



## In Reality a Man: Sultan Iltutmish, His Daughter, Raziya, and Gender Ambiguity in Thirteenth Century Northern India

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### Abstract

Ruler of the Delhi Sultanate in northern India from 1236 to 1240, Raziya is a striking example of a woman who rose to power in a pre-modern Islamic society. It was Raziya's father's recognition and cultivation of her wisdom and ruling capacities, as well as his apparent naming of her as his successor, that paved the way for her accession to the throne. This article offers an explanation of how Raziya was able to rule in an environment in which the birth of daughters normally gave rise to disappointment and women had few avenues for authority. It will argue that despite medieval Muslim India's assigning to women a status separate from and inferior to that of men, a metaphorical space existed in which women could identify or be identified as men. As in many non-Muslim societies, such identification could become a means for a daughter to enter into male sociopolitical spheres.

### Keywords

Raziya, female sovereignty, cross dressing, Delhi Sultanate, daughters

Among the most striking examples of Muslim daughters who succeeded their fathers to positions of power is that of Raziya, a thirteenth-century sultan of the Delhi Sultanate in India who acceded to the throne thanks largely to her own superior abilities, and to her father's recognition of them. Although Raziya's reign lasted less than four years, she left an important legacy of female rule in South Asia. Most notable for the purposes of this study is her personification of a certain paradigm of female successor: the Warrior Daughter who transcends gender distinctions and becomes, essentially, a man once she ascends the throne. Like her forebears in Sasanian Iran, Bōrān and Āzarmidokht—both of whom will be discussed in this article—Raziya assumed

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the trappings of masculinity in order to rule effectively, discarding female attire and donning the tunic and headdress of a man. This article will argue that her identification as a male, which brings to mind the performative aspects of gender that is part of contemporary gender theory, exploited a metaphorical space in which elite daughters could exercise greater agency within a society that normally severely restricted their actions (Butler, 140). It will investigate the elements contributing to the creation of that space and its limits, and reveal how Raziya's example, like those of cross-dressing women in the West, challenges "previous understandings of medieval definitions of gender" by showing that the boundaries between the sexes were far more permeable than often portrayed (Hotchkiss, 12). Finally, it will suggest that neither Raziya's gender nor her attempts to conceal it were deciding factors in her eventual deposition, though they do play a major part in how she is culturally remembered.

### **An Overview of Raziya's Reign**

Peter Jackson notes that sources for Raziya's reign are relatively limited. Only one historian who was contemporary with her rule, the Ghurid *Menhāj-e Serāj* (d. ca. 1260), recorded the events of the period, and he is rather elliptical (Jackson, 182-83). The remainder of the medieval sources, written sometimes a century or more after the events, produced greatly embellished versions of the story. A few events do emerge with relative clarity from *Menhāj's* account. As he notes, Raziya was the eldest daughter of *Ilutmish*, a Delhi sultan of the thirteenth century who was of Turkish stock (*Menhāj*, I, 456; tr. I, 635). *Ilutmish* intended for his eldest son, *Nāser al-Din Mahmud Shah*, to succeed him. But after that son died prematurely of illness in 629/1229, the sultan was obliged to make other plans.

According to *Menhāj*, after returning from an expedition to Gwalior in 630/1233, the sultan designated as his successor Raziya, the daughter of his chief wife, *Terken (Torkān) Khātun*. The historian explains that Raziya "exercised authority, and possessed great grandeur..." and because her father "used to notice in her indications of sovereignty and high spirit, although she was a daughter, and [consequently] veiled from public gaze... he commanded [his secretary] to write out a decree, naming his daughter as his heir-apparent, and she was made his heir [accordingly]..." (*Menhāj*, I, 457-59; tr. I, 638).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A later medieval historian, *Fereshta*, writes that *Ilutmish* left Raziya in charge while he was in Gwalior, suggesting that she proved herself as a capable administrator during that period (*Habibullah*, 754).

This designation was carried out over the complaints of his attendants, who maintained that he should not name his daughter as successor when he had “grown-up sons who [were] eligible for sovereignty” (Menhāj, I, 458; tr. I, 638). Menhāj records the sultan as responding that his sons were “engrossed in the pleasures of youth, and none of them possesses the capability of managing the affairs of the country”; whereas Raziya, his daughter, was the most worthy, as would be proven after his death (Menhāj, I, 458; tr. I, 639).

At a different point in the narrative, however, Menhāj conveys an expectation prevalent among the people that Raziya’s half-brother, later known as Rokn al-Din Firuz Shah, would succeed his father. Firuz Shah had been granted the *eqtāʾ* of Lahore upon Iltutmish’s return from Gwalior, the same time that the sultan apparently designated Raziya his successor. Upon Iltutmish’s return to the capital from his final military expedition, the ailing sultan brought Firuz Shah with him, “for the people had their eyes upon him, since, after [the late] Malik Nāsir-ud-Dīn, Mahmūd Shah, he was the eldest of [Iltutmish’s] sons” (Menhāj, I, 454-55; tr. I, 631). In fact, the day after the sultan’s death, on 21 Shaʿbān 633—corresponding to April 30, 1236—the “[m]aliks and grandees of the kingdom, by agreement,” seated Firuz Shah on the throne (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup> His brief, tumultuous reign was dominated by his mother, Shah Terken, who ruled the kingdom while Firuz Shah occupied himself in “buffoonery, sensuality, and diversion” (Menhāj, I, 457; tr. I, 636).

