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Empress Nur Jahan and Female Empowerment:

A Critical Analysis of a Long-Forgotten Mughal Portrait

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Art and Art History
College of the Arts
University of South Florida

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of a seventeenth-century watercolor portrait of the Mughal Empress Nur Jahan (r. 1611-1627). Titled *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket* and created by court painter Abu'l Hasan, the painting has not been the subject of a scholarly work before. In this unorthodox depiction of a female, Nur Jahan is shown sporting androgynous attire while actively loading a matchlock musket. Through visual and textual analysis, I read this portrait as a symbol of an empowered female and argue that once its meaning is decoded it can serve as a complex historical document that complicates Nur Jahan's persona. Moving beyond romanticized legends about the empress that have been uncritically perpetuated in pre-modern and modern scholarship, I study Abu'l Hasan's portrayal of the empress as a martial woman within the framework of the larger genre of Mughal female portraiture. Additionally, I consider *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket* in relation to portrayals of warrior women found in Indo-Persian history and Arabic literature, and demonstrate that the portrait of the empress is part of a *silsila*, a lineage of powerful women in Islamic cultures who staged their political and military might through performances of cross-dressing. I argue that the performative act of cross-dressing allowed women to subvert the norms of their patriarchal society. By bringing this surprisingly overlooked portrait of Nur Jahan to the attention of art historians, my thesis seeks to rectify her previous misrepresentations while demonstrating the need to integrate visual evidence to the biographies of prominent figures who have been pushed to the peripheries of history.

Introduction

A watercolor painting currently held in the collection at the Rampur Raza Library in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, India depicts a single figure sporting a golden musket, a turban, and jewels.[1] The individual stands erect and imposing before a sparse, green background. At first glance, the posture, costume, and accessories make this person appear to be a nobleman. However, upon closer examination, one notices that the figure is female provided the slight indication of breasts, a fact that is confirmed by the title attributed to the work: *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket* (fig. 1).[2]

Completed at the Mughal court in Agra, India, during the reign of Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket* (from here on, *Nur Jahan*) is a relatively small work, executed on a 98 x 50 mm. paperboard and mounted to a folio.[3] It features empress Nur Jahan (r. 1611-1627), the only co-sovereign in the history of the Mughal Empire, who earned this rank in 1611 through her marriage to Jahangir as his twentieth and last wife.[4] The portrait of Nur Jahan appears within a *muraqqa*‘ (an album of paintings), facing a second portrait on the shared recto

[1]Note to Readers: In my readings of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu words, I follow the rules of Arabic orthography, except for instances when I am quoting from a source. I indicate the dates in the Gregorian calendar, with Hegira dates provided when relevant. For translations of place names, I use the most familiar English form, where available. The images reproduced in this thesis belong to the public domain.

[2] Reproduced in Barbara Schmitz and Ziyaud-Din A. Desai, *Mughal and Persian Painting and Illustrated Manuscripts in the Raza Library, Rampur* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2006), 49. The figure has been identified by Indian art connoisseur Karl Jamshed Khandalavala and corroborated by others as Nur Jahan.

[3] Ruby Lal, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 147.

[4] Ibid., 8. Mughal emperors could marry numerous wives, particularly to build political alliances. However, with the exception of Nur Jahan, these wives were not elevated to status of co-sovereigns. See Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 167.

side that is similar to it in subject and in style, featuring a male figure. This male is possibly a son of Jahangir, Nur Jahan's husband (fig. 2).[5]

The portrait bears the signature of the court painter Abu'l Hasan, one of Jahangir's favorite portrait artists known for his naturalistic style of painting. In 1618, Jahangir gave Abu'l Hasan the sobriquet *Nadir al-Zaman*, meaning "Wonder of the Age," in recognition of the painter's exceptional skills.[6] Although the painting bears no date of completion, the fact that Jahangir's son and successor Shan Jahan, who ruled Mughal India from 1628 to 1658, imprisoned his step-mother Nur Jahan makes it unlikely that he would have been the commissioner of this artwork. The title awarded to Abu'l Hasan, as well as Shah Jahan's antagonism toward Nur Jahan, allows us to safely date the painting to a period during the final nine years of Nur Jahan's rule.[7] Jahangir's memoir, the *Jahangirnama* (The Book of Jahangir), in which the emperor chronicled his reign, told his accounts of courtly events and encounters (such as royal celebrations, visits by ambassadors, and hunting feats), and recorded his observations of the natural world (including his interest in bodily decay, and zoological, as well as botanical life), contains important clues about Nur Jahan. In two passages from Jahangir's memoirs the emperor describes his wife as "a tiger-slayer." This favorable analogy, written by Jahangir between 1617 and 1620, and his interest in visually recording contemporary events, supports my attribution of the painting to a time during Nur Jahan's lifetime, when she was known to be an active hunter, displaying her prowess among the male members of the court.

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[5] Reproduced in Schmitz and Desai, *Mughal and Persian Painting and Illustrated* Manuscripts, 49.

[6] Lal, *Empress*, 145. The sobriquet *Nadir al-Zaman* appears on this portrait, indicating the work was likely completed after this honorific title was bestowed on Abu'l Hasan.

[7] Schmitz and Desai, *Mughal and Persian Painting and Illustrated* Manuscripts, 49. This work has been dated to ca. 1617.

The painting by Abu'l Hasan portrays Nur Jahan as a powerful, confident figure, wearing androgynous attire and loading a musket. This depiction is striking for two reasons. First, not only does it appear to be the only extant portrait of Nur Jahan that represents her in the guise of a man, but my research has revealed no other Mughal portrait that displays a woman in this manner. Second, and significantly for a history of Mughal female portraiture, this representation contradicts descriptions of Nur Jahan found in Mughal legends. These legends describe Nur Jahan in conventional terms, as an empress whose beauty, grace, and nurturing nature are noted as her greatest assets. In Abu'l Hasan's portrayal, on the other hand, Nur Jahan is a martial woman who deliberately and effectively conceals her femininity. Given its unique features and thought-provoking iconography, it is surprising that *Nur Jahan* has escaped scholarly attention. Today, there exists no scholarly work dedicated solely to a discussion of this painting. This oversight is all the more intriguing in light of the fact that modern and contemporary scholars have dedicated volumes to discussions of Mughal royal portraiture, including portraits of Jahangir.

Scholars' neglect of this portrait can be attributed to the fact that the painting does not present a romanticized portrait of Nur Jahan. At least four other portraits depict her veiled, with long hair, a small waist, and full breasts, a figure typical of the genre of Mughal female portraiture. Art historians' uncritical acceptance of Nur Jahan's descriptions as found in Mughal legends might also have contributed to this oversight, leading to a dismissal of Abu'l Hasan's portrait as an oddity. As a result, this painting that does not align with stereotypical descriptions of Nur Jahan has been left out of scholarly discussions of Mughal portraiture.

In this thesis, I attempt to address this gap in scholarship on this painting in particular, and on Mughal female portraiture in general. Having attributed this work to the final years of

Nur Jahan's reign, I ask the following questions. What textual sources inform our current knowledge of Nur Jahan's life and understanding of her activities, and how reliable is the image they present of Nur Jahan? Is this piece an anomaly within Mughal female portraiture, or does it represent a deliberate shift in Mughal depictions of female figures? If a deliberate attempt, who might have been the catalyst for this new direction—the artist, the commissioner, or both? Regardless of who might have commissioned it, does this work present an accurate representation of Nur Jahan's "self-fashioning," or does it seek to construct an idealized, if imagined, portrait of a female leader?[8] Last but not least, is it possible to study this painting as part of a long, if overlooked, Islamic tradition of portrayals of royal or warrior women?

To provide answers to these questions, I have arranged the three chapters of my thesis as follows. In chapter one, I review historical records pertaining to the life of Nur Jahan and analyze twentieth-century scholarship on her biography. The pre-modern and modern textual sources studied in this chapter provide insight into the character of the empress and the power that she held at court from the perspective of her contemporaries and later-day authors. Paying particular attention to the often neglected period of Nur Jahan's life—the portion after her marriage to the emperor, and the time when she created a junta—I draw attention to the power she wielded at the Mughal court to lay the ground for a more multi-faceted portrayal of Nur Jahan that this study will propose through my reading of Abu'l Hasan's work.[9] My reading of *Nur Jahan* in this light reveals how modern scholars perpetuated the romanticized aspects of Nur Jahan's biography as told in Mughal legends. My analyses of the primary and secondary sources on Nur Jahan and

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[8] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

[9] Sir Thomas Roe, the British ambassador to the Mughal Empire from 1616-1619, mentions that Nur Jahan's junta is comprised of her father, brother, and her stepson Khurram. See Ellison Banks Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," in *The Magnificent Mughals*, ed. Zeenut Ziad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35.

their shortcomings bring to the fore a need to complement textual sources with visual documentation, and demonstrate the need for a close visual analysis of *Nur Jahan* in the following chapter.

In order to identify the place of *Nur Jahan* within the larger genre of Mughal female portraiture and highlight its rarity, I begin chapter two with a discussion of the conventional tropes used in Mughal depictions of women. Early depictions of Mughal noblewomen are rare; however, it is the distinctly performative appearance of the empress in *Nur Jahan* that I find intriguing. A comparison of illustrations from literary and biographical texts will show the formulaic elements used in the representations of women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal painting. This analysis facilitates a better reading of *Nur Jahan* as a deliberate departure from conventions. This discussion is followed by a more focused analysis wherein I bring *Nur Jahan* in proximity to other Mughal portraits of royalty and courtiers commissioned during the reigns of Jahangir, as well as Jahangir's father Akbar and his son Shah Jahan, who, like Jahangir were also great patrons of the arts. When juxtaposed with traditional depictions of women from the *Hamzanama* and *Tutinama* (Tales of a Parrot), or portraits of Nur Jahan by other artists, *Nur Jahan*'s idiosyncrasies become more apparent and help to underscore the unconventional aspects of Abu'l Hasan's work.

Having identified the unique features of *Nur Jahan* in relation to similar female portraiture, in chapter three I move to a discussion of gender norms and sartorial practices in seventeenth-century Mughal India to provide an analysis of Abu'l Hasan's rendering of Nur Jahan in the guise of a male. Here, I trace the history of cross-dressing in Indo-Persian culture—a topic largely omitted in historical and art-historical studies—and examine the literary and visual descriptions of warrior women found in illustrated Arabic epics. This analysis allows me to show

Nur Jahan's place within the long history of powerful women who presented themselves to the public eye in the guise of a male to convey political, militaristic, and physical strength in a visual and social code that was heavily gendered. Cross-dressing helped Nur Jahan to identify herself with the characteristic attributes of a sound leader acknowledged by the populace. When considered as part of a long and established tradition of cross-dressing in Islamic cultures, Abu'l Hasan's portrayal of Nur Jahan no longer appears as an anomaly, but a perpetuation of an intricate performance in Islamic societies. It is through locating Nur Jahan's place amongst these women that the extraordinary history of Islamic women may be highlighted.

My analyses in these three chapters establish my reading of *Nur Jahan* as an integral part of the history of Mughal female portraiture at multiple levels: as a symbol of an empowered female, as a complex, constructed historical document that sheds light on Nur Jahan's persona and exceptional position as the sole Mughal empress, and as a continuation in the chain of Islamic representations of female royalty and warriors. My reading of *Nur Jahan* presents an alternative, biography, that broadens our way of seeing an ambitious woman who has been overlooked, misrepresented, and even maligned in history. Once its meaning has been discovered and the possible circumstances of its creation have been revealed, even if partially, *Nur Jahan* becomes as an integral part of Mughal art history, wherein women exercised greater authority than scholars have commonly acknowledged.

Chapter 1: "The Light of the World": Life of Nur Jahan

Biographical literature on Nur Jahan is sparse and unreliable, often characterized by uncritical reiterations of tenuous legends codified in writing in the seventeenth-century. A lack of scholarship on Nur Jahan is a reflection of the current state of the field, wherein, until the 1960s, scholars did not pay sufficient attention to the histories of women. In the1960s, to rectify this oversight, scholars began to mine textual and visual sources and worked to construct the biographies of women who had been neglected from historical narratives or studied from patriarchal vantage points. To contribute to these efforts, in this chapter, I provide an overview of legends on Nur Jahan, and study how by carefully selecting and re-narrating certain elements from her life, legends sought to mold her into an orthodox female type, undermining a self-fashioned persona, which I argue is represented in Abu'l Hasan's work. I then study how these legends shaped modern literature on Nur Jahan's life and activities and point out their failure to address the exceptional role she served in the Mughal Empire.

Existing scholarship on Nur Jahan is limited to works by Mohammad Shujauddin and Razia Shujauddin, Ellison Banks Findly, and Ruby Lal. Their contributions to scholarship highlight a woman who possessed, in her own right, the knowledge and ability to serve as co-sovereign to the Mughal Empire. Since the 1960s, scholars have constructed Nur Jahan's life and activities from dispersed historical records and written accounts. Many of the written accounts of the lives of Muslim women in the pre-modern era come from European travelers, ambassadors, and diplomats, whose work often centered on the differences in European and Indo-Persian cultures. These European records frequently describe Muslims as sharply segregated into

barbaric and slothful men and erotic and sensual women. The accounts of Nur Jahan by European travelers often romanticize her beauty and chicanery, while dismissing her power as stemming only from Jahangir's ineffectiveness due to his opium and alcohol addiction. This, however, does not provide credit to Nur Jahan's wit to negotiate an honored placed beside the emperor, above his other wives and male members of the court. Some of these European accounts provide valuable insight into court dynamics, but often they are the products of Eurocentric, Orientalizing, and colonial perspectives, and therefore require close scrutiny before they can be used as reliable sources. European sources also include the most scandalous of tales to support and perpetuate the authors' assumptions about the men and women of the "exotic" Mughal society. Though these sources capture splendorous courts, foreign practices, and whispers from all levels of society, they also reinforce conventional portrayals of powerful females and owing to their romantic appeal, they fail to provide a full portrayal of Nur Jahan's character and contributions to the Mughal Empire as empress.

The impact of these unreliable European accounts on modern scholarship has been definitive, and until recently scholars have largely relied on them. Rooted in tradition and lacking contemporary voices, oral accounts were codified in writing by seventeenth-century Mughal historian Khafi Khan; seventeenth-century Dutch merchant Pieter van den Broecke; eighteenth-century Scottish writer and army officer in the East India Company Alexander Dow; eighteenth-century Italian mercenary Niccolao Manucci; and nineteenth-century government administrator in British India Mountstuart Elphinstone. Mughal legends continued to form the foundation of Indian history for hundreds of years and their veracity remained unquestioned.[10] With the

[10] Eugenia Vanina, "Roads of (Mis)Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century)," *Indian Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (2013): 267.

primary sources written by a small group of elite males, and no memoir attributed to Nur Jahan herself, pre-modern and modern histories of Nur Jahan remain incomplete accounts that fail to do justice to such an important historical figure.

The legends about Nur Jahan often distort historical facts and use creative license to fill-in any unknown details. They focus on stereotypical, gendered sociopolitical tropes that reify expectations of women in positions of power. Below, I discuss two such legends: Mehr-un-Nisa's (future Nur Jahan) alleged miraculous roadside birth, and the meeting of Mehr-un-Nisa and Prince Salim (future Jahangir). Together, these legends shaped and perpetuated a stereotypical image of an empress that is in striking contrast to the self-fashioned identity portrayed in Abu'l Hasan's *Nur Jahan.*[11]

Written over a century and a half after Nur Jahan's birth in 1577, Khafi Khan's *Muntakhab-al Lubab* (*Selected Records of the Wise and Pure*), serves as the earliest narrative of Mehr-un-Nisa's birth, and recounts how she was abandoned by her parents soon after a miraculous birth, a trope commonly provided for legendary figures. In Khafi Khan's rendition, Mehr-un-Nisa's parents travel from Tehran to Agra to begin a new life, but are robbed along the route.[12] Destitute, they abandon their newborn daughter on the roadside, where she is found by Malik Masud, the leader of the caravan with which the parents were traveling. Seeking a woman to nurse Mehr-un-Nisa, Masud serendipitously hands Mehr-un-Nisa to her own mother, reuniting the daughter with her family.[13] Legends written a century after Nur Jahan's reign foreshadow the

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[11] Mehr-un-Nisa means "Sun Amongst Women," and was Nur Jahan's birth-given name. See Parvati Sharma, *Jahangir: An Intimate Portrait of a Great Mughal* (New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2018), 162.

