

## **“Guest of the Inmost Heart”: Conceptions of the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women**

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*In the works of Sufi love mysticism, the Sufi seeker is often represented as a male lover in relation to God as the symbolically “feminine” Beloved. However, women themselves were not infrequently the practitioners of the mystical path in Islam, and it is clear from the words attributed to them that female Sufis developed their own image of the Divine Beloved as the symbolically masculine object of their female desire. In this paper, I examine short poetic pieces and sayings attributed to Sufi women in both hagiographical and biographical works in an attempt to identify a specifically feminine brand of Islamic “love” mysticism, reflecting a distinctly and traditionally female experience of loving and spiritual longing.*

The image of the Sufi seeker consumed by desire for the Divine Essence—sometimes described as a mysteriously beautiful and “veiled” Beloved—is given a good deal of poetic and rhetorical play in the works of Sufi literature. This image derives much of its symbolic force from the assumption that the Sufi seeker is himself the male lover, seeking the sublime Divine Essence metaphorically conceived of in feminine terms. Yet the feminine presence in Sufism is not merely a symbolic one, as women are also among the well-known practitioners of the mystical path in Islam, and a number of Sufi works clearly establish women’s place within the tradition of early Islamic mystical thought. Rābī’ah al-‘Adawiyyah, undoubtedly the most well known of all Sufi women, is frequently credited with pioneering the Sufi doctrine of divine love, and passionate descriptions of devotion toward God are ascribed to many Sufi women. While, in many ways, the devotional attitudes of Sufi women are similar to those reported of Sufi men, the words attributed to early Sufi women suggest that they developed their own image of the divine Beloved as both gentle and strong, fiercely jealous and disarmingly intimate, and metaphorically conceptualized as the masculine object of their female longing. At the same time, descriptions of their spiritual relationship with the Beloved tend to be less exotic and more “domesticated” than those we find commonly attributed to Sufi men. Rather than conceiving of their souls as lovers journeying in quest of an elusive *rendez-vous* with the Beloved, they more frequently imagined their souls as faithful lovers who enjoyed regular or even constant states of intimacy with God.

Whenever we attempt to discern something of the true historical lives and spiritual practices of early saints and mystical figures, we face the standard problems of authenticity inherent in the hagiographical genre from which most of our material is derived. As the attempt to record the charismatic and paranormal character of the saints within the literature of an institutional and normative religious culture, hagiography is perhaps more given than other types of religious literature both to the pious exaggeration of its subjects' spiritual power and exceptionalism, and (somewhat paradoxically) to the desire to limit the scope of their subjects' thought and action within the legitimating bounds of acceptable religious and social attitudes. In addition to this basic tension within the hagiographic genre as a whole, we must also consider the particular doctrinal or theological agendas of the individual hagiographical compilers, and the ways in which the recording of saints' lives are used to advance those agendas. When our research regards the lives of early Sufi women, our problems are further compounded by the fact that at least until the later Middle Ages and early modern periods, we are entirely dependent on the hagiographical record of male compilers. Women did not author their own texts in the earliest periods of Islam, when female Sufis appear to have been particularly abundant and active, and thus we have no fragments of their own writing to serve as a basis from which to discern more effectively the effect of varying hagiographical agendas on their historical legacy.

Despite these problems with the primary source material, I here attempt to discern something of early Sufi women's views about the nature of mystical love, on the basis of the material found in these imperfect sources. This is a useful project, I would argue, because while the window that this literature provides for us onto the lives of these early women may be significantly colored by the intellectual and religious agendas of its authors, it is still a window, and it is not opaque. Moreover, this literature is all that remains to us of these early mystical women in Islam; if we simply dismiss it as mostly or largely fictional, then whatever these women can teach us about the relationship between gender and spirituality in the early Islamic period is decidedly lost. I should also note that most Islamic hagiographical compilations (with the partial exception of 'Aṭṭār's *Tazkirat al-awliyā'*) do not take the form of full literary *vitae*, such as one has for the lives of many medieval Catholic saints, but are rather compiled in the fragmented form of a series of reports [*akhbār*] about the mystic's words and actions. The *khbar* genre limits, to some extent, the ability of the compiler to shape the structure of his subjects' lives and thought. While the careful selection and organization of existent reports (and perhaps, in some cases, the spurious exaggeration or creation of others) may allow the compiler to shape the reader's perception of a particular mystic's life and character, he is at least partially constrained by the strong Islamic intellectual impulse to gather and preserve all that could be found about a particular subject, even if it might be

