of *Sandbād'nāmah* was published in 1884 in Glasgow ("privately printed"), *The Book of Sindibād*, trans. W. A. Clouston. The French translation is from al-Ẓahīrī's version, *Le Livre des sept vizirs*, trans. Dejan Bogdanovic (Paris: Sindbad, 1975). For a discussion of origins of *Sandbādnāmah*, see B. E. Perry, "The Origin of the Book of Sindbad," *Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies* 3 (1959): 1–94. For a useful anthology, see John D. Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature: An Anthology of the Story of the Chaste Youth and the Lustful Stepmother* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

[12]For English translations of Qurʾanic verses, we have consulted several editions. These include: *The Koran* (with parallel Arabic text), trans. N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin, 1990); *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: Macmillan, 1955); *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾan*, ed. and trans. Muhammad M. Pickthall (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Qurʾan, 1992); *The Quran: The Eternal Revelation Vouchsafed to Muhammad the Seal of the Prophets*, trans. Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1991).

[13]For a recent and thorough example, see Shalom Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[14]See Muhsin Mahdi, ed., *Alf layla wa layla* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 64; and Muḥammad Ẓahīrī Samarqandī, *Kitab-i sandbādnāmah*, ed. Jaʿfar Shiʿār (Tehran: Khāvar, 1954), 105.

[15]Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, 4–6.

[16]See ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, *Al-Marʾa fi al-Qurʾān* (Women in the Qurʾan) (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1969), 23. For more on al-ʿAqqād's views, see Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan*, 54–55.

[17]Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 29.

[18]Later in this paper we will look at Jāmī's *Yūsuf and Zulaykhā* in detail. The version we have used is ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Masnavī-i haft awrang* (The Seven Thrones), ed. Murtiżā Mudarris Gīlānī (Tehran: Saʿdī, 1958). There are two English translations available, one translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith (London: Trubner & Co., 1882) and the other by David Pendlebury, *Yusuf and Zulaikha* (London: The Octagon Press, 1980). For a French translation, see *Youssouf et Zouleikha*, trans. Auguste Bricteux (Paris: Paul Gauthner, 1927). For representations of the story in paintings, see Naʿama Brosh, *Biblical Stories in Islamic Literature and Painting* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1991), and Hādī Sayf, *Naqqāshī-i qahvah-khānah-hā* (Paintings of Coffee Houses) (Tehran: Riżā ʿAbbāsī Museum, 1990).

[19]Al-ʿAzīz, literally meaning the august, the powerful, or the noble one, is translated in various versions of the Qurʾān as the Governor (Arberry) or the Prince (Dawood).

[20]Khan's unusual translation is, "they pressed their fingers between their teeth" and "they gnawed their fingers." See Khan, *The Quran: The Eternal Revelation*, 221, 223.

[21]In Genesis, the wife accuses Joseph, "He came to me to sleep with me, but I screamed, and when he heard me scream and shout he left his tunic beside me and ran out of the house." His master is furious and commits him to the king's prison. In other words, the test of truth—the shirt torn from be-

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hind—and the subsequent episodes until he is jailed are not there. Genesis 39:10–15. This is the last we hear of the wife in Genesis.

[22]James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 55.

[23]This scene is one of the most popular ones in pictorial representations of the story. See, for instance, Brosh, *Biblical Stories*, 52.

[24]See ᶜAbd Allah ibn ᶜUmar Bayḍāwī, *Baidawi's Commentary on Surah 12 of the Qurᵓan*, text accompanied by an interpretive rendering and notes by A. F. L. Beeston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 88. We will discuss this issue later in the article. In a similar move, Gilbert and Gubar associate the pricking of fingers in the fairy tales "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" with the heroines' being assumed into a domain of sexuality. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 37.

[25]The female character of the story is not named in the Qurᵓan. The only woman with a name in the Qurᵓan is Maryam (Mary), mother of Jesus. On this point, see John A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of An Idea* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 152; Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 47; and Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qurᵓān and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1992), 32.

[26]Abū Jaᶜfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān ᶜan taᵓwīl ay al-Qurᵓān* (The Comprehensive Exposition on the Interpretation of the Qurᵓan), ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, 30 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif bi-Miṣr, 1960), Tafsīr Sūrat Yūsuf, 16. All quotations from this work will be noted in the text by page number followed by paragraph number, if available.

[27]Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 3 ff.

[28]Kugel also notes a similar tendency in Jewish commentaries in *In Potiphar's House*, 22 ff. One could almost posit a rising significance to the figure of Zulaykhā through time. By the 15th century, when Jāmī tells it as a love story, she becomes the central figure of the narrative. As Pendlebury has noted, "It could be said that Zulaikha steals the show" (Pendlebury, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 173).