[12] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 35.

[13] Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

powerful woman portrayed in *Nur Jahan*, inserting into history a proper origin that was needed to legitimize her arrival at the Mughal court.

Another rendition of Nur Jahan's abandonment story by Alexander Dow reads as more parabolic and miraculous. Culling information from *Mirat-ul-Waridat* (Mirror of Mystical Inspirations) by Mahommed Shuffia and *Mirat-ul-Ulum* (Mirror of Sciences) by Nazir Buchtar Chan, Dow writes in his third volume of *History of Hindostan,* that after Mehr-un-Nisa's abandonment, her mother throws herself from her horse and cries so violently that Mehr-un-Nisa's father returns to retrieve their daughter, only to find a black snake coiled around her body.[14] This version of Nur Jahan's early days in life projects Nur Jahan's presumed gift from birth to overcome crises, foretelling, perhaps, the future empress's escape from captors or being spared death by her stepson, upon his ascension to the throne.[15]

Legends of Mehr-un-Nisa's birth emphasize her integral role in bringing fortune to her family due to her "innocence and beauty." A further twist in the story appears in the second volume of *History of India,* written by Mountstuart Elphinstone, who further embellishes the story told by Khafi Khan and Dow.[16] In Elphinstone's version, Mehr-un-Nisa spends a night alone in the desert before Malik Masud discovers her.[17] As Masud seeks a wetnurse for the child, he encounters Mehr-un-Nisa's family. Though distressed and lacking personal possessions, Masud notices that Mehr-un-Nisa's father and brother are well-educated, and offers to take them

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[14] Mohammmad Shujauddin and Razia Shujauddin, *The Life and Times of Noor Jahan* (Lahore: The Caravan Book House, 1967), 2. Alexander Dow, *History of Hindustan, From the Death of Akbar, to the Complete Settlement of the Empire Under Aurungzebe*, (n.p., 1792).

[15] Lal, *Empress*, 10.

[16] The *History of India,* volume II was first published in 1843.

[17] Shujauddin and Shujauddin, *Noor Jahan*, 3.

to Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) when they arrive in Agra. The implication in this rendition is that Mehr-un-Nisa, whose beauty drew Masud to her, is the reason for the elevation of her father and brother to the emperor's notice.[18] This family that had been made destitute by thieves would become employed by Akbar. Once again, the legend attributes Mehr-un-Nisa an idealized role in securing her family's future.

In these narratives of her life, as Mehr-un-Nisa went on to become the highest-ranking woman in Mughal India, she is characterized according to prototypical femininity, as a paragon to be respected and imitated. Traditionally in both Hindu and Muslim India, narratives that tell of women's lives focus on their development prior to marriage, portraying them with characteristics and skills that are appealing to men. She not only served as a model for young women who hoped to also find happiness and success, but, through the deployment of the rags-to-riches trope, provided hope and relatability for those not born into wealth. In truth, her family had been members of the elite, and likely it was only for the sake of the legend that they were "robbed." Turning the young Nur Jahan into a role model for Mughal femininity was meant to forge a standard for girls to aspire to, and yet such distortions of her past flatten the image of a complex woman and obstruct a reliable analysis of her as an actual historical figure.

Although at birth and in her childhood the legends portray Mehr-un-Nisa as a heroine, once she meets Prince Salim, Mehr-un-Nisa transforms into a mere object of desire and is subjugated to a secondary role, as she models the loss of autonomy expected of all noble Mughal women of this time. Much like her birth legends, the stories of how she captured the affection of Jahangir vary from author to author—the common element in these variant versions, however, continues to be Mehr-un-Nisa's desirability owing to her physical beauty. In Khafi Khan's

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[18] Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India,* vol. II (London: A. Spottiswoode, 1843), 316.

Muntakhab-al Lubab, for instance, Mehr-un-Nisa and Prince Salim meet at court where the future empress often visited, since her father held an administrative position there. Overcome by desire, Prince Salim pulls Mehr-un-Nisa aside and embraces her. Hearing of the incident, and wanting to secure Mehr-un-Nisa's reputation, Akbar arranges for the marriage of Mehr-un-Nisa to the Persian adventurer Ali Quli Khan Istajlu (Sher Afgan). While legend stresses Mehr-un-Nisa's desirability, it immediately transfers the reader's attention to Prince Salim's yearnings, and thus away from Mehr-un-Nisa. Here Mehr-un-Nisa represents the beautiful, young maiden whose virtue must be maintained, as her role shifts to being the object of Prince Salim's desires. The historical woman had little in common with this fabricated character, however. Contradicting these legends are the facts of Mehr-un-Nisa's life that reveal a complicated woman who was neither young, nor virginal or particularly demure. Rather, when she met Jahangir, Mehr-un-Nisa was in her thirties, and in fact a widow, and already a mother.[19] Thus, the young, virginal, and alluring Mehr-un-Nisa of the Mughal legends was, at best, speculative, and at worst mere fabrication.

A second group of legends, retold by Elphinstone, transforms Mehr-un-Nisa into a voiceless literary tool, solely used to glorify the image of Prince Salim. In Elphinstone's retelling, Prince Salim asks Mehr-un-Nisa to hold two pigeons, while he picks flowers. When the prince stands up, he sees that she has released one of the pigeons. He asks her how the pigeon had gotten away, and she responds coquettishly by demonstrating, as she releases the other pigeon. According to the legend, this is the moment that Prince Salim falls in love with Mehr-un-Nisa.[20] Following this incident, the legend relates, Akbar learned about Prince Salim's interest in

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[19] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 36.

[20] Lal, *Empress,* 66.

Mehr-un-Nisa and arranged her marriage to Sher Afgan who was then provided a *jagir* (feudal land grant) in Bengal to remove Mehr-un-Nisa further from Prince Salim. This legend fails to explain why Akbar would send Mehr-un-Nisa away from Prince Salim, provided that she was the daughter of his minister, and from a good family. Regardless, it draws the portrait of a woman who possesses no control over her life, as decisions about her are made by the men around her.

Elphinstone's version of the legend continues with the story by reuniting the lovers. In his account, a year into Jahangir's reign the emperor sends his foster-brother to Bengal to "procure for him the possession of the object of his passion."[21] Jahangir has Mehr-un-Nisa's husband, Sher Afgan, murdered, and Mehr-un-Nisa and her daughter are brought back to court for Mehr-un-Nisa to marry Jahangir. Mehr-un-Nisa was said to be "raised to honours such as had never been enjoyed by the consort of any king of India."[22] Elphinstone's versions of the legends are particularly important as they became a popular tale of star-crossed lovers that circulated in textbooks compiled during India's rule under the British (1858-1947).[23] In these legends, Mehr-un-Nisa is a passive character that does as she is told, before earning a place beside the emperor. It is important to note that the intervals between the murder of Sher Afgan, Mehr-un-Nisa's marriage to Jahangir, and her rise in the court, were greater than Elphinstone's legend accounted, suggesting that Mehr-un-Nisa might have had wielded more control over her life. These accounts erase both Mehr-un-Nisa's first marriage and her subsequent political power, focusing on her in a very narrow point in time as a virginal, feminine embodiment of virtue. These omissions are

[21] Elphinstone, *The History of India*, 317.

[22] Ibid., 319.

[23] Shujauddin and Shujauddin, *Noor Jahan*, 3.

glaring and important because they point out the lack of concern the authors had when considering Mehr-un-Nisa as a true individual and are a reflection of the patriarchal environment in which these legends were created. When examined against historical facts, these stories become all the more untenable to serve as the primary backbone for Nur Jahan's biographies: as they turned history into legend, these stories, and the authors who perpetuated them, not only silenced an empire's only female co-sovereign, but they also portrayed her as subservient.

Admittedly, though they relegate Nur Jahan to being a protagonist in a romantic love story, the legends do contain elements that hint at the characteristics of an empress as we observe in the painting *Nur Jahan*. For instance, even though the anecdote of Mehr-un-Nisa's releasing the pigeons serves to innocently bring the two together, it can also be read as a demonstration of Mehr-un-Nisa's boldness and wit. They reflect Mehr-un-Nisa's refusal to be caged as a beautiful bird, foreshadowing her frequent outings as an empress at the court, although she was confined to the *zenana* (harem), as per Mughal traditions. Interestingly, the legends predominantly focus on a few select events from Mehr-un-Nisa's life that all occurred before she became empress. As such, they reveal only subtle clues of the portrait of this woman, whose additional side is provided by the work of by Abu'l Hasan.

The shortcomings of nineteenth-century narratives on Nur Jahan continue to reverberate in contemporary scholarship. Historians Mohammad and Razia Shujauddin dedicate their research to this female ruler who had fallen into the recesses of Mughal history. Their work, *The Life and Times of Noor Jahan,* is valuable as an example of the emerging interest in women omitted from history.[24] Following pre-modern legends, Mohammad and Razia Shujauddin begin their book with the immigration of Mehr-un-Nisa's parents from Iran to the Mughal court and

[24] *The Life and Times of Noor Jahan* was first published in 1967.

Mehr-un-Nisa's roadside birth, as told by Khafi Khan. The Shujauddins acknowledge the legends as fictitious and note the fact that the legends' various renditions grew more parabolic over time. Regardless, the Shujauddins do not fully depart from the narrative patterns of prior legends and fail to address questions that would be expected from a modern biography. For instance, one wonders why women are relegated to certain roles in history, and cast particularly as virginal brides, beautiful wives, loving mothers, courtesans, and even wicked temptresses? The authors also never question why the legends circumvent Nur Jahan's political career and omit narratives of her running her own trade business, negotiating with ambassadors, and even issuing *firmans* (royal edicts). Though the book both collects legends that have been passed down for generations and attempts to identify the legends' beginnings and timeline, it offers little in constructing a more multi-faceted portrait of Nur Jahan beyond the apocryphal birth and love stories.[25]

It was not until the end of the twentieth century that Nur Jahan's historical and quite impressive deeds would gain scholars' attention. One such scholar is Ellison Banks Findly, a contemporary historian of religion and Asian studies. Probing beyond Nur Jahan's portrayal in romantic legends Findly uses the popular legends as a starting point to interrogate Nur Jahan's life after her marriage in 1611 and to reconstruct a more complete narrative in her book *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India.*[26]

Accounts of Nur Jahan's early life surveyed in Findly's book accentuate her role in elevating the status of her family, especially the males. However, as noted earlier, Nur Jahan's family had served at the Mughal court prior to her birth, beginning with her uncle Mirza

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[25] Shujauddin and Shujauddin, *Noor Jahan*, 2.

[26] *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* was first published in 1993.

Ghiyasuddin Ali (Asaf Khan II), who served under Akbar. Her cousin (Asaf Khan III), and her father, Ghiyas Beg, were also employed by both Akbar and Jahangir.[27] Her family's close ties to the court would have facilitated a good education for Mehr-un-Nisa, an education that must have proved useful as she performed administrative roles in both the royal court and in her trade business.

Moving from the court of her youth, the young Mehr-un-Nisa married Sher Afgan in 1594 and moved to Bengal, where she gave birth to her only child, her daughter Ladli. In 1607, Sher Afgan was killed, and Mehr-un-Nisa returned to the Mughal court with her daughter. Legends that suggest the murder of her husband and her subsequent return to court was the plan of Jahangir, serve the fiction that the bond between the two lovers predated her first marriage, which does not seem to be historically accurate. However, once widowed, she likely would have returned to her father who was employed as Jahangir's minister. Upon return to the court, Mehr-un-Nisa was honored with a post to watch over Ruqayya Sultan Begam, Akbar's first wife and Jahangir's stepmother. Importantly, she was probably given this post as an honor bestowed on her father, rather than as a result of Jahangir's affections.[28] Despite the tales of star-crossed lovers, Jahangir seems to have first met Mehr-un-Nisa at the Mina Bazaar around March 21, 1611, when she was thirty-four and Jahangir was forty-two. According to the *Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri* (Fortunate Tales of Jahangir) by Muhammad Sharif Mutamid Khan, written from firsthand accounts of Jahangir, Mehr-un-Nisa caught Jahangir's eye at the Nauroz or New Year's

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[27] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 12. See for instance Manohar, *Jahangir and His Vizier, I'timad al-Daula*, from the *Shah Jahan Album*, ca. 1615, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 15 3/8 x 10 3/16 in. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 55.121.10.23.

[28] Ibid., 31.

market, and Jahangir was captivated.[29] On May 25, 1611, they were married, and Mehr-un-Nisa was given the title *Nur Mahal*, "Light of the Palace."[30] With information from the *Jahangirnama*, Findly notes that it likely took at least three years for Nur Jahan to demonstrate her abilities at advising the emperor, administering orders, or hunting before Jahangir acknowledged her prowess. Contradicting the legends that romanticize the relationship between Jahangir and Nur Jahan, Nur Jahan's rise to power seems to indicate that she had to prove her mettle before he saw her as the most capable of his wives. The portrait of the puissant woman suppressed in the most widespread legends was to emerge in Abu'l Hasan's image of the woman loading the musket.

A portrait of Nur Jahan that is more akin to the portrait we see in Abu'l Hasan's work is constructed in Findly's scholarship. In *Nur Jahan,* moving beyond the narratives of legends, Findly discusses life within the Mughal harem and reveals the dynamics between men and women, as well as women's roles in court, and offers a more complete picture of the world in which Nur Jahan lived and rose to power. Findly notes that records by Nur Jahan's contemporaries Thomas Roe, the British ambassador to the Mughal court, and Peter Mundy, a merchant for the British East India Company, both refer to her as "manipulative" and "stubborn," someone who came to power not by means of her intellect but her feminine wiles.[31] This is a typical description of a woman in an elevated position. However, there may be truth to their

[29] Ibid., 36. The Nauroz festival involved eighteen days of feasting and gift-giving, with one of the main events being a large indoor market filled with female vendors from all over the country. Mutamid Khan served as a military officer in Jahangir's army and wrote the *Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri* in the years after the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (*Jahangirnama*). This book is the history of Mughal imperial rulers beginning with Amir Timur and ending with Shah Jahan's ascension to the throne.

[30] In 1614, Jahangir referred to Nur Mahal as Nur Jahan in his memoir, but it would not be until 1616 that her title would officially change to Nur Jahan, "Light of the World."