Shah Terken’s use of her newfound power to settle old scores led to widespread revolt among nobles and officials in the kingdom, many of whom broke out into open rebellion. Amid the turmoil, Shah Terken attempted to put Raziya to death, upon which the people of Delhi rose up, attacked the palace and seized Shah Terken. After considerable upheaval, the Delhi forces and members of Iltutmish’s personal slave group enthroned Raziya, who ordered Firuz Shah imprisoned. He was executed on 18 Rabiʾ I 634/19 November 1236.<sup>4</sup>

Under Raziya, Menhāj observes, “all things returned to their usual rules and customs...” and, after initial rebellions by some provincial governors and

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<sup>3</sup> As Habibullah notes, this appointment constituted a “clear breach of the arrangement made in the proclamation.” He speculates that it was “conducted by the provincial governors and military officers who had joined the late king in his last expedition and were present at the capital at the time of his death.” Firuz Shah’s mother likely also advocated strongly for her son (Habibullah, 757).

<sup>4</sup> The commencement of Raziya’s reign is usually dated to 18 Rabiʾ I 634 as well, though Menhāj does not specifically note it as such. But ʿEsāmi dates her accession to 635/1237, which would accord better with Menhāj’s calculation of the length of her reign as three years, six months, and six days. See Habibullah, 759, n. 43.

emirs who refused to acknowledge her, “the kingdom became pacified, and the power of the state widely extended” (Menhāj, I, 457; tr. I, 639, 641). The historian writes that from Lakhnawati to Diwal and Damrillah—that is, from western Bengal to lower Sind—“all the Maliks and Amīrs manifested their obedience and submission” (Menhāj, I, 459; tr. I, 639). Even if the power of the state was extended during her reign, however, evidence also exists of retrenchment from Hindu strongholds such as Rantabhur and Gwalior—events that may have displeased Iltutmish’s slave officers, who had taken great pride in the sultan’s conquests of those regions (Jackson, 188).

Two highly provocative statements occur about midway through Menhāj’s account. He writes that the *malek* (emir in some versions) Jamāl al-Din Yāqut, the Habashī (Abyssinian), “who was Lord of the Stables, acquired favor in attendance upon the Sultān,” and that this favor caused the Turkish emirs and other officials to become envious (Menhāj, I, 460; tr. I, 642-43). The historian then writes, nearly in the same breath, that the sultan put aside female dress, and “issued from [her] seclusion, and donned the tunic, and assumed the head-dress [of a man], and appeared among the people; and, when she rode out on an elephant, at the time of mounting it, all people used, openly, to see her” (Menhāj, I, 460; tr. I, 643).

Subsequent to Raziya’s discarding of female attire, an act no doubt undertaken to enhance her air of authority and military power, many of the leaders who had previously supported the sultan began to rise up against her. She succeeded in crushing the first internal rebellion, instigated by ‘Ezz al-Din Kabir Khan, the *eqtā’*-holder of Lahore, but failed to do so with the second, instigated by Ekhtiār al-Din Altunapa, commander of the crown fortress of Tabarhindh and secretly abetted by emirs of the court.<sup>5</sup> As Menhāj writes, when Raziya pursued Altunapa to Tabarhindh (identified with Bhatinda in Punjab, northwest of Delhi), the Turkish emirs “rose against her, and put to death [her supporter], Amīr [Jamāl al-Din Yāqut], the Habashī, seized Sultān Raziyyat and put her in durance, and sent her to the fortress” of Tabarhindh (Menhāj, I, 461; tr. I, 645). In the meantime, they enthroned in her place her brother, thenceforth known as Mo‘ezz al-Din Bahrām Shah. They likely hoped to exert more power during his reign by insisting on the appointment of a viceroy to the sultan, Aytegin, Raziya’s *amīr-e hājeb* (military chamberlain) and a former member of Iltutmish’s personal slave troop.

Here the story takes another surprising twist. After Aytegin overstepped his bounds and was subsequently murdered on the new sultan’s orders,

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<sup>5</sup> I follow here Jackson’s rendering of the name rather than the more common “Altunia.”

Altunapa—who had no doubt hoped to derive favors from his now-deceased ally—came to see the expediency of marrying Raziya, his prisoner, and attempting to retake the sultanate, a plan to which Raziya agreed. Together they marched an army towards Delhi, aiming to dethrone Bahrām Shah (Menhāj, I, 462; tr. I, 647). But the new sultan led out a force to rout his sister and Altunapa and succeeded. The troops accompanying the couple abandoned them, and both Raziya and her husband were killed by Hindus on 25 Rabi‘ I 638/14 October 1240.