[29]Ṭabarī says that some know her as Rāᶜīl, but perhaps because he does not consider his sources strong or unified enough on this question, he persists in calling her "the wife of al-ᶜAzīz" throughout.

[30]This conversation echoes a similar dialogue in some of the Jewish commentaries of the Genesis story. See Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, 38–39.

[31]This suggestion is made as an explanation of why al-ᶜAzīz, upon purchasing Yūsuf, says to his wife, "we may adopt him as a son" (12:21). Later commentators have interpreted Ṭabarī's interpretation that "he did not approach women" as signifying either the impotence or homosexuality of al-ᶜAzīz. This is another example of details that have most likely come from Midrashic sources, where it is explicitly said that Potiphar bought Yūsuf for his own pleasure, but Gabriel thwarted him by making him impotent. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–36), 2:43. See also Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, 44.

[32]For a brilliant discussion of the female disruptions of male bonds in Arabic literature, see Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body*, especially chaps. 1, 4, and 5.

[33]Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) answered this question by emphasizing Zulaykhā's seductive power and turning it into an occasion for highlighting Yūsuf's strength: "Had the temptation not been so great, the abstinence would not be so praiseworthy." See Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn ᶜUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ᶜan ḥaqāᵓiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl* (The Unveiler of the Realities of the Secrets of the Revelation), 3 vols. (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaᶜah al-Sharafīyya, 1889), 1:467.

[34]There is no "would" in Arabic; this mood can be implied only by using conjunctions such as "except."

[35]The verse is translated similarly in Arberry (p. 256) and Dawood (p. 237).

[36]Bayḍāwī, *Commentary*, 90.

[37]For Zamakhsharī, see *Kashshāf*, 1:478.

[38]See W. M. Thackston's introduction to *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisaᵓi*, trans. W. M. Thackston, Jr. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

[39]Most likely, Kisāᵓī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāᵓ* dates to the turn of the 13th century. Ibid.

[40]T. Nagel, "Al-Kisāᵓī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 176.

[41]Abū Jaᶜfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarīᵓ, *Tārīkh al-Tabarī: tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk* (Ṭabarī's History: History of the Prophets and the Kings), ed. Muḥammad abū Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār

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al-Maᶜārif bi-Miṣr, 1960), 1:332. For an English translation of this part of *Tārīkh*, see *The History of al-Tabarī*, vol. II, *Prophets and Patriarchs*, trans. William M. Brinner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 148–85.

[42]Kisāʾī/Thackston, *Tales of the Prophets*, 169–70.

[43]Ibid., 172.

[44]This is an elaboration of the Qurʾanic verse (12:22) in which he reaches the age of maturity while at the home of al-ᶜAzīz. For a discussion of this theme, see Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*.

[45]For the significance of the figure of the old wise woman, see ᶜIffat Mustasharnīā, *Dāyah dar adabīyāt-i Fārsī* (Nanny in Persian Literature) (Ph.D. thesis, Tehran University, 1978); Farzaneh Milani, "On Nannies, Gypsies, and Ideal Men: Figures of Mediation," paper presented at the First Biennial Conference of the Society for Iranian Studies, Arlington, Va., 14–16 May 1993; and Leyla Rouhi, *A Comparative Typology of the Medieval Go-Between in Light of Western–European, Near-Eastern, and Spanish Cases* (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1995).

[46]Abū al-Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr ibn Khalaf Nayshābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, ed. Ḥabīb Yaghmāʾī (Tehran: Bungāh-i tarjumah va nashr-i kitāb, 1980), 94–95. Not to be confused with the work of Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī, also known as al-Thaᶜlabī, d. 427/1036.

[47]Abū al-Fażl Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybūdī, *Kashf al-asrār wa ᶜuddat al-abrār* (Uncovering of the Secrets and the Tool Chest of the Pious), ed. ᶜAlī Aṣghar Ḥikmat (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1960), 5:38

[48]Kisāʾī/Thackston, *Tales of the Prophets*, 175.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Nayshābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 96.

[51]Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 342.

[52]Kisāʾī/Thackston, *Tales of the Prophets*, 176–78.

[53]Ḥabīb Yaghmāʾī, ed., *Tarjumah-i tafsīr-i Ṭabarī* (Translation of Ṭabarī's Commentary) (Tehran: Ṭūs, 1988), 779–80.

[54]Ṭūsī, *al-Sittīn al-jāmiᶜ*, 368.

[55]Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār*, 5:55–56, and Hiravī, *Ḥadāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 449–50.

[56]Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār*, 5:61; Hiravī, *Ḥadāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 471–72; and Ṭūsī, *al-Sittīn*, 354.