[31] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 13.

assessments; these traits also demonstrate a cleverness that Nur Jahan likely exhibited to negotiate a place for herself at court, indicating a balance between the gentle wife and a woman who could take charge. To illustrate Nur Jahan's achievements in politics, economics, arts, and language, Findly analyzes a diverse corpus of primary sources. These include: the *Humayunnama* which is Jahangir's great-aunt Gulbadan Begum's memoir of her brother Humayun's reign; *Akbarnama,* the official biography of Jahangir's father, Akbar; *Jahangirnama,* the aforementioned memoir of Jahangir; and the aforementioned biography of Jahangir, the *Iqbalnama,* as well as several European primary sources, including the accounts of Van den Broecke, Dow, and Manucci, Europeans who traveled to court with the varied perspectives of a merchant, officer, and mercenary.[32]

A rigorous effort to complicate Nur Jahan's reputation and restore what has been missing in historical accounts, Findly's book reveals that in 1611, after Mehr-un-Nisa's marriage to Jahangir, her family's role in the court grew rapidly, bringing their families closer together.[33] Her family's rise would generate speculation that Nur Jahan was a schemer who took advantage of Jahangir. Her father, Ghiyas Beg, was given the elevated title and position of *Itimaduddaula*, "Pillar of the Government;" additionally, her brothers, uncles, and brothers-in-law, as well as her daughter all secured positions at court, leading to whispers that Nur Jahan was bolstering her own pivotal status at court.[34] Paying particular attention to historical events, Findly also studies Nur Jahan's junta, which included Nur Jahan's brother Asaf Khan, and Jahangir's son, Prince

[32] Ibid., 6.

[33] Upon her marriage to Jahangir, she was given the name Nur Mahal, "Light of the Palace."

[34] Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 47.

Khurram, who Nur Jahan believed would be the eventual heir to the throne. Defending Nur Jahan against scurrilous remarks, Findly emphasizes her roles and contributions to the court.

Building upon Findly's work, in *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan,* Ruby Lal creates a more detailed portrait of Nur Jahan as a mighty co-sovereign[35] Lal's work collates disparate sources and moves beyond just the biographical material, contextualizing Nur Jahan's rise to power. Through researching travel routes of Persians to Agra, and the routes traveled to the frontiers of Mughal territory, as well as Mughal war history, trade, architecture, and religion, Lal's text offers a richer understanding of life at Jahangir's court. Utilizing materials that illustrate how the public viewed the court, and, specifically, the role of women at the court, Lal sketches a vivid picture of the Mughal India wherein Mehr-un-Nisa might have grown up to eventually become a co-sovereign. As a feminist historian who grew up in India, Lal is intimately familiar with the legends of Nur Jahan and their fragmentary nature that focuses on her birth and love for Jahangir at the expense of her independence. Lal's grasp of the content and intent of the legends allows her to shift the reader's attention to Nur Jahan's political career, which is erased in so many early legends.[36] Bringing textual sources (such as the *Jahangirnama*, accounts by diplomats, court visitors, tradesmen, chroniclers, critics, and artists) into proximity with material evidence (such as coins, jewelry, architectural commissions, and paintings), Lal achieves an account that is far more concrete and specific than previous versions. The *Empress* is written from a female scholar's perspective with the intention of highlighting Nur Jahan's position as far more than the patriarchal and Orientalizing portrayal of a seductress who rules through manipulating her ineffectual husband. The result is the first comprehensive biography of

[35] *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* was first published in 2018.

[36] Lal, *Empress,* 8.

Nur Jahan that sheds light on her life by taking a multi-valent approach. What these primary and secondary sources reveal to us is that Nur Jahan should be represented by more than a couple of legends, and a few lines about her position in relation to her husband.

The Other Nur Jahan

Nur Jahan was an independent agent, who performed her duties as a wife, but also acted on her own behalf. As a woman of political stature, Nur Jahan naturally had adversaries who wrote critically about her unusual influence over Jahangir. Opposition to Nur Jahan can be gleaned from the writings of both resident and foreign observers, including Nur Jahan's contemporaries, Mughal general Mahabat Khan, and Peter Mundy, a British merchant. Mahabat Khan, pointedly penned that it was "indecorous to let a woman govern the empire," from the perspective of a military leader, clearly referencing Nur Jahan's presence.[37] Another criticism comes from Mundy, who commented that Jahangir, "became [Nur Jahan's] prisoner by marryeing her, for in his tyme shee in a manner ruled all in ruleing him."[38] This demonstrates that even outsiders of the court recognized the power Nur Jahan wielded, whether from their own experience with her or from the whispers they heard in their travels.

While some despised Nur Jahan's elevated status, others recognized her power as legitimate and indispensable. One such recognition comes from the author Dow who commented that the governed populace valued Nur Jahan for her own power, and did not perceive female rule as a sign of weakness on the part of Jahangir.[39] Dow also observed that the populace distinguished Nur Jahan from Jahangir's other wives, as the *Shahi* (empress).[40] Despite being

[37] Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 47.

[38] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 51.

[39] Ibid., 46.

[40] Ibid., 47.

recognized as such, there were limitations to Nur Jahan's power; for instance, she was not allowed to have the *khutba* proclaimed in her name at Friday prayers.[41] Such boundaries reveal that although Nur Jahan enjoyed an elevated status above Jahangir's other wives, Jahangir was still the primary sovereign.

While the *khutba* would remain in Jahangir's name alone, Nur Jahan shared with him the noble prerogative of attending hunts. Noblewomen are known to have participated in royal hunts, but Nur Jahan was not relegated to the women's group: indicative of her unique role at the court, she rode alongside Jahangir. That Jahangir was fond of her company right beside him is apparent from his praises of her in his memoirs. In the *Jahangirnama*, the emperor praises Nur Jahan as a sharpshooter during imperial hunts and serving in Jahangir's stead as a tiger-slayer defending the population of Mathura, by performing the heroic deed. In one famous account, Jahangir records, several men had attempted to shoot several tigers and failed. At this point, Jahangir granted Nur Jahan's request to try, and she, "shot two tigers with one shot each and knocked over the two others with four shots. In the winking of an eye, she deprived of life the bodies of these four tigers." Jahangir's account boasted that the likes of such good shooting had not been seen, particularly from a howdah, as Nur Jahan had outshot the best marksman of the empire, Mirza Rustam.[42] In another account, Jahangir tells of how a citizen had pled for him to kill a tiger that had been harassing the neighborhood, but as Jahangir had already taken a vow of nonviolence,

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[41] Ibid., 47.; The *khutba* is reserved for the official sovereign, as it reflects the current political scene and symbolizes the mosque attendees' allegiance to the ruler. See Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 71.

[42] To show his admiration, Jahangir "gave her a pair of bracelets (*pahunchī*) of diamonds worth 100,000 rupees and scattered 1,000 *ashrafis* [over her]." *Ashrafis* are gold coins. See Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangir, or Memoirs of Jahāngīr: From the First to the Twelfth Year of his Reign*, vol. I, trans. Alexander Rogers and Henry Beveridge (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1974), 375.

he asked Nur Jahan to shoot the tiger. Again, from atop an elephant, she impressed Jahangir as she "hit the tiger with one shot"[43] In these two instances, Jahangir praises Nur Jahan for her apparent skill, but even more significantly, he acknowledges her proficiency as greater than a man's. In the second account, Jahangir requests that Nur Jahan serve in his stead. He asks that Nur Jahan perform the duty of the emperor to protect the populace, providing her a space to act as the defender of the empire. This is particularly significant given the belief that an emperor's ability to hunt a lion or tiger was an indication of his ability to overcome evil.[44] It is then no surprise that in Abu'l Hasan's work Nur Jahan appears loading her musket, as she readies to display her remarkable skills, to give visual expression to the accounts from Jahangir's memoir. In light of Nur Jahan's hunting activities, it is possible to suggest that *Nur Jahan* could have been commissioned either by her or by Jahangir to commemorate one of these hunting excursions

Nur Jahan would be armed with a matchlock musket not only on hunts or while taking down tigers, but also as she rode into battle. In his memoirs, Jahangir acknowledged Nur Jahan as a military strategist in her attempts at rescuing him after he had been taken captive by rebel forces in 1626. After a surprise attack on Jahangir's river-side camp, the emperor was taken captive by his own general Mahabat Khan's army. In the *Ikbalnama,* Mutamid Khan records that Nur Jahan distinguished herself as a soldier with her granddaughter and her granddaughter's nurse in her howdah, because she "wanted to show her woman's courage to Mahabat Khan."[45] A similar description of Nur Jahan is found in a poem by Mulla Kami Shirazi (d. 1636), where the poet describes the empress as commanding her army from the back of the elephant, displaying

[43] Ibid., 104-105.

[44] Ebba Koch, "Dara-Shikoh Shooting Nilgais: Hunt and Landscape in Mughal Painting," *Occasional Papers*, 1 (1998): 15.

[45] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 52.

"masculine courage," as she bravely rode to Jahangir's rescue, with the "queen's gun which could overthrow even lions."[46] While she is reported to have killed ten men with her musket, her army was defeated. Kami Shirazi describes how Nur Jahan was taken prisoner, but she was able to advise Jahangir and Shahryar on how to conduct themselves as they prepared an escape. Not through strategies proposed by Jahangir, but through plotting, funding of mercenary soldiers, and letters sent to court by Nur Jahan, Nur Jahan was able to recruit a secret army and plan an elaborate escape. Kami Shirazi praises Nur Jahan and acknowledges Jahangir's feeble role in the escape with the line, "Emperor Jahangir takes pride in her as she possesses the ability to defeat even the heavens with her wise and clever devices."[47] It is this valor and military prowess that is depicted in Abu'l Hasan's painting.

Where Mughal emperors had held their mothers in the highest esteem, it seems Jahangir showed favor to Nur Jahan. Jahangir and Nur Jahan are often depicted as a couple in love throughout texts including the *Jahangirnama* and in images in which they are seen embracing. Kami Shirazi records Jahangir as telling Nur Jahan to ask from him whatever she desired for she was his "partner in kingship."[48] As the Italian traveler, Pietro Della Valle (d. 1652) commented, the Mughals acknowledged that Jahangir had one wife that he esteemed above all others.[49] As Findly proposes, it appears that Jahangir needed Nur Jahan to serve as a maternal figure, someone who could counsel and support him.[50] Marrying Nur Jahan later in life meant that she

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[46] Kami Shirazi, *Waqa-i-uz-Zaman: Fath Nama-i-Nur Jahan Begam: A Contemporary Account of Jahangir,* trans. Waqarul Hasan Siddiqi (Rampur: Rampur Raza Library, 2003), 8.

[47] Ibid., 256.

[48] Kami Shirazi, *Waqa-i-uz-Zaman*, 13.

[49] Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 81. Pietro Della Valle wrote this in 1623-4.

[50] Ibid., 82.

was not seen as a young woman to bear Jahangir heirs, but rather as a mature woman to take care of him as he aged. This supposition finds support in a letter by Jahangir, where the emperor stated that Nur Jahan "…by degrees, lessened my wine, and kept me from things that did not suit me and food that disagreed with me."[51] In Jahangir's own opinion, there was no one else who cared for him more or could look after him better.[52] As noted earlier, Nur Jahan was the only woman elevated to the role of co-sovereign in the Mughal court. Even the famed Mumtaz Mahal (d. 1631), wife of Shah Jahan, for whom the Taj Mahal was built as a testament to their love, never had coins minted in her name or sat at the *jharokha* (balcony).[53] As is clear from Jahangir's memoirs, Nur Jahan was more than a consort to him: as she never bore him a child, she had the opportunity to dedicate her attention to him, as his caretaker, confidant, and advisor.[54] This portrait that I have been able to glean from Findly, Lal, Jahangir, and Kami Shirazi is in stark contrast to Nur Jahan's life told in legends and perpetuated in modern scholarship, however, when brought together, a more complete portrait of Nur Jahan may be created.

In the next chapter, I analyze how *Nur Jahan* displays this overlooked aspect of the empress; not the nurturing, doting wife, but the martial woman Jahangir also adored. By juxtaposing textual sources with Abu'l Hasan's portrait of Nur Jahan, I reveal the value of this artwork as a historical document to be read in direct relation to Nur Jahan's performed political persona.

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[51] Ibid., 83.

[52] Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 368.

[53] A *jharokha* is a covered balcony found in Indo-Islamic architecture. For instance, the *jharokha* is referring to the balcony from which the emperor could be seen and could conduct government business each day.

[54] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 5.

Chapter 2: "The Sharpshooter": Empowering Nur Jahan

"Though Nur Jahan be in form a woman,
In the ranks of men she's a tiger-slayer"[55]

In the previous chapter, I provided a critical analysis of Nur Jahan's biographies, in relation to the position she occupied at the Mughal court. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the unorthodox painting *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket* as visual evidence that corroborates the narrative thread in written sources which depicts Nur Jahan's self-fashioned persona not as an object of desire, but as a mature and powerful woman who displayed political and administrative acumen as well as physical might.

As noted in the introduction, this portrait is accompanied on the right-hand side by an image of a prince, in an arrangement similar to pendant portraits. Photographs of these dual portraits do not allow us to examine their physical features. Scholars have suggested that the young man on the right-hand side might be representing one of Jahangir's sons.[56] The Rampur Raza Library, where the *muraqqa*' is housed today, provides little to no information on this double-page, other than citing the dimensions of each of the portraits. The paintings' provenances remain unknown as well. In light of the date range provided by the library and the portraits' painterly style, it is reasonable to attribute both works to Jahangir's workshop, though

[55] By an anonymous poet.

[56] Schmitz and Desai, *Mughal and Persian Painting and Illustrated Manuscripts*, 49. The male figure is identified as Jahangir in a translation of Kami Shirazi's *Fath Nama-i-Nur Jahan Begam*. However, in a comparison with the painting *Jahangir and Prince Khurram Entertained by Nur Jahan*, created circa 1624, the prince portrait shows a resemblance to Prince Khurram.

it is not possible to determine which work might have been executed first, nor at what time the two were placed together. Although it is tempting to attribute both works to Abu'l Hasan based on stylistic features, the artist's signature is penned only on Nur Jahan's portrait, at the lower left corner of the portrait. In the portrait of the young man, a script on the right top corner of the page gives the accession number M118 in Arabic numerals, also inscribed on the corner outside of the frame.

The two works are contained within a *muraqqa'* of Mughal, Deccani, and Persian paintings that span the sixteenth through twentieth centuries. The album measures 435 x 325 mm. and comprises twenty-three folios: twenty-six paintings and two calligraphic specimens. Originally measuring 98 x 50 mm., a strip of paper added to it extends the height of *Nur Jahan* to 105 mm. At 107 x 57 mm., the portrait of the prince measures slightly larger. The added paper to *Nur Jahan* suggests that this was not the original context for the work.[57] Of the twenty-six paintings, only two contain images of women: the painting that is identified as Nur Jahan, and a painting depicting a scene from a popular fictitious love story of Layla and Majun.[58] The other images in this album are predominantly portraits of men, with the exception of one painting of a white bird. This limited spectrum of images makes one wonder why this picture of Nur Jahan might have been placed in this collection dominated by male portraits.[59]

Of particular interest is *Nur Jahan*'s presentation in a double mount. With such close proximity, the relationship between the portrait of Nur Jahan and the prince cannot be overlooked. Though one immediately may be inclined to identify the male companion as Nur

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[57] Ibid., 49.

[58] A story about a man who becomes self-destructive in his obsession with a beautiful woman.

[59] Unfortunately, the catalog of the album does not show the full folio pages with the border designs, so I cannot tell if the preceding or following pages were originally part of the same album.

Jahan's husband, Jahangir, a closer examination of the figure's profile features reveals the man does not share Jahangir's most characteristic attribute: his nose. Jahangir's profile, as seen in numerous works, shows a long, downward sloped tip to his nose. Meanwhile, the nose of this male figure appears to project more straightforward from the face. Additionally, the prince here is evidently both too youthful for the dates provided and seems too young to represent the husband of Nur Jahan, for Jahangir was forty-two when he and Nur Jahan were wed. These facts further substantiate my reading that the man portrayed here is unlikely to represent Jahangir.