As valuable as it is, Menhāj’s account leaves much to be desired. His laconicism creates ample opportunity for misunderstanding and for later elaboration by less circumspect historians, as does his tendency to narrate the same events slightly differently in separate *tabaqāt* (Jackson, 183). One matter that remains shrouded in ambiguity, given the markers also pointing to Firuz Shah, is whether Iltutmish actually designated Raziya as his successor. Jackson notes that since Menhāj was not in Delhi at the time of the sultan’s return from Gwalior, he could not have witnessed the appointment; “in these circumstances, we have to consider the possibility that the story is apocryphal and was put about by those who made her sultān” (idem, 184). Still, whether Raziya was actually appointed by her father is perhaps not the burning issue here. She clearly manifested leadership qualities that were observed both by the sultan and those around him—qualities that lent credence to the decision to seat her on the throne, no matter from whom it came.

Even greater confusion is engendered by Menhāj’s cryptic descriptions of the jealousy aroused among Turkish emirs by Raziya’s preference for Jamāl al-Din Yāqut, and the sultan’s subsequent discarding of female attire. The proximity of the two statements makes it tempting to link them, and their gendered nature proves a trap into which many a medieval (and modern) historian falls. As will be seen, the fantastic, amorous speculation to which they gave rise in the middle Islamic period produced an even more luridly romantic scenario in the modern period: the transformation of this “warlike” sultan into a beleaguered heroine whose reputation stands in need of rescuing (Menhāj, I, 457; tr. I, 637).

### **Precedents for Female Rule**

Precedents among Turks, Mongol-type peoples, and even Persians likely played a role in paving the way to Raziya’s accession to the throne. Jackson observes that many of the Turkish slave officers who brought her to power originated from the Pontic and Caspian steppes, where women were afforded significantly

more latitude than they enjoyed in non-nomadic societies (Jackson, 189). Other *gholāms* were of “Khitan or Qara-Khitan stock—Mongol-type peoples of the eastern steppes” who founded dynasties in Turkestan (idem, 189-90). Upon the death of Gur Khān, a Khitan leader, his daughter Koyunk Khātun ruled Turkestan for several years in the twelfth century. A. B. M. Habibullah further notes that one of the feudatory rulers of Khwārazm “was succeeded early in the same century by his only child, a daughter, who even after her marriage to the founder of the Khwārizmshāhī dynasty, retained her sovereign power and title” (Habibullah, 752).

Similarly, Maria Szuppe observes that “Turko-Mongol nomadic cultural tradition, as compared with Irano-Islamic customs of settled people, gave a much larger place to women’s social and political activities and to family blood ties on both paternal and maternal sides.” Female members of ruling Mongol and Ilkhan families were “entitled to a share of booty and had the right to participate in the *quriltay*, the all-Mongol assembly. Not only did they become regents of their minor sons, but also under certain circumstances they could themselves lay claim to the throne. Even after Islamization progressed among the Turko-Mongol tribes, women retained much of their social position” (Szuppe, 141). Szuppe further notes that traditional Turkic patterns of succession gave all male members of the family—“including those descending from the female line”—the right to the throne (idem, 147). In the absence of a fit male scion, appointing a daughter to rule was not a radical move.

Ancient Persian precedent may also have influenced those who enthroned Raziya, albeit less directly. Habibullah suggests that for Persians (and “therefore, the Turks who were fast assimilating the Persian political traditions”)

the acceptance of a female sovereign was rendered unavoidable by their monarchical theory, according to which Divinity was believed to reside in the person of the king. Since none but persons of royal blood had any right to assume royal titles, and since this divinity could not be transferred except through direct descent, it is not difficult to see that the possibility of a daughter succeeding her father could not be excluded. (Habibullah, 753-54)

Such examples would have been transmitted via the *Shāhnāma*, with which Turkish officers and other powerful figures in the sultanate would likely have been acquainted. The accounts of Homāy, the legendary Kayānid ruler who was appointed by her father, Ardashir Bahman, and who reigned successfully for thirty-odd years, and of Bōrān and Āzarmidokht, two royal sisters who ascended to the Sasanian throne one after the other, provided precedents of ruling daughters in Iran. Although Ferdowsi includes in his account of Bōrān’s brief rule an obligatory statement that “when a woman becomes king,

matters go badly,” he presents her and her sister as effective and just rulers (Ferdowsi, IX, 305:1).

Many of these examples derive from pre-Islamic times. But Islamic mores did not necessarily militate against a daughter’s succeeding her father, at least not on legal grounds. Habibullah argues that from “the 10th century onwards, that is, from the beginning of the Turkish ascendancy over the Islamic world,” Islamic constitutional theory posed no legal obstacle to female sovereignty (Habibullah, 751). He further maintains that “in the 13th and 14th centuries the idea of a woman ruler was no more repugnant to Islamic law than, for example, were the numerous Turkish Sultans who included among them, not only unmanumitted slaves but also . . . persons with physical deformities as well” (Habibullah, 752-53). In fact, Menhāj, himself a jurist who would have been well aware of any legal transgression inherent in Raziya’s appointment, raises no objection to her accession on constitutional grounds (Habibullah, 755).