[57]Kisāʾī/Thackston, *Tales of the Prophets*, 179–80. See also Sūrābādī, *Yūsuf va Zulaykhā*, 52–55.

[58]Nayshābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 145–46.

[59]Hiravī, *Ḥadāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 575–78.

[60]Nayshābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 146–48.

[61]Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 28–29.

[62]On the Sufi concept of love, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 130–48; see also p. 429 for her discussion of Zulaykhā in Sufi poetry.

[63]The centrality of ambiguity in Jāmī's poetry is brilliantly pointed out by Pendlebury: "Jami is the master of what could be called 'constructive ambiguity', which is never designed merely to confuse, nor is it ever the result of confused thinking; rather its function is to enable the mind simultaneously to entertain multiple possibilities—and grow in the process. An obvious example of this is the ambivalence of Jāmī's attitude towards his heroine: on the one hand there is no mistaking the love and passion he both feels for her himself and effectively arouses in his audience; but on the other hand his salute to Zulaikha has something of Junaid's salute to the condemned man, whose 'single-mindedness' had brought him to the gallows. . . . [T]he poet encourages conflicting attitudes towards Zulaikha so that his audience cannot walk away with any easy answers as to her nature, but are left instead with the impression of having encountered someone as real—and as unreal—as themselves" (Pendlebury, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 179).

[64]Jāmī, *Haft awrang*, 595–96. Subsequent references will be noted in the text.

[65]For a discussion of the challenges and problems of reading as a woman, see Jonathan Culler, "Reading as a Woman," in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 43–64.

[66]See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). In his historical/cultural analysis of "Little Red Riding Hood," Jack Zipes dismisses psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales, and in particular that of Bettelheim, as ahistori-

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cal. See Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), in particular the prologue and epilogue. Persuasive as his arguments are, they deal with how different *writers* imagined and rewrote the story in different historical and cultural settings and how different readers as *parents and educators* may have found a version useful for their educational purposes. The psychoanalytical line of argument proposed by Bettelheim, among others (and regardless of whether one finds any particular school persuasive), concerns how a very young *listener* relates to a particular version of a given fairy tale. It should be evident that the fascination of a two-year-old girl with the story "Little Red Riding Hood," demonstrated for instance by her insistence on hearing it night after night, could not be attributed to her desire to hear a story of metaphoric rape and dangers of female disobedience. In fact, because she already so strongly relates to the story, for reasons that we may not be able to access and analyze, a parent or educator can then inscribe her or his moral message on the young listener. In a similar way, when we speak of a *listener* to or *reader* of the Yūsuf story, we need to take into account a different set of issues from what may have been the narrative, ethical, moral, or political concerns of the *commentators* and *writers* of the story.

[67]Pendlebury, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, 179.

[68]Jāmī, *Haft awrang*, 688.

[69]Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (Nasirean Ethics), ed. Mujtabā Mīnuvī and ᶜAlīriżā Ḥaydarī (Tehran: Khwārazmī, 1978), 219. For an English translation, see *The Nasirean Ethics*, trans. G. M. Wickens (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964). Such prohibiting recommendations continue to contemporary times. Maulana Ashraf ᶜAli Thanawi lists an unspecified *Tafsīr-i sūrat-i yūsuf* (Commentary on the Sura Yusuf) among "the harmful books" that women should not read, because such books "are not about religion at all, . . . [and] spread great harm. . . . Habits are ruined. Thought is sullied. Indiscretion, shamelessness, and Satanic matters are encouraged." See Maulana Ashraf ᶜAli Thanawi, *Perfecting Women: A Partial Translation with Commentary*, trans. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 375, 379.

[70]For some such versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," see Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*.

[71]Bībī Khānum Astarābādī, *Maᶜāyib al-rijāl* (Vices of Men), ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi (New York and Bloomington: Nigarish van nigārish-i zan, 1992), 84. For more recent attempts to deal with Zulaykhā and feminine guile, see Zahrā Rahnavard, *Hamgām bā hijrat-i Yūsuf* (In Step with Yūsuf's Migration) (Tehran: Nashr-i farhang-i Islāmī, n.d.), 38–41, and Munīrah Gurjī, "Zanān dar Qurᵓān" (Women in the Qurᵓan), *Zan-i rūz* (Women's Day), 1318 (29 June 1991): 10–11.