A study of the portraits of Jahangir and his sons reveals that this prince appears to most closely resemble a young Prince Khurram (future Shah Jahan). A comparison of the profiles—the angle of the nose, the slope of the forehead, the distance of nose to chin, as well as the angle of the ear and eyebrow allows me to observe that the portrait of the unidentified prince shares a striking resemblance to the depiction of Prince Khurram in *Nur Jahan Entertaining Jahangir and Prince Khurram* (fig. 3).[60]

If we accept this as a portrait of Prince Khurram, we might then consider that the two portraits could have been brought together when it was believed the empress and Prince Khurram were working together, along with Nur Jahan's brother, Asaf Khan, to form a junta. However, after Prince Khurram refused to marry Nur Jahan's daughter, Ladli, a rift formed between the prince and the empress. Nur Jahan then had Ladli marry Jahangir's fourth son, Shahryar, whom thereafter Nur Jahan promoted as the heir to the throne. If this is indeed a portrait of Prince Khurram, the folio could be dated to a time before Ladli's marriage to Shahryar in 1621, considered to be the date when the junta was terminated, and before Prince Khurram's rebellion against Jahangir in 1623-24.

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[60] As work under Shah Jahan progressed, portraiture became more and more idealized.

Abu'l Hasan's signature on Nur Jahan's portrait suggests that the two portraits were accessible to Prince Khurram. When Prince Khurram ascended the throne as Shah Jahan in 1628, he had Nur Jahan removed from court to live the last seventeen years of her life confined to her home in Lahore with her daughter.[61] In a political act of revenge, Shah Jahan also had Nur Jahan's name redacted from court documents. One wonders if this page is a lucky survivor of Shah Jahan's attempt to erase Nur Jahan from Mughal history, though there appear to be no records of Shah Jahan's destruction of artwork.

Regardless of who might have brought the two portraits together and when, the double mount shows an alliance of the two due to their proximity, while simultaneously suggesting their political rivalry and underlying gender opposition. As the portraits of the empress and the prince face one another, however, their gazes do not meet: Nur Jahan's gaze is directed over the head of the prince, while his gaze looks directly ahead, transcending Nur Jahan's space.[62] Though facing one another, the two individuals claim their own space standing as solitary figures in their respective fields of green. The differences in the green used in the backgrounds—with the green behind the prince being lighter and bluer—suggests the portraits were not created with the intention of pairing them. Although I believe the works were created by different artists' hands, there are striking similarities in the figures' attire. While both wearing *pyjama* pants and a *jama* (robe) is not shocking, as it was common fashion, the fact that the two are wearing the same color pants is intriguing. Both figures are portrayed in a sheer *jama* worn over orange *pyjama* trousers, sporting a *patka* (sash), turban, and jewels. The prince figure appears more ceremonial,

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[61] Shah Jahan had all of his brothers, cousins, and nephews killed to prevent an insurrection, thus making his sister-in-law Ladli a young widow.

[62] The unreciprocated gaze is a common Mughal pictorial convention within singular works.

as his turban shows the black occipital heron feathers, called *kalgi*, that denote his status as a Mughal royal, and his *patka* appears to be of a finer material in contrast to the one wrapped around Nur Jahan's waist. Though the similarity in fashion does not establish proof that one image was informed by the other, as there exist a number of courtier portraits that exhibit similar clothing, their forced union can be interpreted as politically motivated.[63] United by the color of their garments, the two figures seem to engage in a silent conversation wherein the empress stands erect before her (future) rival, no less powerful with a phallic musket she is readying to load, than her opponent in a ceremonial garment, holding a sword that rests on the ground. In contrast to the dignified and yet passive man, Nur Jahan is captured in a moment of action. Whatever the original context or the intended meaning of these two portraits might have been, owing to Abu'l Hasan's skill in capturing both empowerment in the stillness and dynamism of his subject makes *Nur Jahan* arguably the most salient, though previously overlooked, image of a female in Mughal portraiture. In Abu'l Hasan's work, Nur Jahan is the sole character, standing erect in the center, in a vigorous pose emphasized by the arrangement of her arms. Her right arm is raised upwards holding the ramrod, as her left hand holds the barrel of her musket, creating an s-curve. Her feet are visible from the side, pointing towards the right, partially splayed to provide stability, while her hips and chest are turned to nearly face the viewer. Through rendering the figure's face in profile, looking towards the right, Abu'l Hasan was successful in capturing a representation of her likeness. The desire to capture the likeness of the individual and Nur Jahan's presence in a field of green are both evocative of the courtier portraits made popular under Akbar. Akbar had likenesses of his courtiers created to catalog their physiognomies and to

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[63] See for instance Bishandas, *Portrait of Suraj Singh Rathor Raja of Marwar and Maternal Uncle of Shah Jahan,* from the *Prince Khurram Album,* opaque watercolor with gold on paper, 29.1 x 19 cm. Cleveland, the Cleveland Museum of Art, accession no. 2013.313.

learn of their personalities. As a response to this cataloging, Abu'l Fazl wrote in the *A'in-i-Akbari* that Akbar's interest in possessing portraits of grandees allowed those who had passed away to live again and those who were alive to remain immortal.[64]

When comparing the portrait of Nur Jahan to other Mughal portraits, the exceptional quality of Abu'l Hasan's work becomes ever more apparent. Nur Jahan displays a prominent, straight nose, a small mouth, and a small round chin that gently curves meeting her neck. With her right shoulder pulled back and her chest lifted, her torso does not immediately disclose to the viewer that this is a portrait of a woman. A closer study reveals breasts that are only slightly accentuated through the contrast found in the white shirt and the dark underarm region of her left side. This twist of the torso may have been intended to conceal the figure's femininity while simultaneously serving to create a more robust pose. In the physicality of the portrait and the action captured, Nur Jahan does not simply pose resting upon a sword but rather is engaged. Abu'l Hasan may have selected this moment, forever frozen but dynamic, to show his skill at the naturalistic style and the virtuosity of his hand, and to also serve as another way for Nur Jahan to break the mold of the delicate female, or even the typical male courtier in her presentation.

Elements that accentuate the masculine figure of Nur Jahan include the sash around her waist and the gun in her hand. The sash defies gravity as it lifts towards the viewer, displaying the artist's skill in rendering the delicate folds at the edge of the sash, and adding a softness and delicacy that serves as a contrast to the large, phallic, unwavering gun. The musket and ramrod create a diagonal that bifurcates the image, beginning in the right bottom corner, cutting across the full width of Nur Jahan's body, and extending towards the horizon line in the top left.

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[64] Amina Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court,* trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1992), 23.

Compared to Nur Jahan's stiff yet torqued body, the musket is rigid and mighty, emphasizing the power of the woman who is able to wield it.

Abu'l Hasan uses color to deftly accentuate this intriguing central figure loading a gun. The female figure is emphasized by the level of detail paid to her person, clothing, and weapon, in contrast to the simple ground onto which she is painted. The pigment that defines her body appears opaque in comparison to the wash that defines the background. The bright orange of Nur Jahan's *churidar pyjama* trousers and slippers captures the viewer's attention first. Competing with the color orange is the lead white paint used to render the bright white blouse, the sheer tunic, the eyes, and the pearls and diamonds of the figure's jewelry, all of which contrast with the green background. The green that predominates implies an exterior scene, guiding the viewer's attention to the top of the page, towards the high horizon line, a horizon that may not have existed prior to the addition of the paper strip. However, closer examination reveals that a pale blue or green (perhaps thickened with lead white) was once applied to the surface of the added paper to blend the strip of paper with the original work, overlapping the "horizon line" and extending into the green of the grass. This suggests that what appears as a golden yellow sky, of aged paper, was once likely green, which would have competed less with the golden yellow used on the musket, further emphasizing the warm colors of Nur Jahan's pants, shoes, and gun. The fact that the paint has deteriorated at a faster rate than the original watercolor could indicate that less care was taken when inserting the original work into the *muraqqa'*.

Fittingly, the golden yellow is employed to highlight the most intriguing element in this portrait: the matchlock musket, an element made prominent by its color, scale, and position. The weapon is not for mere decoration, but a vital accoutrement in the posed portrayal of the sharpshooter. Yellow is also used to render Nur Jahan's *patkas*, as a decorative pattern on her

turban, as well as the golden *nath* earring on her right ear and her necklace.[65] The yellow used as a reference to gold, further emphasizes the preciousness of the objects (particularly the empress's gun and jewelry), while visually connecting the gun to the turban, sash, and jewels. The knotted sash is light purple and golden yellow with an embroidered design executed in red, magenta, blue, and black. Nur Jahan's tie-dyed turban that hides a bounty of black hair is deep purple with stripes of maroon, light blue, and yellow. Nur Jahan's dark turban brings to focus the dark colors of the image, moving from the headdress and exposed tresses of hair, down to her eyebrows and eyes, to the jewels around her neck, the shadows in her armpits, the belt holding a pouch for musket balls and her horn of gunpowder, and from her sash down to her ornate shoes. Each of these elements is enriched by small touches of color, such as the magenta on the earring and necklaces and the small dark beads that adorn the belt that holds her ammunition, displaying the artist's attentive consideration of detail and composition. Most striking among these details is the red on the figure's palms and soles of her feet, signifying *mehndi* (henna), which, besides the title given to the piece, provides one of the few definitive indications that this is an image of a woman. Last but not least, Abu'l Hasan creates the illusion of volume through the subtle use of a darker shade of vermillion on the soles of Nur Jahan's slippers. These slippers, too, indicate her gender as evident in their stylistic similarity to those worn by other female figures.[66] It is important to note that while Nur Jahan adopts this masculine identity, she does not conceal her

[65] *Nath* is a style of earring that consists of a ruby (or spinel) or other colored stone set between two pearls. See Elaine Julia Wright, *Muraqqa; Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin* (Alexandria: Art Services International, 2008), 195.

[66] See for instance Govardhan, *Shah Shuja with a Beloved*, ca.1632, opaque watercolor on paper, 15 5/16 x 10 1/4 in. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no: 55.121.10.35.

true female self: she is not presented as a man, but rather a woman who demonstrates proficiencies typically associated with men, and in particular with effective leaders.

To better understand the unique attributes of *Nur Jahan*, one must place the work in the history of Mughal painting, specifically painting of women. Akbar, Jahangir, and later Shah Jahan were all great patrons of the arts. As Muslims with dynastic ties to both the Timurids and Mongols, while ruling over Hindu Indians, the Mughal court was bound to be pluralistic. This diversity is evident in the heterogeneous visual styles of Mughal painting. The evidence of Mughal cultural exchanges with the Safavids and later Europeans—particularly the Portuguese and English—is displayed in the artistic style the Mughal court embraced.[67] Under both Babur (r. 1526-1530) and Humayun (r. 1530-1540; 1555-1556), the Mughal Empire was peripatetic and did not possess an established art culture. Between his two reigns, Humayun resided at the Safavid court in Iran, and learned that in order to align himself with the great powers—the Safavids and the Ottomans—the Mughals would need to create a grand court that also continued the traditions of the arts. Persian masters were considered highly accomplished in both calligraphy and illustration.[68] When he returned to India, Humayun brought with him Persian artists in hopes of establishing a *kitabkhana.*[69] Humayun's time to see this through would be limited, as he died shortly after his return. Under his son, Akbar, the Mughal court was established in Fatehpur Sikri with a *kitabkhana*, where Mir Sayyid 'Ali and 'Abd-as-Samad–the

[67] Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court*, 22.

[68] Mandakini Sharma, Ila Gupta, and P.N. Jha, "From Caves to Miniatures: Portrayal of Women in Early Indian Paintings," *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design* 6, no. 1 (Jan. 2016): 34.

[69] *Kitabkhana*, lit., library, used to describe where manuscripts were created and stored, as well as the atelier where artworks were produced.

two Persian masters Humayun had brought to court—were placed in charge of training the Mughal and local Hindu artists in the Persianate style.

During Akbar's reign, the predominant focus of the *kitabkhana* was to complete large-size manuscripts, to illustrate stories such as the *Tutinama* (Tales of a Parrot), as well as historical texts, including the *Baburnama*, the biography of the founder of the Mughal Empire. Akbar had an interest in historiography and creating a Mughal lineage that justified his rule over the Hindu population, as well as the stories and religious texts of various cultures. Illustrations made for these texts are often complex, presenting crowded events dominated by men. In a few instances during Akbar's reign, women were included in narrative illustrations, often as romanticized, beautiful figures, as seen, for instance, in the *Tutinama*.[70] When women make appearances in sixteenth-century Mughal paintings, they are often depicted in relation to men, or as secondary figures, such as dancers, maids, or concubines, and examples of paintings where a woman (such as the mother or wife of an emperor) is given a prominent place within the pictorial space are rare.[71] When considered against the background of this pictorial tradition, then, the uniqueness and significance of Nur Jahan's portrait become more apparent: it is more the exception than the norm. During Jahangir's and later Shah Jahan's reigns more portraits of independent women would be created, portrayed in everyday activities, and significantly after *Nur Jahan*, during the reign of Shah Jahan, there is an increase in independent female portraits.

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[70] Lal, *Empress*, 145. See Anonymous, double-folio, from the *Tutinama,* ca. 1560, gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper, 8 x 5 1/2 in. Cleveland, the Cleveland Museum of Art, accession no. 1962.279.

[71] Sharma, Gupta, Jha, "From Caves to Miniatures," 35. See for instance Basawana, *Tumanba Khan, His Wife, and His Nine Sons,* folio from the *Chengiznama,*1596, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 38.1 x 25.4 cm. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 48.144. In the illustration, Chingiz Khan's ancestors, Tumanba Khan, and his wife sit on an elevated throne, looking upon their nine sons, before dividing the empire. While the wife appears in a place of high esteem enthroned with her husband, it is through her relationship to Tumanba Khan, and more importantly as the mother to nine sons, that she was depicted.

Another important element in Mughal portraiture was introduced during Akbar's reign when Jesuits brought examples of European art to his court, often in the form of religious prints, including illuminated manuscripts and German and Flemish engravings by artists such as Albrecht Dürer, as seen in the future works of Abu'l Hasan. [72] This introduction led to stylistic adaptations in the studio, and led to an interest in portraying female figures, as seen in the Mughal copies of the Christian Madonna and the Roman Diana, Goddess of the Hunt.[73] Mughals found the Madonna image honorable, as she stood for the sublime maternal figure. In fact, Mughal images of the Madonna were added to sacred locations at court, including at the *jharokha*. One such placement can be observed in Payag's *Jahangir Presents Prince Khurram with a Turban Ornament*, where multiple images of the Madonna adorn the top section of the *jharokha's* interior wall.[74]

Following in the footsteps of Akbar, Jahangir expanded the collection of European works, particularly Italian and English works that he received as gifts from ambassadors to his court. Considering himself a connoisseur of the arts, Jahangir wrote in his memoir that he was able to determine the hand of individual artists. If multiple artists were involved, he could "perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrows."[75] Where

[72] Akbar heard of the Jesuits in 1578, then invited Father Rudolf Aquaviva and Father Anthony Monserrate to his court in 1580. There they presented him an eight-volume Polyglot Bible printed by Christopher Plantyn for Philip II in 1569-1573 in Antwerp, as well as several representations of Christ and the Virgin. See Sanjeev Srivastava, *Jahangir: A Connoisseur of Mughal Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2001), 77.

[73] See for instance 'Ali Quli Jabbadar, *Diana, Goddess of the Hunt*, from the *Davis Album*, 1600s, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 13 1/8 x 8 1/4 in. New York, the Metropolitan Musem of Art, accession no. 30.95.174.25.

[74] See Payag, *Jahangir Presents Prince Khurram with a Turban Ornament*, from the *Padishahnama*, ca.1640, painting in opaque watercolor, gold metallic paints with decorative incising on paper, 30.6 × 21.1 cm. London, Royal Collection Trust.

[75] Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangir,* 21.