### Identifying as a Man

Even if pre-Islamic precedents and even Islamic constitutionalism created somewhat favorable conditions for a daughter’s succession to the throne, strong anti-female sentiment in Perso-Islamic culture and, hence, in the Delhi Sultanate, remained a formidable obstacle. Such an attitude was based on a popular view of women as *nāqes ‘aql*, deficient in intelligence, and therefore as more prone to evil than men.<sup>6</sup> The notion that women were unsuited to rule is exemplified in a *hadith* attributed to the Prophet Mohammad, who, upon hearing that the Persians had appointed Bōrān to the throne, allegedly said, “Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler,” and in the Seljuk statesman Nezām al-Molk’s (d. 1092) advice to kings to refrain from allowing women to assume power, “for they are wearers of the veil and have not complete intelligence” (Bokhāri, LXXXVIII, no. 219; Nezām al-Molk, 180).

As in Western societies, one way for a woman to circumvent this obstacle was, quite simply, not to *be* a woman, but rather a man. Either through her own efforts, those of her supporters, or both, she could transcend or transform the public perceptions of her gender to an extent that people would cease to

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<sup>6</sup> This view is strikingly similar to those held in Western societies (Hotchkiss, 17). Zoroastrianism likewise typically envisioned the feminine as “more chaotic, dangerous, evil, and, consequently, distant from the order and goodness of god” (Choksy, 2).

associate her with the weaker, “deficient” sex.<sup>7</sup> By cross dressing, and by otherwise associating themselves with traditionally masculine symbols, titles, and imagery, Muslim women could raise their sociopolitical status and be considered worthy of achieving or maintaining sovereignty.

Such acts also had their pre-Islamic precedents. Haleh Emrani observes that in Sasanian Iran, as the closest surviving direct descendents of Khosrow II, the aforementioned rulers Bōrān and Āzarmidokht were candidates for the *farr/xwarrah* “divine glory of kingship,” a necessary ingredient for sovereignty. By disregarding the gender of these women—a step that, Emrani argues, involved a “shift and an adjustment, not a revolution”—Sasanian aristocrats and religious leaders were able to preserve the “imperial ideology and the monarchy” that otherwise would have collapsed in the absence of a male descendant (Emrani, 9).

For these women of the imperial elite, transcending or transforming their gender involved assuming male garb and displaying traditionally masculine (especially military) imagery. In paintings, Bōrān is shown “wearing the same type of clothing as the Sasanian kings, including a green tunic in a special pattern over sky-blue pants, a sky-blue crown, and sitting on the throne while holding a . . . battle-axe”—garb that differs greatly from “outfits of royal women who were always depicted in very long dresses that cover their legs and feet” (Emrani, 8). On her coinage, her crown displays the symbol of Bahrām, the “deity of offensive victory,” also displayed by her father, Khosrow II—interpreted by Emrani as a “symbolic gesture to reinforce her connection to her father,” and to bolster her image as a military monarch (*idem*, 7). Ultimately, Emrani suggests, Bōrān’s gender was “rendered irrelevant through the use of symbols”; she “was not viewed as the queen; she was in fact the king!” (*idem*, 9)<sup>8</sup>

Centuries later in India, Raziya and her supporters relied on similar associations to legitimize her rule. The most obvious of these is her assumption of male attire. Habibullah maintains that cross dressing helped Raziya cultivate her popularity with the people of Delhi—some of her most fervent supporters—since it allowed her to ride out in public and undertake state business “in the manner of kings,” and helped to dispel the “impression of

<sup>7</sup> For a fascinating contemporary example, see Dan Bilefsky, “Albanian Custom Fades: Woman as Family Man,” *The New York Times*, 25 June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> In further support of this idea, Emrani observes that Āzarmidokht was “presented with a beard on her coins . . . to emphasize the fact that the monarch was not a woman.” Others, however, have attributed the image of a man on her coins to the “reuse of older coins” in the absence of time to mint new ones; and, alternatively, to a male co-ruler. See Daryaei, 36; Pourshariati, 206.

effeminacy and weakness that her sex was likely to create” (Habibullah, 765-66). Writing about three quarters of a century after her death, the medieval Indo-Persian poet-historian Amir Khosrow (d. 1325) describes both the debilitating effect of *purdah*, the traditional seclusion for females, upon Raziya’s ability to rule, and the freedom engendered by her emergence from it:

For several months, her face was veiled—  
 her sword’s ray flashed, lightning-like, from behind the screen.  
 Since the sword remained in the sheath,  
 many rebellions were left unchecked.  
 With a royal blow, she tore away the veil;  
 she showed her face’s sun from behind the screen.  
 The [lioness] showed so much force  
 that brave men bent low before her. (Amir Khosrow, 1988, 49)

Her coinage also conveyed a sense of male legitimacy or a striving for it. Some of her coins bore both her name and that of her father; Iltutmish was proclaimed as *al-soltān al-a’zam* (the greatest sultan) and Raziya, *al-soltān al-mo’azzam* (the great sultan), and identified as *bent al-soltān* (daughter of the sultan). Later coins named Raziya alone (Jackson 1998, 187, 195, n. 40; Wright 1936, 40). Perhaps significantly, she appears both on the coins and in the early histories with the gender-neutral and awe-inspiring sobriquet of sultan: the king, the leader.<sup>9</sup> Centuries later, in retelling the story of Iltutmish’s designation of Raziya as his successor, one Mughal-era historian has the sultan saying of Raziya that “although she is in appearance a woman, yet in her mental qualities she is a man and in truth she is better than [my] sons” (Nezām al-Din Ahmad, I, 75).