contradictory or controversial. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ascertain the factual or historical nature of the reports regarding Sufi women, or even the historicity of the women they describe. I therefore take a thematic approach in this study, seeking to discern prevalent concepts and common emphases that can be found throughout the works that discuss Sufi or pious women. If it is possible to identify consistent thematic emphases in accounts of Sufi women, across a variety of hagiographical compilers and other authors, living in a variety of places and time periods, and with a variety of hagiographical agendas, then this can tell us something meaningful about the general character of female spirituality in early Islam.

While common hagiographical tropes—such as the somatic nature of female mysticism, reflected in the emphasis on female asceticism—are clearly on display in this literature, the reported words and actions of the women that we find in Sufi biographical compilations hardly suggest a consciously constructed paradigm of female mysticism molded to the standards of normative female behavior in Islam. Although the biases of male transmitters and compilers are always a concern, my review of several major hagiographic collections and other works that mention female Sufis suggests no clear male agenda to define what a Sufi women should look like. These are works written for men, not for the education or refinement of Sufi women. If these women represent a more domesticated and internalized mode of spiritual practice that may seem befitting of medieval Islamic views on the proper place of women, they are just as often depicted as acting in ways that are decidedly antinomian in relation to standards of female conduct and comportment prescribed in other religious literature. They shout out their spiritual pain and frustration in the sanctified *haram* in Mecca, they openly challenge notions of male spiritual superiority, and they resist, through multiple means, the spiritual control of men over their lives. This would seem to belie the notion that these works reflect a male religious or social agenda of “domesticating” female spirituality. I would argue, on the contrary, that in the moral tension some of these women express in trying to reconcile the outward religious demands of marriage and domestic life with the inward spiritual desire for detachment and solitude, or in the struggle of others to live solitary and celibate lives in a religious culture that strongly discouraged such lifestyles, we can detect something of a genuine, female voice—a “residual [female] subjectivity”<sup>1</sup>—behind the sometimes formulaic accounts of women’s asceticism and piety.

At first glance, the female Sufi perspective on mystical love we find in Sufi literature does not seem terribly different from that of their male counterparts. Yet a careful analysis of the words and actions attributed to Sufi women reveals a number of themes (or thematic emphases) that subtly distinguish them from those of most Sufi men. For example, in many works of Sufi literature by and about men, there is a certain tension—albeit often a creative one—between

more ascetic forms of mystical practice and the ecstatic ways of the love mystics. This dialectic is built into the structure of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Tazkirat al-awliyā'*, for example, where passionate and sometimes antinomian modes of devotion to God (as demonstrated by Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah and others) are positively compared to the fearful self-loathing of other Sufi figures, who were driven to constant weeping and drastic asceticism by an exaggerated awareness of their own sinfulness. Yet in the sayings and actions of many Sufi women, love mysticism and an ascetic withdrawal from the world and society are seamlessly combined. This is especially apparent in the fuller record we have of the spiritual perspective of Rābi'ah, who is remembered in Sufi sources both as an extreme and vigilant ascetic and as a passionate lover of God who was sometimes driven to wander the streets like a drunken madwoman.<sup>2</sup> For women like Rābi'ah, the asceticism of poverty, celibacy, and solitude was a natural corollary to their intensely passionate and intimate relationship with the divine Beloved. Theirs was not a cold and fearful asceticism only partially warmed by an imaginary relationship with the Beloved, but a relationship with God felt too intensely for them to be distracted by mortal objects of affection.