Akbar's artists collaborated to illustrate large collections of texts, differing from his father, Jahangir was more interested in images that captured natural observations and contemporary events. Jahangir not only frequented the royal workshop but also kept an artist near him to document everyday life.[76] This practice led Jahangir and his workshop away from illustrations and toward individual paintings. I propose that it was this interest that prepared the path that allowed the portrait of a single woman, Nur Jahan, to be included in Mughal portraiture.

The change that characterized Jahangir's period was more about selectivity in incorporating European techniques rather than blind copying of the imported works. The more naturalistic style found in European work of the Late Renaissance served well Jahangir's interests in close and rational observation, and there emerges greater naturalism in the style of the figures found in the Mughal idiom.[77] As Mika Natif has suggested, copying other artworks and styles was a means for Mughal artists to become part of a *silsila*, the lineage of artists and artistic knowledge.[78] Copying a master and emulating their work had been common practice in Mughal ateliers before Jahangir, but under Jahangir, patrons and art lovers began to celebrate individual styles of the artists. Gradually, the elegant, stylized, Persian-inspired work and the expressive and robust colors of Hindu art were replaced by greater naturalism of form and color in Mughal art. This shift is evident particularly in the portraits of Abu'l Hasan.

During Jahangir's reign, women became more common and individualized in manuscript paintings rendered in the new more naturalistic style. Bishandas, for instance, was known for his

[76] Maurice S. Dimand, "The Emperor Jahangir, Connoisseur of Paintings," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 6 (February 1944): 196.

[77] Ebba Koch, "Visual Strategies of Imperial Self-Representation: The Windsor *Pādshāhnāma* Revisited," *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 3 (September 2017): 119.

[78] Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 68.

expressive portraits of male and female figures and painted the *zenana* (harem) scene of *Jahangir's* birth. In Bishandas's *Birth of a Prince* from the *Jahangirnama* (1610-1615), Jahangir's mother Maryam az-Zamani, Akbar's mother Hamida Banu Begum, and several ladies-in-waiting, servants, and musicians are present.[79] Created more than thirty years after the event took place, this image that serves as a record of a momentous event not only illustrates the contemporary interest in the individualization of figures, but is also striking for its inclusion of a large number of females. Some scholars, such as Pratapaditya Pal, have suggested that the greater prominence granted to the female figure during Jahangir's time could be a result of Nur Jahan's involvement in the arts, as she was an active art collector.[80] Scenes of women bathing, playing chess, and watching performances appear more frequently after Nur Jahan's rise to power.

When studying a portrait, one cannot undermine the agency of the artist. The artist who was allowed to portray the empress in *Nur Jahan* was honored with the title Nadir al-Zaman for his ability to capture likenesses. A son of the famed Persian artist, Aga Riza, Abu'l Hasan was born in India in 1588. Aga Riza joined the Mughal court when Jahangir was a prince, making Abu'l Hasan a *khanazad*, someone born into a position of service, as a future court painter. Trained under his father, by the age of thirteen Abu'l Hasan was well-versed in the diverse styles that were to create the Mughal style.

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[79] Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal* Court, 161. See Bishandas, *Birth of Prince Salim,* ca. 1620, opaque watercolor on paper, 10 3/8 x 6 1/2 in. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, accession no. 14.657.

[80] Ellison Banks Findly, "The Pleasure of Women: Nur Jahan and Mughal Painting," *Asian Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 68.

An early work by Abu'l Hasan titled the *Seated Youth* illustrates his painterly style and knowledge of Persianate models with their elongated, slender bodies.[81] Intimately familiar with the European examples circulated at the court, Abu'l Hasan incorporated into his work techniques to create volume and naturalistic features through a greater focus on tonal variation than surface design. This stylistic preference can be observed also in *Nur Jahan*, where the designs of the *patka* and turban appear more abstracted and painterly compared to the attention to detail paid to the other pictorial elements. The earliest known work by Abu'l Hasan, a drawing with gouache, titled the *Study of Saint John the Evangelist, After Albrecht Dürer,* which the artist completed when he was only thirteen demonstrates his interest and skill in capturing expression and form.[82] In this work, Abu'l Hasan creates a dreamy, soft image with emphasis on the face and hands. Compared to the prototype, a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, Abu'l Hasan's work is more sensitive, thanks to his training in the characteristically soft lines found in Persian drawing. This delicateness and attention to detail would carry through Abu'l Hasan's future paintings, in the subtle tone variation used to achieve greater verisimilitude, as we observed in *Nur Jahan*.

That Abu'l Hasan's talent in portraiture was recognized by his patrons is evident in Jahangir's praises of him in the frontispiece of the *Jahangirnama.* Writing in 1618, Jahangir commented, "his work was perfect, and his picture is one of the *chefs d'œuvre* of the age. At the present time, he has no rival or equal."[83] Commending Abu'l Hasan as the son who had

[81] See for instance Abu'l Hasan, *Seated Youth*, early seventeenth century, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 4.88 x 2.87 in. Washington D.C., Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, accession no. F1907.161. For comparison, see Aga Riza's *Youth Reading,* 1625-26, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 5 3/5 x 3 in. London, British Museum, accession no. 1920,0917,0.298.3.

[82] Findly, "The Pleasure of Women: Nur Jahan and Mughal Painting," 99. See for instance Abu'l Hasan, *Study of Saint John the Evangelist, After Albrecht Dürer*, 1600-1601, brush drawn ink on paper, 3 15/16 x 1 13/16 in. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The original woodcut "Little Passion" is a crucifixion scene from 1511.

[83] Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangir*, 20.

surpassed his father in skill, Jahangir also claimed credit for having shaped the young artist's career by assisting in his upbringing. Abu'l Hasan's ability to give form to his figures through shading, and more importantly the utilization of this technique to provide insight into individual characters resulted in tremendously successful portraits, such as *Nur Jahan*

Looking Closer at *Nur Jahan*

Abu'l Hasan's penchant for the naturalist style leads him to subdue harsh outlines. Contour lines surround much of Nur Jahan's figure, suggesting the portrait might have been transferred from a sketch. The original outlines, as observed in the sash, appear to have been created in black. These hard, flattening lines have largely been painted over. A dark hue separates Nur Jahan's profile from the background, yet an interest in naturalism where the wing of her nose touches her cheek and the subtle differentiation between jawline and neck displays Abu'l Hasan's incorporation of modeling. These indistinct areas that suggest volume are rendered subtly to facilitate a reading of flesh. His abilities are further demonstrated in his rendition of the trouser where the small gatherings of material near the ankles are visible. This gathering is indicative of form as it creates contour lines around the ankles, and the darker pigment is pulled into the orange paint, creating subtle shifts in tone. Another delicate detail are the lappets on Nur Jahan's white blouse or tunic, which are barely distinguishable yet appear to cascade down the center of her torso upon closer examination, adding to the believability of the image. Abu'l Hasan's careful rendition of the musket enhances our understanding of its significance: the small details of the trigger, the match coiled around the stock of the musket, and the matchstick jaws, or serpentine, extending over the top with the match already in place are all marked with diligence and keen attention to minute detail. The naturalistic style with the details that it embraces imbue the painting with life, as though Nur Jahan's match will be lit, and the

gun will be ready to fire any moment. Overall, the work is characterized by naturalistic elements, distinguishing Abu'l Hasan's hand from the more Persianate style of his father and master, Aga Riza.

What might have motivated Abu'l Hasan to depict the empress in this nontraditionally strong and assured pose? Nur Jahan stands with her shoulders back, chin raised, and eyes looking at a sight inaccessible to the viewer. Underscoring her power and proficiency, she is loading the musket without even looking at it, as though the task is second nature. If put upright, the rifle would be significantly taller than her, further highlighting her mastery over an unwieldy weapon. Nur Jahan is depicted wearing clothes reminiscent of men's hunting attire, including a turban that extends high atop her head, binding what appears as an abundance of hair and hiding it from view. Yet, dark tresses of hair that have escaped the turban indicate her femininity, and she is still adorned with pearls, rubies, and diamonds to indicate her nobility. In Mughal painting, an image of a woman actively tamping down gunpowder in a musket, a show of technical knowledge indicating strength in hunting and war, was indeed an unprecedented, revolutionary enterprise.

Nur Jahan honors the capabilities of a skilled female figure. It is a portrait that establishes Nur Jahan's place at court as more than simply a wife of Jahangir. Not accompanied by the emperor, or depicted as a delicate, fragile woman, the famed sharpshooter stands imposing, reminding the viewer that this is the woman who slayed four tigers in six shots, and killed ten men as she rode to her husband's rescue. The fact that this image was later placed alongside a portrait of a male who is adorned in a similar fashion, and in a standing but passive position, leaning against a sword, suggests that the juxtaposition in the *muraqqa'* was far from accidental.

This portrait of Nur Jahan does not as readily display the naturalistic style in comparison to Abu'l Hasan's other works that represent the hybrid Mughal style. Nonetheless, the features discussed above place *Nur Jahan* within the artist's works that bespeak his interest in European visual grammars. Noteworthy is the fact that at the time when Abu'l Hasan was active at the court, along with the increased interest in naturalism on the part of both Jahangir and the artists in his service, there was an interest in capturing an individual's *ma'ni*, or essence, and this was within the purview of only the most talented masters.[84] In this area, *Nur Jahan* does not disappoint in presenting a curated projection of self to leave for posterity.

Today, many of Abu'l Hasan's works are dispersed among museums across the world and images of them are not immediately available. Research during this thesis has revealed a painting that contributes to our understanding of *Nur Jahan* and its significance within Mughal female portraiture. Titled *Jahangir Giving a Cup of Wine to a Young Woman* (subsequently, *A Cup of Wine*) and dated to the early seventeenth century, this painting is also preserved inside a *muraqqa'*.[85] The painting depicts a young royal woman who is being served wine by Jahangir. Interestingly, she is wearing the masculine turban seen in *Nur Jahan*. The woman's profile view, her stature, and this small but important detail suggest the identity of the anonymous "young woman" in the painting to be none other than Nur Jahan.

A Cup of Wine depicts a female and a male figure, placed to the left and the right, respectively. Much like the figures in *Nur Jahan*, the figures occupy a simple landscape, with

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[84] Yael Rice, "The Emperor's Eye and the Painter's Brush: The Rise of the Mughal Court Artists, ca. 1546-1627" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011), 8.

[85] See Abu'l Hasan, *Jahangir Giving a Cup of Wine to a Young Woman*, early seventeenth century, opaque watercolor on paper, 7.48 x 11.61 in. Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum. The Digital Walters, http://thedigitalwalters.org/Data/WaltersManuscripts/html/W668/. Accessed April 6, 2020. This is a collection of Persian and Indian calligraphy and paintings dated to a period between the late sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Of the thirty-four paintings, three are attributed to Abu'l Hasan. This painting is found on fol. 40b.

green extending from the lower edge of the composition to the horizon four-fifths of the way up the page, meeting the pink-and-blue sky. On the horizon line appears a faintly rendered hawk who is hunting cranes. Jahangir's and Nur Jahan's gazes do not meet. Jahangir appears to be looking past her, as his companion gazes upwards to the right. Despite this seeming disconnect, following the conventions of Mughal portraiture, there is a palpable sense of intimacy between the two, as Jahangir hands Nur Jahan a cup of wine and she raises her left hand to receive the cup. The turban that Nur Jahan is once again wearing was reserved for men, as women wore it only occasionally inside the *zenana*, in private. The bright vermillion of Nur Jahan's turban catches the viewer's attention, leading to her breasts and slender waist wrapped by her *chakdar jama*.[86] Under her *jama*, Nur Jahan wears cadmium red *pyjamas* trimmed in gold and golden slippers. Both figures sport *kalgi*, tucked into their turbans, and luxurious, golden, embroidered *patkas* around their waists indicating their royalty.[87]

Indicative once again of his skill at depicting draped fabric, Abu'l Hasan has intricately painted a draped *duppata*, a long scarf, cascading down Nur Jahan's right shoulder, across her chest, over her left shoulder, and delicately wrapping around her raised left arm. Careful attention is also paid to the gathered material found at the ankles and wrists of both figures, also seen in *Nur Jahan*. The material gathers more naturally than it does in many other Mughal paintings, such as those created by Abu'l Hasan's father.

As in *Nur Jahan*, here, too, the empress is shown wearing many pieces of jewelry, while Jahangir is without his usual precious adornments. Nur Jahan's abundance of jewelry includes

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[86] Mohamed Nasr, "Mughal Costumes (16th 18th Century) and Royal Costumes," (PhD diss., University of Delhi, 2012), 31. A *chakdar jama* is a traditional article of clothing at the Mughal court. It is a robe with four points, made of *malmal,* or silk muslin, as seen here worn by Nur Jahan.

[87] Ibid., 39.

strings of pearls and rubies layered around her neck, earrings, a nose ring, bracelets, an armlet, and rings. With these additional symbols of royalty, Nur Jahan appears as the more royal of the two figures. Despite her unmistakable royal status, as Abu'l Hasan places her on a pedestal, elevating her to nearly the height of Jahangir, he pays due respect to the emperor by positioning him still slightly higher. A strikingly similar image by Govardhan (d. 1640), *Shah Shuja with a Beloved* (1632) offers an interesting comparison and shows this placement to be a convention of Mughal female portraiture.[88] Govardhan's painting depicts Jahangir's grandson, Shah Shuja with an unidentified woman. It is noteworthy that the female figure representing the beloved is depicted more traditionally, with a veil to cover her long, loose hair, in contrast to Nur Jahan's bound hair under the male turban. Unlike Nur Jahan, who is standing on a pedestal, the beloved in Govardhan's painting is positioned on the ground. This position forces the beloved to look upwards, adoringly, at Shah Shuja, contrasting Nur Jahan's confident look beyond Jahangir. The female pictured in Govardhan's painting, although she is being presented with wine, similar to Nur Jahan, does not embody the same power and stature as Abu'l Hasan ascribes to Nur Jahan. In both depictions of Nur Jahan, the figure possesses a distinguished spirit that challenges the ethos of seventeenth-century Mughal India in regard to women.

The portraits of Nur Jahan by Abu'l Hasan exhibit a lesser-known side of the beautiful empress. His characterization of Nur Jahan breaks from the tradition of showing the empress as merely an adoring and dutiful wife, as she is portrayed in such works as *Jahangir and Prince Khurram Entertained by Nur Jahan* (ca. 1624) and *Nur Jahan Holding a Portrait of Emperor Jahangir* (ca. 1627) by the painter Bishandas (fig. 4). The former work records an event from October 1617, in Mandu, where Nur Jahan served as hostess honoring her stepson and one of his

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[88] Govardhan was a court painter whose career spanned the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

military conquests.[89] While the scene is set in a female space, the *zenana*, and Nur Jahan shares the center of the scene with Jahangir, she is shown in a typical female role as entertainer. Similarly, the second portrait by Bishandas also illustrates an utterly romanticized vision of the empress, in keeping with the centuries-old traditions of depicting women with ample bosoms, tiny waists, long, flowing hair, and alluring sensuality. Nur Jahan is depicted in Bishandas' portrait with an unnaturalistic bosom, tiny waist, and long veiled black hair as she displays for the viewer the portrait of her late husband that she is holding with reverence. She is depicted as a youthful fifty-year-old with smooth skin, dark hair, and breasts that defy gravity, in comparison to the aged Jahangir. This portrait of Nur Jahan presents a complimentary, if contrasting, side to the Nur Jahan depicted in Abu'l Hasan's work, who is "more than" merely a wife. Abu'l Hasan's woman was equal to a man and entertained nearly equal rights at the court. As such, a more complicated biography of the empress emerges from Abu'l Hasan's paintings, one that has been flattened in pre-modern texts and modern scholarship.