Raziya’s success in identifying as a man benefited from surprisingly flexible conceptions of gender in medieval Perso-Islamic culture. Although, as in Western medieval societies, the categories of “male” and “female” were sharply delineated, with the majority of positive attributes arrogated to men and negative ones to women, evidence also exists that, in certain cases, one’s biological sex did not necessarily determine one’s gender—that, in fact, by behaving as men, some women could become them, with all of the positive and powerful attributes associated with men at that time.

This notion emerges in literary, mystical, and historical texts across a broad geographical and chronological expanse. The *Shāhnāma*, credited with shaping norms in Perso-Islamic societies for centuries, presents numerous examples of

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, some contemporary historians feminize her title by calling her “sultana” or “queen.”

masculine women who are on a par with male characters (Omidshar, 89). Gordāfarid, a legendary heroine who was the daughter of the warrior Gazdaham, defends a fortress against a Turanian onslaught led by Sohrāb. Compared to a lion, she dons the armor and helmet of a knight and challenges members of the opposing army to single combat (Ferdowsi, II, 184-90). In the story of the world-conquering exploits of Alexander the Great, the king encounters a group of Amazon-like women in a city called Harum. The right sides of these celibate female warriors have breasts, while the left sides resemble those of men who “wear armor on the day of battle” (Ferdowsi, VII, 74:1237-38). If a woman chooses to take a husband, she is forced to leave the city. Any daughter born of that union is closely examined. If she is feminine and enjoys “color and scent,” she remains where she is. If she is masculine (*mardvash*) and proud, she is sent to Harum to be brought up in the warrior’s tradition (Ferdowsi, VII, 75:1267-69). No shame attaches to these women for their masculine traits; rather, Ferdowsi describes them admiringly.

In mystical circles, a woman’s ability to transcend her gender appears to have been accepted as a matter of course. Many famous female mystics, like their counterparts in Western societies, were paid the ultimate compliment of being not women, but men. The Persian mystic and poet ‘Attār (d. ca. 1221) maintained that “on the day of judgment when the call is sounded, [saying] ‘[Arise] O men,’ the first who steps forth in the line of men is the [virgin] Mary” (Omidshar, 88). Of an early mystic, Rabi’a, it was reportedly said, “When a woman walks in the way of God, she cannot be called a ‘woman’”—she is, rather, a man (Schimmel, 19). A great female mystic of India who lived at about the same time as Raziya, Fātema of Indarpat, was portrayed as a man whom God had sent to earth “in the bodily form of a woman!” (Nezām al-Din Awliyā’, 103).

Such designations were based on a broader connotation of “man” than one defined solely by biological sex. Annemarie Schimmel maintains that the noun “man” (*rajul* in Arabic, *mard* in Persian) can refer to “any individual who earnestly strives toward God, without making any direct reference to the biological gender of the individual in question” (Schimmel, 20). Likewise, in some mystical circles the concept of manliness had less to do with one’s biological sex and more with one’s devotion, and the degree to which one is “purified by the light of the intellect and of spiritual guidance” (Schimmel, 77).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, this concept has its parallels in early and medieval Christianity, in which “animus virilus” (manly spirit) “signified virtue and spiritual development for both sexes. While not stripped of gendered meaning, maleness became a moral quality as well as a biological fact” (Hotchkiss, 19).

That one's biological sex did not always determine one's gender is reflected in the Persian proverb, "Not every woman is a woman/not every man a man/God did not make identical/the fingers of one hand," as well as an Arabic proverb whose origins are attributed to thirteenth-century northern India: "Whoever seeks the Lord is a male, whoever seeks the [world to come] is a passive pederast, whoever seeks the world is a female" (Schimmel, 78, 76). By extension, the poet-philosopher Nāser Khosrow (d. ca. 1072) wrote that the "Prophet was the only true man, while all others are but women" (Schimmel, 77).

Even outside of royal and mystical circles, the idea existed that women could and should be like men. Less than a century after Raziya's death, Amir Khosrow advised his daughter to be manly, albeit in a distinctly womanly way:

A woman is best, who is like a man in countenance  
 So that, to veiled women, she's a husband.  
 A woman, if she's a man, and a man of prudence  
 The needle and the spindle are her spear and arrow. . . .  
 (Amir Khosrow 1982, 39: 382-85)<sup>11</sup>

Several centuries later, in Mughal India, no stigma appears to have adhered to royal women who behaved in a manlike way.<sup>12</sup> In her memoirs, the Mughal princess Golbadan Begim (d. 1603) describes two female guests at an imperial gathering held in Agra. These elites of Timurid Central Asia wore men's clothing, played polo and shot with the bow and arrow. Lisa Balabanlilar observes that "for all their conspicuous unconventionality, it is noteworthy that these uncommon women were not treated as eccentric social outcasts but were . . . honored guests at the imperial family's Mystic Feast" (Balabanlilar, 125).