[72]See in this connection Malti-Douglas's discussion of *dhakāᵓ* versus *kayd* in *Woman's Body*, 31–32. Goldman also offers several examples of "wiles of women and wiles of men," and concludes that in attribution of guile, neither gender is spared (Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, xx–xxi, 47–48, 93–94, 147). This is not a persuasive argument, because it ignores that a woman's *kayd*, such as that of Zulaykhā, is inscribed in negative terms connected to her presumably insatiable sexuality. Yūsuf, on the other hand, does not suffer from but is rewarded for his *kayd*. Goldman's characterization of the frame story of *One Thousand and One Nights* as "a tale of 'the wiles of women and the wiles of men'" (p. 51) is not supported by any reading of that story. The cycle of wiles-of-women stories that Goldman uses extensively to support this argument is taken from a late-19th-century English translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* by John Payne. Though this cycle is very similar to *Sandbādnāmah*, the ending is significantly modified, perhaps in the English translation, though there is no way of ascertaining this. (This cycle is also incorporated in a 19th-century Persian translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* under the subheading *makr-i zanān*. See ᶜAbd al-Laṭīf Ṭasūjī, trans. *Hizār va yik shab* (Stockholm: Ārash, repr. n.d.), 4:168–217). In *Sandbādnāmah*, the king's slave concubine is in fact severely and gruesomely punished before being expelled from town. For an expanded discussion of the female figure in *Sandbādnāmah*, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Reading—and Enjoying—Wiles of Women Stories as a Feminist," unpublished manuscript.

[73]Shaykh Bahāᵓī, *Kulīyāt-i ashᶜār-i Fārsī va mūsh va gurbah* (Collected Persian Poems and Mouse and Cat), ed. Mahdī Tawhīdī-pūr (Tehran: Maḥmūdī, 1958).

[74]For a recent attempt to rewrite a guile-of-women story from a woman-friendly perspective, see Katāyūn Mazdāpūr, *Rivāyatī dīgar az Dalīlah-i muḥtālah va makr-i zanān* (An/other Narrative of the Beguiling Dalīlah and Guile of Women) (Tehran: Rawshangarān, 1995).

[75]Fatima Mernissi, "Who's Cleverer: Man or Woman?" in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writings*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

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[76]Salwa Bakr, "*Kayd al-rijāl*" (Wiles of Men), in *Maqām ᶜAṭīyya: riwāya wa qiṣaṣ qaṣīra* (ᶜAṭīyya's Shrine: A Novel and Short Stories) (Cairo and Paris: Dār al-Fikr li'l-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīᶜ, 1986), 97–109.

[77]Hiravī, *Ḥadāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 426–39.

[78]See, for example, Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, *Durrat al-tāj* (The Jewel of the Crown), ed. Mahdukht Humaʾi (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ᶜilmī va farhangī, 1990), 137.

[79]ᶜAbd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad Thaᶜālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb fī al-muḍāf wa-al-mansūb* (Fruits of the Hearts in the Attributed Statements), ed. Muḥammad Abū Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr li'l-Ṭabaᶜ wa-al-Nashr, 1965), 305. Emphasis ours.

[80]The literature on sexual harassment in recent years may provide us with some vision of alternative narratives that become available when women begin to tell their stories. There are a number of ways in which coverage and interpretation of sexual harassment cases contrast with interpretations of sura Yūsuf that we have surveyed in this essay. When women have spoken up against unwanted sexual solicitation, the skeptical disbelief has been translated into a variety of sentiments, such as, "Well, it is natural sexual attraction. Only a prude would complain of it," or "She must have asked for it, encouraged it," and of course "She could say no." Compare these interpretative strategies to centuries of literary production around the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā, where the core tale was the reverse—that is, the story of a woman attempting to seduce the man. Yūsuf did not "ask for it," nor did he encourage it, although in some Jewish commentaries on the Genesis story there are hints of his improper and vain behavior that one can assume may have contributed to Zulaykhā's infatuation (see Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, 37–38). That the contemporary significance of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā occasionally extends beyond the Islamic world was displayed in a parallel drawn by a Harold Segall of Harrison, New York, who wrote the following remarkable letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* soon after congressional hearings were held to confirm Clarence Thomas's appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, during which Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment: "Why does everyone assume that sexual harassment is a one-gender activity? The spate of recent articles on sexual harassment in the workplace, stemming from the accusations against Clarence Thomas, do not mention several lawsuits in recent years in which the allegation was made by a male worker that the offense of sexual harassment was committed by a female superior. The first victim of sexual harassment mentioned in history was a man, Joseph, and the aggressor was Potiphar's wife" (*Wall Street Journal* 29 October, 1991, A23). Those hearings were significant from another perspective, as well: they dramatically illustrated the importance of having the contesting versions of male and female storytellers available to us. Told by contending voices, the story became a very different one from the simple line of the vengeful woman who has been rejected by the pious man.

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