In the absence of written documents about *Nur Jahan*, we have no way of knowing why Abu'l Hasan might have chosen to depict Nur Jahan in this manner. Lack of written records about the commissioner of this work or where the painting might have been displayed prior to its inclusion in the Rampur Raza Library limits speculation on *Nur Jahan*'s intended audience as well. Regardless, with our knowledge of the artistic milieu at the Mughal court, it is safe to assume that the painting would have been viewed by Jahangir and circulated at his court, as Abu'l Hasan was his court painter. A painting titled *Abu'l Hasan Presenting a Painting to Jahangir*, wherein the artist shows himself presenting a painting to the emperor, also supports the supposition that Nur Jahan's portrait would have been approved by the emperor for viewing at

[89] Findly, "The Pleasure of Women," 76.

the court.[90] In this painting, Jahangir is seen commenting on the artwork, rather than passively observing it. This evidence of Jahangir's active involvement in critiquing a painting raises the possibility that Jahangir was involved in the day-to-day activities at his *kitabkhana*.[91] Given the respect that Jahangir accorded her and Nur Jahan's private commissions of buildings and gardens, it is not far-fetched to propose that she might have commissioned portraits of herself. As a central figure at the court, it is only natural that she would dictate how she should be presented for posterity.

In light of all these considerations, *Nur Jahan* emerges as a representation, perhaps even a reminder, of her ability to defend the empire against its foes. A shift from previous Mughal stylistic traditions, this portrait was simultaneously an attempt likely orchestrated by Nur Jahan herself to emphasize her rank and might akin to an emperor, without insinuating grandeur above Jahangir's assumed divine kingship. Precisely how novel this physical and visual performance of power was in the context of the Mughal Empire and in Islamic societies is the topic of the following chapter.

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[90] See Abu'l Hasan, *The Painter Abu'l Hasan Presents His Work to Prince Salim, the Future Emperor Jahangir*, ca. 1605. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[91] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 113.

Chapter 3: Gender Bending: Performing Nur Jahan

To the modern and contemporary viewer, an artist's choice to depict a woman as male might appear as a backhanded compliment at first, if not an outright sexist critique of womanhood. However, in this thesis, I propose the possibility that in seventeenth-century Mughal India such a portrayal was meant to be a compliment to the female subject, and in fact, might have been the empress's own choice. Even though *Nur Jahan* appears an anomaly, I argue that it actually perpetuates a much older tradition of Islamic portrayals of powerful women who defied conventions. As previously established, *Nur Jahan* may be a commemoration of one of the empress's successful hunts Jahangir recorded in his memoir. At the same time, her rendering with fierce, strong Amazonian features and her dignified posture invites a reading of the painting independent of a particular time in history, and within the larger Islamic literary and visual traditions that represent elite and empowered women. In Abu'l Hasan's depiction, Nur Jahan is the prescient feminist who sought to defy misogyny as she displayed more than usual power and these traits allow me to study Nur Jahan as part of the *silsila*, the lineage of powerful and royal Muslim women. [92] In this final chapter of my thesis, I explore Nur Jahan's life and activities in relation to her predecessors and propose that inasmuch as it appears to be an oddity, *Nur Jahan* exists within a long-standing tradition of "female dissenters." As the following discussion will try to demonstrate, in the pre-modern Islamic world, cross-dressing was a strategy employed by

[92] Gregory C. Kozlowski, "Private Lives and Public Piety: Women and the Practice of Islam in Mughal India," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 469.

women to showcase their physical strength, intelligence, and political as well as military might both in history and literature. [93]

Female adoption of male garments has a long history in the Islamic world; however, scholars have yet to bring together discussions of this practice into visual analyses of artwork. Before such an integration can take place, one is prompted to question the meaning of this practice. Should it be viewed as women's acquiescing to orthodox ideas of kingship, or a clever manipulation of gender imagery? Literary texts (Arab epic stories and Indo-Persian memoirs), as well as visual evidence (architectural details and manuscript paintings), suggest that to the diverse pre-modern populations of the Islamic as well as pre-Islamic world, donning male garb was an astute way to circumvent gender restrictions on the political and military scene: to bolster the legitimacy of their reign, female rulers of the past adopted the most familiar symbols of manhood.

Modern and contemporary scholars may perceive cross-dressing as more derogatory than celebratory. Writing in the twentieth-century, the feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, commented that "women who assert they are men still claim masculine consideration and respect," thus acknowledging male superiority.[94] There exists a paradox in this interpretation, however: how does one oppose masculine power while aligning oneself with power culturally associated with man? If a woman engages in practices perceived to be in the realm of men, it would be a rejection of her own femininity and self, and an elevation of male identity, and thus a reinforcement of hegemonic patriarchy. As Mimi Schippers, a scholar of

[93] Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 67.

[94] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 4.

sociology and gender and sexuality studies elucidates, “man” and “woman” are not simple qualifiers, but rather institutionalized repositories of symbolic meanings, found in the patterns of social practice and seen as complementary opposites. Men are only associated with power and dominance if there is a vulnerable and submissive other. However, these oppositions are dynamic and defined by social practices.[95] In light of these theorists’ views, is it then possible to interpret the performance of maleness as empowering? Is Abu’l Hasan’s portrayal of Nur Jahan in men’s attire a constructive display of power, or does it serve as a reminder that even the most powerful woman in the empire was inferior to her male co-regent? How can one subvert gendered hierarchies without accepting as valid the hierarchies’ pervasiveness in societies? Does suppressing femininity affirm androcentric hierarchies? Or through defying diachronic categorization, can it create a hybridization of maleness and femaleness as we observed in the practices of some powerful women?

An Islamic literary tradition around cross-dressing, to which scholars have begun to pay attention only recently, provides some answers to these questions. Stories from this genre suggest that neither the practitioners nor the viewers considered the choice to be shown in the guise of a man as bowing down to social norms. Rather, what emerges from a study of a corpus of popular Arab epics and their illustrated versions is that cross-dressing was considered a shrewd tactic to allow women to move between genders. These were nonconformist individuals who pushed the sociocultural boundaries to redeem privileges normally ascribed to men. Appropriation of masculine attire, attributes, and titles could transform a woman into being acknowledged as a man, despite biological traits, and served as a means to challenge cultural

[95] Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 91.

gender norms.[96] Given the time period in which these women trespassed the boundaries, I read their acts as attempts to proclaim power, making these women pre-modern equivalents of present-day female "dissenters."

The practice of wearing male garb to assert power and gain popular acceptance goes as far back as the famous Hatshepsut of Egypt, who even wore a fake beard in imitation of a male pharaoh. Though distant in time, Hatshepsut's example remains relevant within the long history of cross-dressing by female rulers. There exist several female rulers in Indo-Persian history, but not all chose to don male garb, indicating conscious choice in how female rulers wished to present themselves. One such ruler, that did choose to "unveil" was Raziya Sultana, the only female Mamluk sultan of the Delhi Sultanate (r.1236-1240). Her father Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish elected his only daughter from among his sons as heir to the throne. Indo-Persian traditions to legitimize rule through claims of semi-divinity allowed female rulers to also be imbued with the assumed divinity of their fathers, allowing them to secure the throne. Female successors or "warrior daughters," as Alyssa Gabbay has called them, could then, hold the throne with might similar to that of their fathers.[97] In further preparation to hold the throne, Raziya was trained in archery, martial arts, and administration.[98] Yet, despite her legitimacy and rigorous training, like many "warrior daughters," she was subjected to "strong anti-female sentiment" by some of her people.[99] Raziya would be rejected by Muslims at court, who ignored her father's

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[96] Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King," 423.

[97] Alyssa Gabbay, "In Reality a Man: Sultan Iltutmish, His Daughter, Raziya, and Gender Ambiguity in Thirteenth Century Northern India," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 4 (2011): 45.

[98] Peter Jackson, "Sultan Radiyya Bin Iltutmish," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed., Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 189.

[99] Gabbay, "In Reality a Man," 51.

wish and placed her brother on the throne instead. Yet, her brother's ineptitude proved too much to tolerate, and six months later, he and his mother were assassinated by Raziya's supporters. Initially elected as a figurehead, she would prove herself an adept ruler.

Transcending gender distinctions, the "warrior daughter" transformed into the image of a man once she ascended to the throne. While the epithets that Raziya adopted for herself as "pillar of women" and "queen of the times" demonstrate her desire to be acknowledged as a true female leader, she took the throne by eschewing feminine presentation.[100] As cultural anthropologist Shelly Errington has suggested, an individual is not automatically imbued with political authority, but rather how the person enacts maleness and femaleness is what influences the perception of the populace; and in the pre-modern world, leadership was associated with maleness.[101] According to the court historian, Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani Raziya's first act as a ruler was to "unveil" and don a turban.[102] Juzjani bore witness to Raziya's public appearance on elephant back and wrote in his *Tabaqat-e Naseri* (The Tales of [Sultan] Naser) that she "donned the tunic, and assumed the head-dress [of a man]."[103] Juzjani observed that wearing men's clothing provided Raziya with a sense of greater authority, particularly as she moved among her people, rather than remaining secluded at the court. In her masculine attire that provided her a male persona, Raziya was allowed to move through the public realm to perform "in the manner

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[100] Ibid., 45.

[101] Cynthia Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King: Gender and Political Authority in Medieval India," in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization,* edited by David Shulman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 400.

[102] Jackson, "Sultan Radiyya Bin Iltutmish," 189.

[103] Menhaj, I, 460; tr. I, 643. Quoted in Alyssa Gabbay, "In Reality a Man," 48. *Tabaqat-e Naseri* (The Tables of [Sultan] Naser) was completed in 1260.

of kings," as well as hold public *durbar* (royal court) and gain respect as a man.[104] As the sultan's daughter, Raziya was already a known figure in society, so her clothing was certainly not intended as a disguise to trick the populace who knew her identity. Rather, the clothing functioned to showcase political and military acumen. As the daughter of a divine ruler, Raziya does set a precedent for future female leaders like Nur Jahan in Indo-Persian societies. Raziya was from Delhi, making it likely that Nur Jahan was familiar with this historical figure and was eager to continue the *silsila* by emulating Raziya's model.

The next place in the *silsila* before Nur Jahan belongs to Rudrama-devi (r. 1262-1289), another "warrior daughter." Upon her accession to the throne, Rudrama-devi appropriated the title *maharaja* (king), adopted a male form of her name (Rudradeva), and wore masculine clothing.[105] She was the only independent female ruler of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal. Beginning in 1262, she ruled jointly with her father, Ganapati-deva (r. 1199-1262), before being crowned in 1269.[106] Unlike Raziya's short reign, Rudrama-devi ruled for more than a quarter-century.[107] Rudrama-devi, like Raziya, wore male attire at the royal court, where she directly advised ministers, generals, and other officers of state, particularly in regard to battles, as she was considered a valiant warrior and general.[108] Like Nur Jahan, Rudrama-devi too commissioned monuments, and at one such monument, the *rangamantapa* (great hall) at the

[104] Gabbay, "In Reality a Man," 53.
[105] Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King," 399.

[106] Ibid., 396.

[107] This is due to the lack of male heirs to the throne, as Rudrama-devi did not have brothers, nor did she bear sons. Her successor would be her grandson, Prataparudra II (r. 1289- 1332).

[108] Alekhya Punjala, *Rani Rudrama Devi*, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 2016), 52. Despite legends of Rudrama-devi dying in battle, likely she did not die on the battlefield, as she was nearly eighty years old. However, she may have been present at the military camp, as she is known for leading men into battle.

Swayambhu Deva Temple in Warangal, there is a high-relief sculpture of the female king.[109] In this portrait, Rudrama-devi is depicted as a female warrior, foreshadowing Nur Jahan a few centuries later. The sculpture portrays her wearing the headdress of a lady warrior, holding a dagger and shield, while mounted on a lion, with the trunk of an elephant visible below.[110] The accompanying epithet glorifies her with the title *Raya-Gaja-Kesari* "lion to the elephant-like [enemy] kings," the same title used by her father.[111] Rudrama-devi's choice to have herself depicted as female demonstrates that she did not see it necessary to alter her persona at all times: the timing and location of her performance as a male was a carefully made choice.[112]

While these female rulers of Mughal India altered their fashion to conform to the preconceived notion of a ruler and to put their peoples' minds at ease, tales of other warrior queens were circulating in and outside of India. Among these, the tales of Alexander the Great (appropriated in Islamic literature as an exemplar ruler) are of particular interest for their accounts of Amazon women, which circulated widely at the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal courts. In an illustrated version of *Aja'ib al-makhluqat* (The Wonders of Creation), by Zakariya al-Qazwini (d. 1283), Amazons are depicted in active battle with Alexander.[113] The Amazons are shown in female garb, wearing kaftans over tunics and trousers, and headscarves, with a Muslim

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[109] Ibid., 31.

[110] This portrayal of Rudrama-devi evokes the Goddess Durga, the Hindu goddess of war, strength, and protection.

[111] Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King," 400.

[112] Ibid., 402. Rudrama-devi has often been overlooked as a noteworthy female ruler, due to the use of her masculine name in contemporary documents. In a contemporary inscription, the use of her feminine form is employed when describing her genealogy and masculine form when telling of her military might.

[113] See Supplement Persan 332, folio 201v., Paris, Bibliothèque nationale. Zakariya al-Qazwini was an Arab physician, astronomer, geographer, and writer. The translation of the Persian text under the image reads, "Iskandar [Alexander] fights in the West warriors from the kingdom of Queen Faryānūš, with whom he will make peace because he has not been able to defeat them." This translation is provided by the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

audience in mind. Although they are not dressed like men, their vigorous resistance to Alexander illustrates their power and martial skill that were not inferior to those of a man.

Although female rulers were often met with resistance, tales of powerful females and warrior women told in both court literature and folk literature were popular in pre-modern Islamic societies. The warrior woman type can be found in the Persian *Shahnama* (the Book of Kings), an eleventh-century example of the "mirror of princes" genre that defined norms in Perso-Islamic courts, in the persons of Homay, the Kayanid ruler, as well as Boran and Azarmidokht, two Sasanian rulers who took the male title of Shahan Shah.[114] The image of the battling woman can be linked to the women of the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet's first wife, Khadija, for instance, was older than Muhammad, and as a successful businesswoman who ran caravans; she even employed Muhammad before the two married. Muhammad's other wife A'isha is especially revered by Muslims for her active role in the Battle of the Camel that the Prophet's followers fought against the fourth caliph 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, after Muhammad's death in 658.[115] These actual and fictional female warrior figures set the precedent for the future Nur Jahan.

Arguably the most fascinating accounts of warrior women in Islamic literature are found in *siras*, Arabic popular tales. The *sira* was considered by members of the Mughal court as lowly literature, and they were even prevented from being read or copied. Yet, in Arab contexts, their popularity was wide.[116] Remke Kruk, an Arabic language and cultural scholar, has culled together and analyzed Arabic tales of female heroines, and concluded that these stories illustrate

[114] Gabbay, "In Reality a Man." 50.

[115] Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 66.

[116] Remke Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 16.

an appreciation for strong females by both female and male audiences, in particular by men who enjoyed stories that were told in public forums. The women mentioned in *sira* literature, such as Princess Dat-al-Himmah, the leading female hero of the Kilabi tribe, and other female warriors she encounters, such as Gharma and Iftuna, as well as 'Unaytira, warrior woman and daughter of Antar, bear striking resemblance to Nur Jahan.[117] The women of these stories disguise their female identities to command armies and to earn the respect of their husbands. Interestingly, however, these women do not yield unlimited power: once their identity is revealed, they risk losing their power to men.