### **Controversial Cross Dressing?**

Naturally, not all medieval attempts at cross dressing, whether in the East or the West, met with approval. For example, it was Joan of Arc's resumption of male dress while in jail that largely precipitated her final condemnation and

<sup>11</sup> To be a "husband to veiled women" likely means that she will protect their modesty as would a husband. See also Gabbay 2010, 41-65, for a discussion of how both Khosrow and the earlier poet Nezami blur gender distinctions in their work.

<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Hindu thinking about gender may have indirectly influenced ruling Muslims in thirteenth-century India. Bullough and Bullough maintain that among major religions, the idea that male and female principles are present in both sexes—as well as in the Supreme Being—was "most strongly entrenched in Hinduism where some forms of Hindu esoteric belief still hold androgyny as an ideal to be pursued" (Bullough and Bullough, 6).

execution (Schibanoff, 31-33). Some medieval historians, writing well after her rule ended, attribute Raziya's deposition to her donning of male attire and "performance" as a man. As will be seen, 'Esāmi (d. ca. 1350) asserts that her riding out among the people in male clothing caused "everybody from the lowest to the highest" to become suspicious of her ('Esāmi, II, 253).

In fact, female transvestism is sometimes viewed as a threat to social hierarchies. A relatively robust literature on the subject explores cases when cross dressing was acceptable in medieval Western societies and when it was not. Valerie R. Hotchkiss argues that transvestism "can be sanctioned or even lauded, if the woman does not challenge male authority or if she disguises herself only temporarily and is situated in a literary setting. If the woman uses male dress to assume power over men, cross dressing is evil" (Hotchkiss, 128). Susan Schibanoff maintains that if a woman "passed" as a man, her transvestism was acceptable, even lauded. If she remained recognizable as a woman, as did Joan of Arc, it was not (Schibanoff, 42-53).

Certainly some Muslim societies show little tolerance for cross dressing.<sup>13</sup> The high textual tradition of Islam condemns cross dressing, as does that of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> A *hadith* declares that the Prophet Mohammad "cursed the man who dressed like women and the woman who dressed like men."<sup>15</sup> Yet, as in Christian societies, what is acceptable in reality often diverges significantly from what is prescribed. Michelle Lee Guy writes of contemporary Islamic societies that most "show high tolerance or acceptance of women wearing 'male' or 'neutral' attires such as jeans and t-shirts, and their male-leaning identity."<sup>16</sup> It is not unreasonable to assume that imperial women, saints, and other extraordinary women who lived in cultures strongly influenced by pre-Islamic Persian and Turko-Mongol precedents could have worn tunics and other male attire without causing an uproar.

In the case of Raziya, it is unlikely that scandal arising from her assumption of male attire led to her deposition. Peter Jackson observes that although the Turkish slaves who surrounded her father brought Raziya to power, they likely did so with the idea that they would be able to manipulate her (Jackson, 47). Meanwhile, although she showed them favor, she demonstrated no signs of

<sup>13</sup> To give but one example from the contemporary world, in 2009 the journalist Lubna Hussein was arrested along with twelve other women and threatened with lashing for wearing loose-fitting trousers to a café in the Sudan. See Gettleman and Arafat.

<sup>14</sup> See Deuteronomy (22:5): "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God."

<sup>15</sup> Abu Dāwud, XXXII, no. 4087, cited in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures* III, s.v. "Sexualities: Transvestism."

<sup>16</sup> See *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures* III, s.v. "Sexualities: Transvestism."

being malleable. In fact, she took many steps to assert her autonomy and to break their monopoly. Her patronage of Jamāl al-Din Yāqut (who was not a Turk), her emergence from *pardah*, and her coinage can all be seen in this light (Habibullah, 764-68; Jackson, 185-88). These demonstrations of autonomy proved too much for the Turks, leading them to depose her and enthrone someone they thought might be more submissive: her brother. Scandal over perceived immorality or transgressions of gender-based mores, however, did not contribute to their decision. Jackson argues that “however scandalous [her behavior] might have been to the Tājik ‘*olamā*’ of Delhi, it would surely have had less impact on the Turkish military,” who were accustomed to seeing women in powerful positions (Jackson, 189).

That the same fate would likely have befallen her had she been a man is demonstrated in the shortness of many of her brothers’ reigns. In fact, Raziya’s rule stands out for its vigor and relative length, which exceeded that of both the brother who preceded her and the one who immediately followed her.<sup>17</sup> All came to power during a transitional period during which, even if one were male, the likelihood of remaining on the throne for more than a few months was weak.

Early assessments of Raziya’s rule make no mention of gender-based transgressions.<sup>18</sup> Menhāj does write, somewhat morosely, that she was “endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings; but, as she did not attain the destiny, in her creation, of being computed among men, of what advantage were all these excellent qualifications unto her?” (Menhāj, I, 457; tr. I, 637-38). Yet I believe Menhāj uses her femaleness here as a foil to avoid placing blame for her deposition where it belongs: on the activism of the Turkish slave group. That group was growing ever more powerful as the historian was writing his *Tabaqāt-e Nāseri*, which he co-dedicated to his patrons, the sultan Nāser al-Din Mahmud, son of Iltutmish<sup>19</sup> and Nāser al-Din’s deputy, Balaban the Lesser, a powerful member of the slave group and the head of the dynasty later replacing that of Iltutmish. Underlining that group’s role in the removal of a popular sultan would hardly have been a politically expedient move.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Firuz Shah ruled for less than seven months before he was executed. Bahrām Shah’s reign lasted just over two years; he was “overthrown when many of his commanders mutinied and stormed Delhi” (Jackson, 47).

<sup>18</sup> The “favor” that she showed Jamāl al-Din Yāqut, no matter how it has been interpreted by later historians, hardly appears in a damning light in Menhāj’s account. The same word for favor or preference, *qorbat*, is used with regard to those servants of the state who had access to Sultan Iltutmish (Menhāj, I, 458; Raverty, I, 638).

<sup>19</sup> Not to be confused with the earlier offspring of Iltutmish of the same name.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Jackson observes that Menhāj, writing soon before Balaban’s accession, seems “to

Amir Khosrow adopts a more neutral tone when he attributes the end of Raziya's rule to the hand of an inscrutable fortune, not to her sex:

For three years in which her hand was strong  
 No one lay a finger on one of her orders.  
 In the fourth, since the page had turned from her matters  
 The pen of fate drew a line through her. (Amir Khosrow 1988, 49:7-9)

### Fabrications and Elaborations

Even though Raziya was able to divest herself of femininity during her reign, intervening centuries have served to re-feminize her. Medieval and even modern historians present heavily gendered and even erotically charged accounts of her reign and deposition. 'Esāmi, writing in the mid-fourteenth century, is at first relatively restrained in his depiction. He writes that as the top-ranking emirs were lamenting the failings of Firuz Shah as leader, Raziya "let loose her scarf from the window," declaring herself ready to rule and asserting that the king had chosen her as his heir-apparent. The chiefs debated the matter and decided to enthrone her, a move that was welcomed by the populace. But 'Esāmi then adopts a distinctly gendered approach. He indicates that she had ruled successfully for three years when a radical change occurred:

I am told that she came out of *purdah* suddenly, discarded her modesty and became jovial. One day, she put on male attire and cap and came out of the exalted palace. Then she mounted an elephant and went about publicly. Then, I heard that for another six months that daughter of the renowned king continued to hold a public durbar; everyone high and low used to enjoy the sight of her face. After a month or two, she began to ride escorted by the State officers. This having continued for a full six months, everybody from the lowest to the highest became suspicious of her.

I am told that a slave of the Ethiopian race used to stand by her side when she mounted her horse. With one hand he used to hold her arm and help her to mount her horse firmly. . . . When the grandees of the State noticed the liberties he took openly, they felt scandalized and said to one another privately: 'From the way this demon has made himself more powerful in the State than other servants, it would be no wonder if he found his way to seize the royal seal.' (Esāmi, 253-54)

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have felt inhibited from revealing circumstances which cast his benefactor in a poor light" (Jackson, 48). The situation is complicated by the fact that Balaban received an important promotion from Raziya.

The historian then attributes a long disquisition on the failings of women to the Turks who have become determined to remove Raziya from the throne:

All women are in the snare of the devil; in privacy, all of them do Satan's work. Confidence should not be placed in women; devils should not be relied upon. At no time can faithfulness be expected of women. Faithfulness is masculine; expect it only from men. In public women look better than a flower garden, but in privacy they are worse than a fireplace. When the passions of a pious woman are inflamed, she concedes to an intimacy even with a dog. If a man places confidence in a woman, she makes him a laughing stock. A woman is a sign of danger wherever she [may] be, since she is of devilish disposition. To wear the crown and fill the throne of kings does not benefit a woman; this is the role exclusively meant for the experienced type of man. A woman cannot acquit herself well as a ruler, for she is essentially deficient in intellect. It is better for a woman to occupy herself with the *charkha* (spindle) since attainment of high position on her part would make her intoxicated. (Esāmi, 254)

The "furious" Turks decide to undo their mistake since "it would not be consistent with our manhood to bow through stupidity to a woman, particularly now when the world is suspecting her" (Esāmi, 255). Esāmi writes that they confronted Raziya the very next morning as she was holding court. Killing Jamāl al-Din Yāqut on the spot, they seized the sultan, bound her and sent her in heavy chains to Tabarhindh. A year and a half later, Altunapa (or, as in this account, "Latuna"), depicted here as a raiding wanderer accompanied by a small band, attacked and captured that fortress. Freeing Raziya without recognizing her, he married her. Subsequently, Raziya revealed to him the secret of her identity. She encouraged Altunapa to march an army upon Delhi, and this stalwart official was forced to give in: "When Latuna heard this from his wife, he had no alternative beyond giving his consent" (idem, 259).