While the Mughals disapproved of the *sira* literature, their literary and visual traditions did not exclude images of warrior women, though these images remain loyal to the conventions of female portraiture. Such images can be observed in Akbar's *Hamzanama* (Story of Amir Hamza), a fourteen-volume illustrated story of Amir Hamza, the Prophet's uncle, which contained fourteen hundred illustrations.[118] The epic recounts the stories of Hamza, who throughout his journey encounters several "warrior women." The women of *Hamzanama* are referred to as "warrior women," and yet they are ascribed more traditional gender norms than those adopted by the "warrior women" of Arab epics.[119] The women of the *Hamzanama* are encouraged to be submissive, to give up their independence at marriage, and to live life in *parda* (seclusion).[120] Illustrations created for this book represent women in choli tops, skirts, and veils

[117] Ibid., 25. This epic, *Sirat al-amira Dat al-Himmah* (*Epic of the Commander Dhat-al Himma*) is dated to circa 1100-1143.

[118] The *Hamzanama* was created by hundreds of artists, gilders, and bookbinders, working between 1562 and 1577. Today, twenty-seven of the approximately one-hundred and forty folios that survive are housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[119] Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam,* 150. As seen in the *Sirat al-amira Dat al-Himmah* and *Sirat 'Antara ibn Shaddad* (*Epic of 'Antara ibn Shaddad).*

[120] *Parda* lit., screen or curtain.

over long hair. It is striking that even in the rare scenes where women behave more as "warrior women" as they wrestle one another, behead a man, or display skills of archery, they are still presented in feminine fashion. The toning-down of the deeds of the warrior women in this manner is especially significant when considered in relation to Abu'l Hasan's portrait of Nur Jahan, where both the subject and the artist were willing to capture a true "warrior woman." It is within the framework of these literary and visual traditions that in what follows I attempt to contextualize Abu'l Hasan's work as a nod to the descriptions and depictions of powerful rulers and warrior women of the past.

Women in the Mughal Court

Before she became the empress, Nur Jahan grew up near the court of Akbar, where the emperor had established a harem.[121] The regulations of the life at the harem were outlined in the *Ain'i Akbari*, a document that established the rules of the court. In this administrative record, women were officially designated *pardeh-giyan*, "the veiled ones."[122] Transforming a formerly peripatetic court into a singularly located court, in Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's establishment of the *zenana* was intended to emphasize his own alleged divine characteristics and display the legitimacy of the Mughals, just as the establishment of the *kitabkhana* was intended to reinforce Akbar's right to rule as a cultivated man of Timurid lineage. In Akbar's court, seclusion was emblematic of high economic standing and it was intended to preserve the noblewomen's preciousness in the eyes of the populace.[123] Within the *zenana* lived several thousand women,

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[121] Lal, *Empress,* 50. Nur Jahan lived with her parents in a *haveli* (mansion) in Fatehpur-Sikri until she was eight, before moving to Agra until her first marriage in 1594.; See Ibid., 95. As a girl, Nur Jahan would visit the harem with her mother.

[122] Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, 176.

[123] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 40. This contrasts with the Western colonial discourse that depicts harems as phantasmagorias of debauchery.

including grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, daughters, as well as concubines, servants, slaves, *urdu begi* (female guards), entertainers, soothsayers, as well as young sons, and eunuchs who supervised them all.[124] Women of various ages and religions (Muslims, Hindus, and Christians) dwelled together within a hierarchical organization, with elderly women at the top of the social ladder. This private sphere was the feminine space, a *sanctum sanctorum*, of the Mughal court.

This separation of the harem led many Westerners to identify the court space in dichotomies: the private space of the harem was associated with the female, and the public space was associated with male. In reality, however, the boundaries between the two zones were fluid. Women could not always obtain public political stations, but they could and did indirectly exercise power over their male counterparts.[125] Noblewomen at Muslim courts often served as advisors to the male rulers and as ambassadors, as in the case of Hürrem Sultan, the infamous wife of Sultan Suleyman. Despite their continued presence on the royal scene, the lives and activities of women have been obfuscated from history.

During Akbar's reign, *parda* was used not only to veil the female body but also to disguise facts about the female members of the court from historical records. For reasons of propriety, names of young women were erased from official records, with only rare references to elders, such as mothers.[126] It was not until the time of Jahangir that more than fleeting references

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[124] Gavin R. G. Hambly, "Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers: The Case of Bibi Fatima," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 432.

[125] Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King," 392.

[126] Ruby Lal, "Mughal Palace Women," in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, edited by Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 106.

to female members of the Mughal court begin to appear in palace records and literary works. As mentioned in chapter one, Jahangir's memoir *Jahangirnama* provides substantial evidence of Nur Jahan's presence in court. With no less than thirty entries, Jahangir's memoir provides us with a portrait of a woman that the emperor describes as a companion, nurse, hunter, rescuer, tradeswoman, patron, and hostess of celebrations.[127] These descriptions are among the few descriptions of any women that exist in textual sources.

Another source that provides insight into the Mughal harem and elaborates on the circumstance of women is the *Humayunnama* (the Book of Humayun). A biography of the emperor Humayun composed by Gulbadan Banu Begum (d. 1603), daughter of Babur, sister to Humayun, and aunt to Akbar. In 1587, Akbar asked that Gulbadan record for posterity her memories of Humayun's rule. Gulbadan's account is not about personal gain or glory, but rather it provides a rare account of court life without administrative or diplomatic concern. Composed by another important female member of the Mughal court, the *Humayunnama* opens a window onto the *zenana* from a woman's perspective. Gulbadan writes on some of the common concerns of women, such as bathing, dressing in luxurious outfits, interior design, garden designs, embroidery, preparing for ceremonies, concern for men, and relationships between women. Contrasting Western eroticized images of the harem, shaped by fantasies of male European travelers, ambassadors, and merchants, Gulbadan's work provides a unique and genuine insight into the world in which Nur Jahan lived.

Despite the dearth of female autobiographies, Mughal and European sources suggest that although they lived in the harem, women did play active political roles at Mughal court, having the ears of the emperors, providing advice, and even serving as mediators between male rulers.

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[127] Nur Jahan was mentioned by her husband more than any other woman in Mughal history.

Noblewomen also exchanged letters with other noble wives and rulers and bestowed gifts on visiting ambassadors.[128] Politically astute and influential, some noblewomen could even issue *farmans* (edicts), *hukms* (sentences), and *parwanas* (warrants).[129] Acting in both private and on occasion semi-public spheres, women were not only behind marriage negotiations of court members, steering generations of Mughal emperors towards political alliances, but they also assisted in reconciliation between family members. In short, Mughal noblewomen were able to weild power from within the private sphere.[130]

Mughal women had access to the world beyond the confines of the court in other significant ways as well. In fact, it was predominantly the outside world that provided the large incomes with which Mughal noblewomen were privileged. Besides the allowance the emperor provided them, women also received income from taxing the inhabitants of their *parganas* (lands), as well as from custom dues on goods that passed through their land, and gifts from visitors.[131] Nur Jahan, for instance, collected duties on goods from Bengal and Bhutan in Sikandarabad, across the Yamuna River from Agra.[132] Some women, such as Nur Jahan, also invested in and controlled trade ships and routes, culminating in profits from duties and sales to

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[128] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 49.

[129] Hambly, "Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers," 471.

[130] A famous example of women serving as conciliators is when Gulbadan, Hamideh Banu Begum (d. 1604), Akbar's mother, and Salima Sultan Begum (d. 1613), Akbar's wife, pleaded for Akbar's forgiveness on Prince Salim's behalf after the prince's rebellion. Other examples of Akbar trusting women are when he placed Hamideh Banu Begum in charge of Delhi while he marched to Kabul in 1581 and then again when Akbar granted his half-siser Bakht-un-Nisa control over Kabul, which she maintained for three years.

[131] Ellison Banks Findly, "The Capture of Maryam-us-Zamani's Ship: Mughal Women and European Traders," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 2 (April – June 1988): 230. The land would be provided by the emperor in the form of *jagirs* or grants but considered the property of the beneficiary.

[132] Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 111.

earn additional income.[133] Women could not directly interact with merchants, but employed servants to carry messages. Yet, within the *zenana*, they did establish their own financial office.[134] Women spent their earnings on luxury items such as jewels, clothing, and perfume, but they also commissioned gardens, mosques, tombs, and caravansaries. [135] Among Nur Jahan's commissions were several gardens and buildings that displayed her piety and power, including the caravanserai in Nurmahal, and the tomb of her parents, Itimaduddaula and Asmat Begum, located in Agra.[136] Gulbadan also informs us that women would spend money on cavalry to assist in small skirmishes, as demonstrated later when Nur Jahan paid for the army that came to her and Jahangir's rescue. The noblewomen's income and purchasing power provided them with a palpable sense of independence.

Mughal women were viewed by foreign ambassadors as the "gatekeepers" to the emperor, and by extension, to the empire. Sir Thomas Roe, the English ambassador, wrote he had to appeal to Nur Jahan if he wanted to establish safe trade routes and lower taxes in India for the English.[137] Roe complained in his journal and letters to officials of the East India Company that he could not be formally received by Jahangir until Nur Jahan had examined his seal and approved his audience.[138] In another show of power, from October 1617 through January 1618,

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[133] Ibid., 110.

[134] Findly, "The Capture of Maryam-us-Zamani's Ship," 231.

[135] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 47.

[136] This tomb is often said to have inspired the Taj Mahal.

[137] The English wanted to establish a preeminent place in trade with the Mughal Empire to supersede the Portuguese.

[138] Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 59.; See Findly, *Nur Jahan,* 61. Both Roe and Pelsaert emphasized the control Nur Jahan exhibited in relation to trade. However, it must also be remembered that Jahangir inherited a rich empire and did not see the need to expand trade with countries more interested in exporting from India than introducing new goods. Similarly, Francisco Pelsaert working for the Dutch East India Company wrote that without Nur Jahan's approval, the order and grants of Jahangir were null. Acknowledging Nur Jahan's apparent power, Pelsaert claimed that Jahangir had forgotten himself as emperor and allowed Nur Jahan to secure a "more than royal position.

Nur Jahan had all English goods put under her supervision. Nur Jahan even provided Roe a "scrite," a list of items she desired, that included beaver hats and embroidery from England.

As a co-sovereign, Nur Jahan often served in the place of her husband at court. The most striking demonstration of this power-sharing is evident in Nur Jahan's *jharokha*s. In images by Abu'l Hasan that captured Jahangir's daily *jharokha darshan,* the emperor is portrayed as the sun that shone on his people, with deity-like status as he listens to their pleas.[139] The thrice-daily *jharokha darshan* was viewed as exclusive to the emperor. Yet, in an unprecedented show of power, Nur Jahan appropriates this ritual on behalf of her husband, becoming a symbol upon which the subjects depended as a source of peace and order.[140] Another bold appropriation was Nur Jahan's minting coins in her name—a prerogative of male sovereigns.[141] Last but not least, a far cry from the romanticized image of a Nur Jahan told in Mughal legends, was the use of drums and an orchestra at Nur Jahan's entrance to the court.[142] This last honor was not given to her until after her father's death in 1622, at which time Jahangir bestowed upon her all of Itimaduddaula's wealth, including the honorary court entrance.[143] As Dow, the Scottish writer, has observed, Nur Jahan made herself invaluable in a government that shielded its women in the

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[139] Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001), 140. See for instance Abu'l Hasan, *Emperor Jahangir at the Jharoka Window at Agra Fort*, ca. 1605, opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 56 x 35.2 cm. Ontario, the Aga Khan Museum, accession no. AKM136. For comparison, see also Anonymous, *Jahangir Holding a Picture of Madonna,* ca. 1620. New Delhi, National Museum.

[140] See for instance Abu'l Hasan (attributed), *Nur Jahan: Portrait to be Worn as Jewelry*, 1600s, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 1 3/4 x 2 1/16 in. Boston, Harvard Museum of Art. For comparison, see *Jahangir Holding a Picture of Madonna,* ca. 1620. New Delhi, National Museum.

[141] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 46. Nur Jahan's coins were of a similar style and equal value to those with Jahangir's name.

[142] Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India: 1526-1748 A.D.* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 62.

[143] Jahangir made Nur Jahan the sole heiress of Itimaduddaula's wealth, over her brother, Asaf Khan.

harem. In a similar passage, Muhammad Hadi, the eighteenth-century Mughal court historian, wrote "by degrees, she became, except in name, undisputed Sovereign of the Empire, and the King himself became a tool in her hands." In this, Hadi echoes the very words of Jahangir, who had commented that Nur Jahan was wise enough to handle the matters of state, while he enjoyed wine and a bite of meat.[144] It was all this vigorous intervention in policy and her marksmanship that allowed Nur Jahan to trespass gender boundaries.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" Judith Butler interprets gender as a performance, comprised not of biological sex, but rather of the way women opt to carry themselves and their dress.[145] Gender, Butler argues, cannot be assigned at birth, nor is it an agent that acts on individuals: rather individuals have the agency to control their own gender performance as defined by or in defiance of society. While there have historically been established expectations of masculine and feminine sociocultural roles, (including positions, clothing, and designated spaces), Butler finds the notion that identity is associated with biological sex too strict a binary. Her insistence on gender as performative and her perception of gender as fluid informs my reading of *Nur Jahan* not as a derogatory representation of a woman in need of male acknowledgment, but rather as a depiction of a female who skillfully navigated the strict hierarchies of a male-dominated court to carve her own niche.

As I was finishing writing this thesis, I stumbled upon a third image that echoes the persona and composition of *Nur Jahan* and reinforces my reading. These portraits had been brought to England, then compiled by the cleric Samuel Purchas in his 1619 collection of travel

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[144] Findly, "The Lives and Contributions of Mughal Women," 36.

[145] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519.

stories. The page contains three figures in full-length, which appear to have been created as individual portraits originally and pastiched together in this reproduction. [146] Labels penned in English identify the figures as "Selim Shah the Great Mogoll" (i.e., Jahangir) to the right, "Sultan Corooan" (i.e., Prince Khurram) to the left, and placed between the two men "his [i.e., Jahangir's] slave woman."[147] Interestingly, the woman is outfitted for war.[148] It is possible that the original works reproduced in this print were brought to England by Roe. Roe's relationship with the Mughal court, and more directly with Jahangir and Nur Jahan, suggests that he might have received artworks as gifts from the royal couple, in exchange for procuring English works of art for them. In light of the letters written by Roe regarding Nur Jahan's interventions in establishing trade relations between the English and Mughals, it is safe to assume that Roe procured this image with the knowledge that it represented the royal family. "His slave woman" then, would be none other than Nur Jahan. The print juxtaposes the three figures as symbols of the empire. Jahangir is shown holding a falcon, which symbolizes kingliness and sport. Prince Khurram holds a book that symbolizes his learnedness and three roses that are signs of sovereignty, echoing the three figures in the print. Placed in the center is Nur Jahan, depicted with accoutrements of battle: the sword and battle-axe. She stands on the same ground with Jahangir and Prince Khurram, and central to this image of the empire.

This second image of Nur Jahan with military gear corroborates my interpretation of Abu'l Hasan's image as an alternative representation of the empress—a soldier and protector of

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[146] Milo Cleveland Beach, "1600-1660: Mughal Painting and the Rise of Local Workshops," in *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 105. *Purchas His Pilgrimes* was first published in 1619. Milo Cleveland Beach associates this print with English cleric, Samuel Purchas's *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. *Purchas His Pilgrimes* is a multi-volume compilation of travel stories spanning both time and place.

[147] Image reproduced in Beach, "1600-1660: Mughal Painting and the Rise of Local Workshops," 109.

[148] Identified as the work (or works) of Manohar with a Persian inscription at the bottom Mughal court painter Manohar (d. 1624).

the empire. Together with this image, *Nur Jahan* serves as a historical document that links Nur Jahan to the line of female queens and warriors. Nur Jahan's role in this trio is also accepted by Jahangir who yields the physical power to his wife, as he is contented with holding the falcon.

As this chapter intended to demonstrate, the examples of several Indo-Persian women who challenged the system and whose stories have been recounted in tales and epics, have been obscured from our view. As Butler has discussed, to be biologically female does not make one innately submissive and hidden from view. Within the context of pre-modern Islamic cultures, it follows that donning men's clothes does not alone make one a man. Within the confines of gender binaries, there existed many outliers who occupied a "third space."[149] Nur Jahan was wise enough to transition into a masculine identity when it suited her needs politically. Rather than succumbing to ideals of male as authority, Nur Jahan's cross-dressing was an acknowledgment of the patriarchal court she so skillfully subverted. This way, Nur Jahan's cross-dressing was a performance of power.

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[149] See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Conclusion

In this thesis, building on Findly's and Lal's scholarship on Nur Jahan's reign, I examined the portraits of Nur Jahan and her contemporaries to deepen our understanding of the public perception of Nur Jahan's power and her role at the Mughal court. Previous scholarship on Nur Jahan has remained limited to textual sources, and in a surprising oversight, omitted visual evidence that sheds light on her life, particularly on her role as empress. In this study, approaching this historical figure from an art-historical lens, I attempted to construct a more encompassing account of Nur Jahan. Textual sources place emphasis on Nur Jahan's pre-sovereign period, whilst Abu'l Hasan's paintings illustrate her regnal era. In this respect, *Nur Jahan* fills in a historical gap and effectively illustrates how Nur Jahan asserted her persona through political, economic, and symbolic means, such as by hearing grievances at the *jharokha*, issuing edicts, and having coins minted in her name. Though it remains unknown who commissioned *Nur Jahan* or who its audience was, the painting likely circulated at the court and was viewed by both Jahangir and Nur Jahan. Precisely how this image was conceived remains a mystery. However, I hope that by revealing how it re-presents the constructed persona of a woman who created a space for herself, trespassing into the public, masculine realm, I have secured the work a prominent afterlife.

If Beauvoir's idea of becoming a woman only through the choice of action is valid, then we know that a female by sex can transform and present herself as a male ruler, even if simply as a charade to display the qualities the public expects to see in a strong ruler. Nur Jahan did not need to do this as other women before her, from Hatshepsut to Raziya and Rudrama-devi did,

however. Taking their example many steps further, Nur Jahan stepped out from the shadow of her husband to be seen publicly in the *jharokha* and gain renown as a sharpshooter.[150] Thus, besides being one of the most successful examples of Mughal painting, *Nur Jahan* aligns its protagonist with the female leaders of the past. One cannot know whether, when she sat at the *jharokha,* Nur Jahan wore her hair up in a masculine turban, but the fact that she is represented by Abu'l Hasan not once, but as I claim, twice, as well as in the unknown portrait brought to England, suggests that her show of power was not ephemeral, but a routine performance clearly understood by her target audience.

Images of emperors and men of court are plentiful in Islamic art, and they have been analyzed in a number of scholarly works. Representations of women, on the other hand, have not received the scholarly attention that they deserve: artworks such as *Nur Jahan* have been pushed to the peripheries of history. As I tried to demonstrate in this study by integrating visual evidence into the realm of textual evidence, works excluded from dominant art histories are well worth examining as they help us write better narratives. I hope that as it fills the lacuna in scholarship on the life, career, and personality of Nur Jahan, and demonstrates how visual representations can help challenge or compliment representations in historical documents and literary works, my work will also encourage future scholars to pay greater attention to history's peripheries, particularly where textual documentation is sparse or questionable as in the case of European travelogues that have disproportionately informed studies of Islamic art.

[150] Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King," 421.

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Appendix

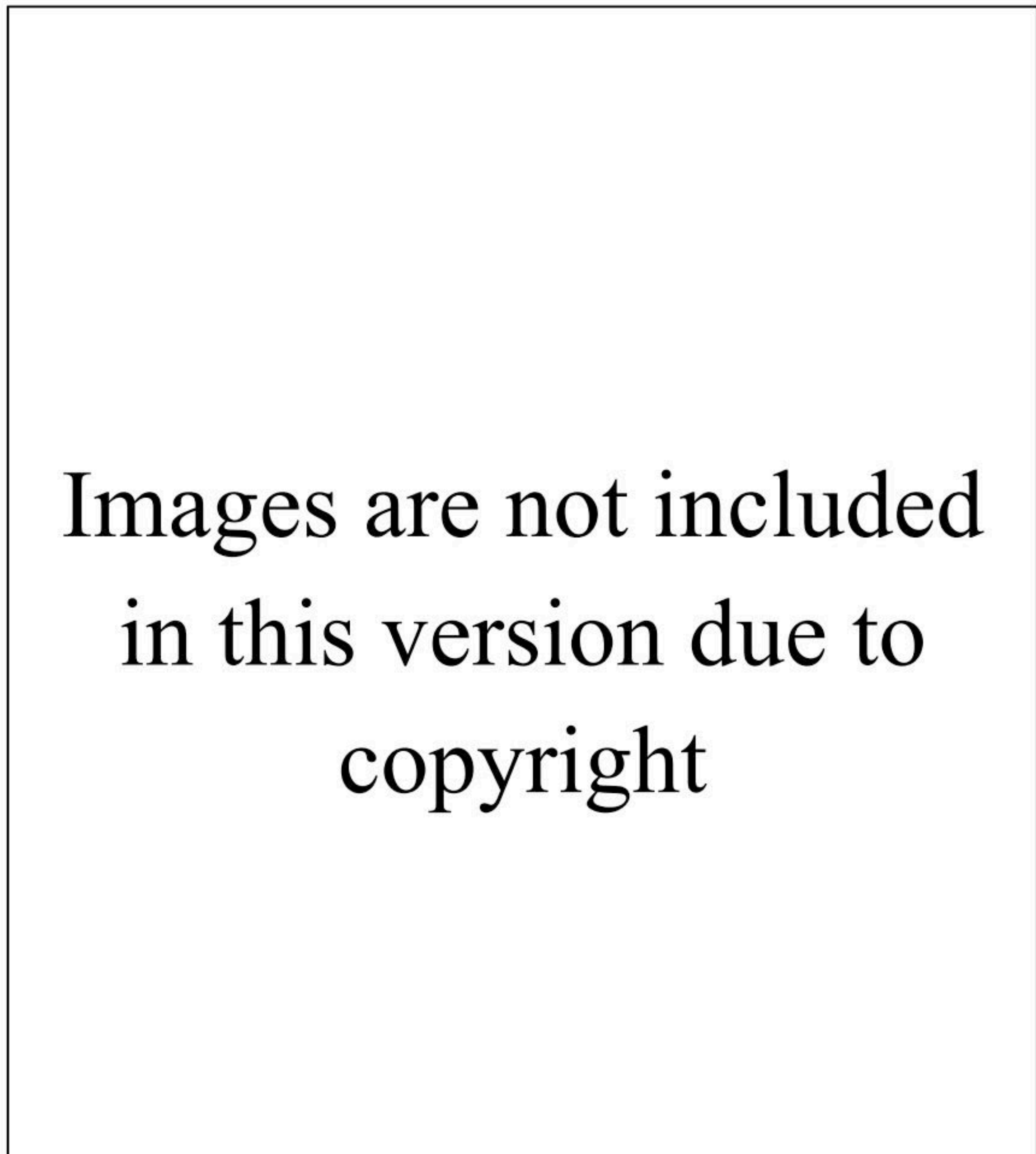

Figure 1. Abu'l Hasan, *Nur Jahan Holding a Musket*, ca.1618-1620, opaque watercolor on paper board, 105 x 50 mm. Uttar Pradesh, Rampur Raza Library.

Images are not included in this version due to copyright

Figure 2. Abu'l Hasan, *Nur Jahan in Holding a Musket*, ca. 1617. Anonymous, *A Mughal Prince*, ca. 1615-25, opaque watercolor on paper board, 107 x 57 mm. Uttar Pradesh, Rampur Raza Library.

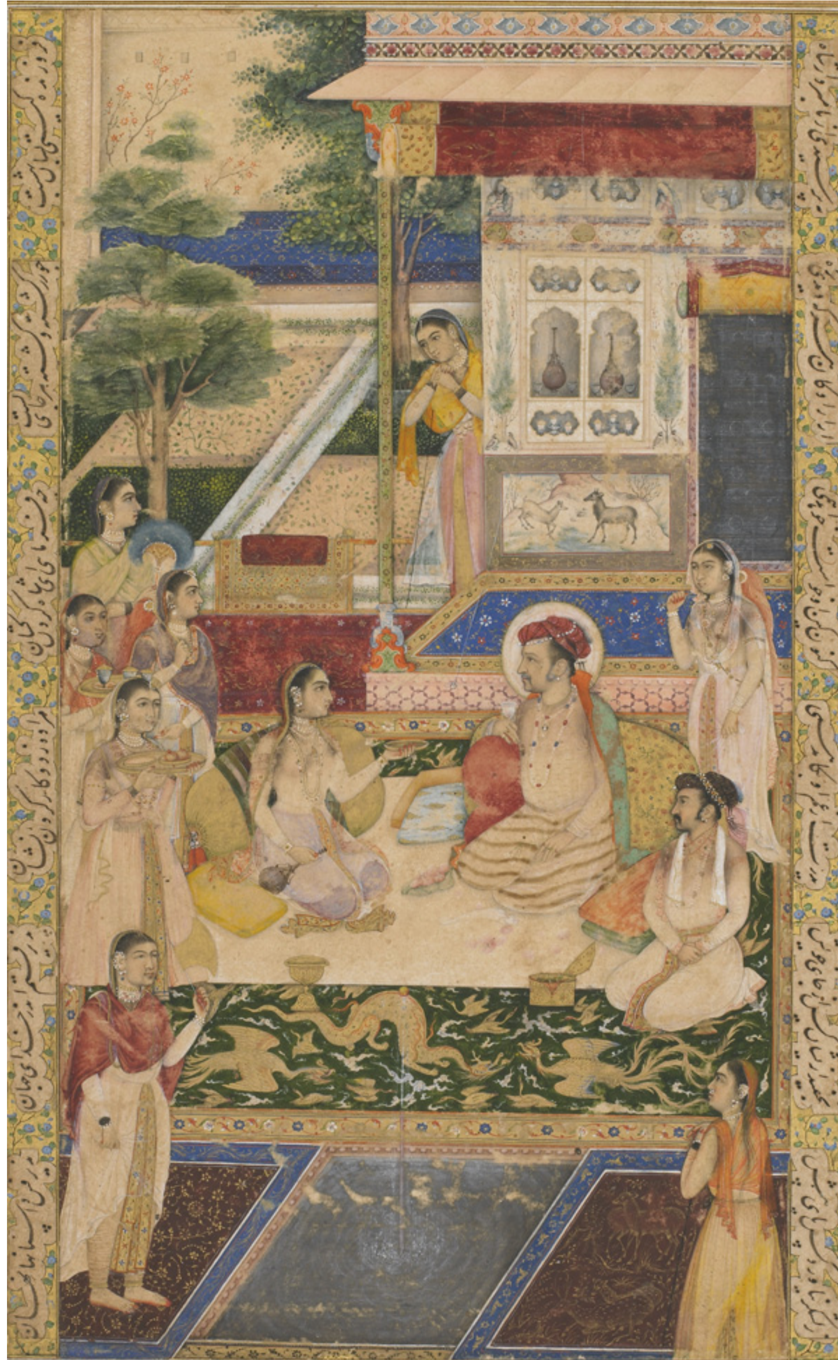

Figure 3. Anonymous, *Jahangir and Prince Khurram Entertained by Nur Jahan*, ca. 1624, opaque watercolor, ink and gold on paper 9 15/16 x 5 9/16 in. Washington D.C., Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Image in the public domain.

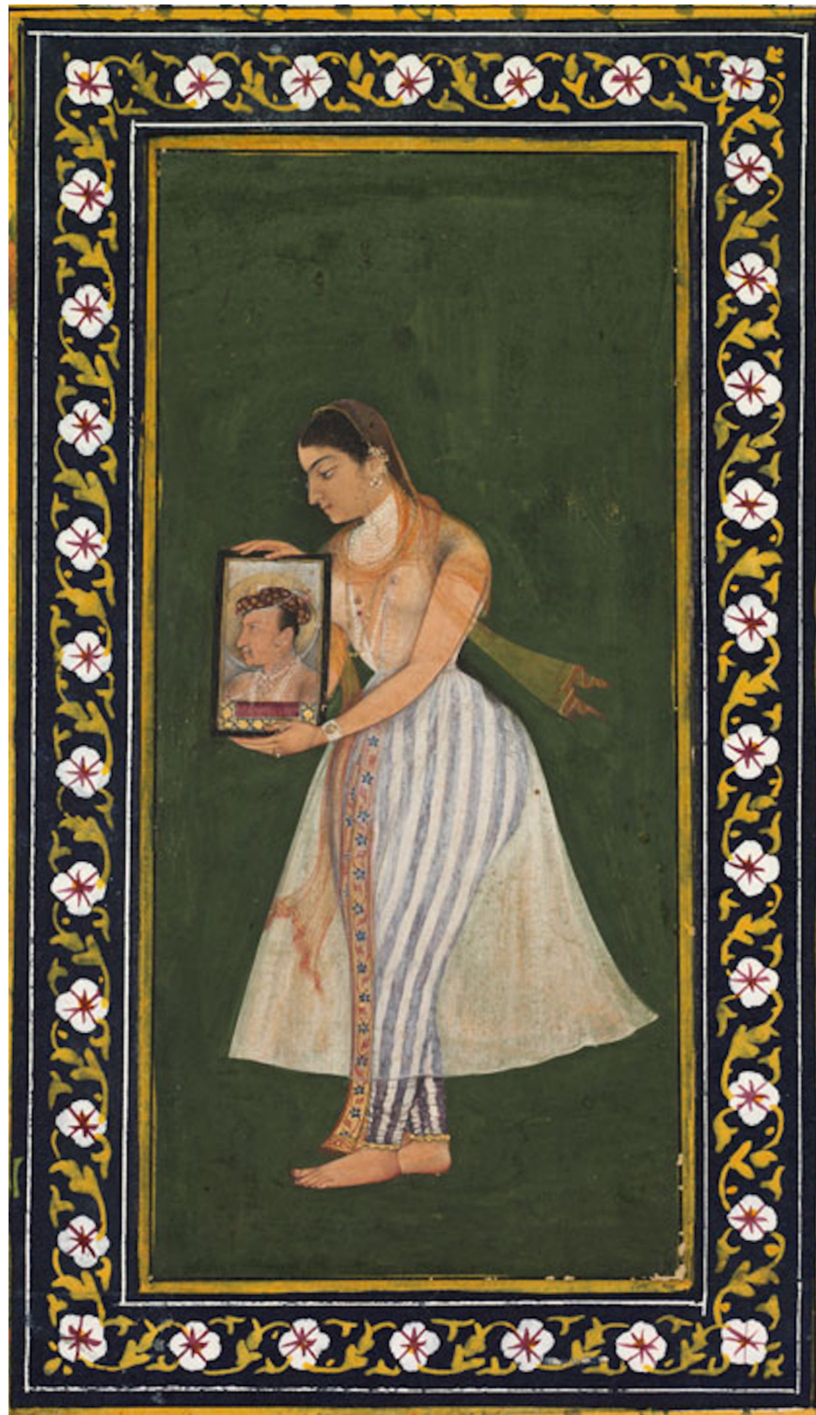

Figure 4. Bishandas, *Nur Jahan Holding a Portrait of Emperor Jahangir,* ca. 1627, gum tempera and gold on paper, 5 3/8 x 2 1/2 in. Cleveland, the Cleveland Museum of Art. Image in the public domain.