Esāmi depicts the ensuing battles as humiliating defeats of Raziya's forces. He writes: "I am told that, as a result of the first attack [by the new sultan's troops], defeat was inflicted in that battlefield on the troops of [Raziya] in the twinkling of an eye. She took to flight and proceeded to [Tabarhindh], her eyes shedding tears of blood at every step" (idem, 261). A second attack launched by Raziya three or four months later resulted in a complete rout of her troops. "As for herself, she was dismayed in fight and fled in the direction of Kaithal where a group of Hindus, immediately as they saw such a bird fall into their trap, captured her treacherously and killed her as well as Latuna. It was in the year 638 [1240] that they killed them in a dreary desert" (idem, 263).

Apart from the inaccuracies he introduces into the account—to name but a few, the Turks did not confront Raziya in court but rather lured her out of it;

Altunapa was the commander of Tabarhindh, not a roaming raider; there is no evidence that Jamāl al-Din Yāqut was a slave—‘Esāmi adds lurid color and as signs to Raziya the worst traits associated with women during his era.

The traveler Ebn Battuta (d. 1368 or 1369), likewise writing about a century after the events had transpired, presents a more sympathetic but highly melodramatic version of the story. While not directly charging Raziya with sexual immorality, as some later historians did, he attributes her deposition at least in part to her association with Jamāl al-Din Yāqut: “She mounted [a] horse like [a] man armed with bow and quiver; and she would not cover her face. Then, she was accused of connections with an Abyssinian slave of hers. The army . . . agreed to depose her and have her marry. She was consequently deposed and married to one of her relations . . .” (Ebn Battuta, 34).<sup>21</sup>

After Raziya’s troops suffered a defeat, the historian reports, the sultan fled and, hungry and tired, asked a peasant whom she found tilling the soil for something to eat.

He gave her a piece of bread which she ate and fell asleep; and she was dressed like a man. But, while she was asleep the peasant’s eyes fell upon a gown . . . studded with jewels which she was wearing under her clothes. He realized that she was a woman. So he killed her, plundered her and drove away her horse, and then buried her in his field.

The peasant then tried to sell Raziya’s garment, but the people at the market becoming suspicious, he confessed to her murder and pointed out where she was buried. A dome was built over her grave “which is now visited, and people obtain blessings from it” (Ebn Battuta, 34-35).

Ebn Battuta’s narrative—no doubt based on accounts current in fourteenth-century Delhi—immerses the sultan into a universe resembling that of the tales of the so-called holy tranvestites in medieval Western literature who, as James Anson observes, “move in a world of pure erotic romance” (Anson, 11).

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<sup>21</sup> Later historians have spun Raziya’s favor toward Jamāl al-Din Yāqut into a full fledged romance. Edward Thomas (d. 1886) writes, in prose suited to any Harlequin-style bodice-ripper, “It was not that a virgin Queen was forbidden to love—she might have indulged herself in a submissive Prince Consort, or reveled almost unchecked in the dark recesses of the Palace Harem—but wayward fancy pointed in a wrong direction, and led her to prefer a person employed about her Court, an Abyssinian moreover, the favours extended to whom the Tūrki nobles resented with one accord” (Thomas, 106). A poster advertising the 1983 film “Razia Sultan,” starring Hema Malini, shows the sultan in close embrace with a man whose skin is significantly darker than hers; her eyes are closed in apparent ecstasy. In case audiences miss the point, the word “eros” appears in upper-case letters at the poster’s top left.

The stories of these women, whose sexual identities are eventually revealed, turn “on the concept of woman as ritual sacrifice”; they hinge on the moment when “the woman’s body is finally relocated in its cultural place” (Schibanoff, 128). Likewise, the ornamenting of Raziya’s story reveals at work an imagination that reveals, however sympathetically, in the exposure of feminine “weakness.” Like Joan of Arc, Raziya has been “rescripted and recled to serve the interests of God, king, country, and finally masculinity—male heterosexual desire—itself” (Schibanoff, 54).

## **Conclusion**

Raziya’s identification as a male in order to achieve and maintain power raises many uneasy questions. Does her relative success, based as it was upon a suppression of her femaleness, truly represent empowerment for women? If a woman conforms to androcentric models in order to succeed, is she disrupting gender hierarchies or affirming them? As Hotchkiss writes of female transvestites in medieval Europe, “because of the social implications of gender inversion, interpretation often remains ambiguous” (Hotchkiss, 9).

Yet I believe that Raziya’s example, despite its ambiguity, symbolizes a step forward for women. By showing that some flexibility toward female sovereignty existed in medieval Islamic societies, especially for sultans’ daughters who identified as men, her rule reveals that gender identity was far less stable in these societies than is often thought, and that gender could be constructed by means other than one’s biological sex. Such a construction perforce admits some “femaleness” into the category of “good” (i.e., “male”).

It is difficult to think of a more accurate way of expressing the cultural work accomplished by the paradox of Raziya than the following statement of Hotchkiss, who writes of medieval Western cross-dressers that they

contradict the idea of sex as the determinant for gender behavior. The underlying gender inequity that requires male metaphors and paradigms is balanced, if not outweighed, by the implicit admission that some women, at least, are equal or even superior to men. Redefining the female role, without radically displacing the androcentric archetype of the hero, the cross-dressed woman compels authors and audiences to confront her as a sexual being, a socially defined gender, an ‘opposite’ sex, and a fellow human. (Hotchkiss, 129)

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