### **A Feminine Conception of the Divine Beloved**

The images used to convey God as the Beloved, and the Sufi's relationship to Him, are somewhat different in male and female Sufi discourse, with female expressions of divine love appearing to be strongly connected to the norms of gender relationships and marriage for women in medieval Islamic society. For example, the Islamic social structure allowed polygyny, and hence multiple objects of love and desire for men, but demanded that women remain loyal to a single spouse; and the female experience of love as purely monogamous may be related—both rhetorically and practically—to the decision of many more female than male Sufis to remain celibate and avoid marriage, and hence the situation of having both an earthly and a divine "spouse." Moreover, the conception of the Beloved we encounter in female Sufi discourse is a very masculine one, and the relationship between these Sufi women and the divine Beloved often symbolically assumes traditional modes of male–female interaction. In a number of passages, for example, Sufi women speak of the Beloved as the one who provides for and shelters them, and in their poverty, they come to see Him as the one on whom they depend for spiritual as well as physical sustenance.<sup>3</sup> In one fantastic account, Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah's donkey dies in the desert, leaving her stranded in the midst of her journey to Mecca. After rejecting offers of assistance from passers-by, Rābi'ah complains to God, like a dissatisfied wife, that He has not provided for and protected her, a weak and helpless woman, on the journey to His house. Her appeal to divine chivalry is reportedly effective, as her donkey is miraculously revived and she is soon on her way

again.<sup>4</sup> Using a similar mode of discourse, but from a contrasting perspective, some Sufi women display the traditional wifely virtue of contentment with the provisions they have been given by their divine “spouse” and “provider,” and an “embarrassment” about asking for more from either God, Himself, or from human men.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most striking features of early female Sufi discourse is the tremendous confidence many of these women had both in God’s love for them and in the rewards they could expect for their devotion to Him. While there are some examples of women weeping over their own moral unworthiness and their desire for God,<sup>6</sup> it is at least as common to find Sufi women expressing certainty in their relationship with God, and a pronounced confidence that God has chosen them for His love, and that He loves them as they love Him. A number of both named and anonymous women are reported to have begun their regular supplications by addressing God as: “O You who loves me and whom I love.” For example, the female slavegirl of a leading judge of Basra would habitually slip out from her master’s bed after he had fallen asleep in order to perform nighttime devotions. One night he overheard her praying to God, saying: “For Your love of me, forgive me.” He approached her and said, “O girl, you should not say ‘for Your love of me’; rather say, ‘for *my* love of *You*, forgive me.’” She replied: “O vain one! His love for me has brought me from paganism to Islam and awakened my eye while yours is asleep!” Her master was reportedly impressed by her reply and freed her.<sup>7</sup> In another case, an anonymous woman is found in the sacred precinct of the Ka’bah similarly invoking God on the basis of His love for her. When she is overheard by a prominent male spiritual authority, he inquires as to why she is so confident of God’s love for her. She replies: “He has levied armies on my behalf, provided for me, and brought me from polytheism to belief in the unity of God (*tawhīd*); He made Himself known to me when I was ignorant of Him. What is this, if not true concern and solicitude?”<sup>8</sup> The theme of a female slave’s certitude in God’s love for her on the basis of her conversion to Islam is, in fact, quite common in this literature. Taḥiyyah al-Nūbiyyah, a former Christian, tells us that as a small child, she was taken to a church to participate in a rite involving kissing the crucifix. Just as she bent down to kiss the crucifix, she saw a hand coming out from the cross preventing her from doing so.<sup>9</sup> In this case, as in the others, the woman’s confidence in God’s love for her is based on her belief that God has protected, defended, supported, or rescued her, recalling typical modes of chivalrous male behavior toward women. In some cases, Sufi women justify their confidence in God’s love by invoking the Qur’anic verse that mentions a reciprocal love between God and those who love Him. The verse warns a rebellious group of people that if they do not heed God’s word, He can and will replace them with “a people whom He loves and who love Him.”<sup>10</sup> This is a common notion in later Sufi thought generally, and this particular interpretation

of the Qur'anic verse is attributed to male Sufis as well. In the case of Sufi women, however, it seems to play an important rhetorical role in the overall sense of certitude and security that frequently characterizes their thought.

The confidence Sufi women often express about their relationship with God and their ultimate spiritual destiny is based either on a sense of their own "chosenness"<sup>11</sup>—something already implied in the idea that God "loves them" before they love Him, and widely witnessed in male Sufi discourse as well<sup>12</sup>—or else on the sense that their own moral qualities merited favorable divine attention. Some women declare that they fear separation from God more than the fires of hell<sup>13</sup> (an idea perhaps first put forth by Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyah), while others emphasize the concomitant notion that their nearness to God offsets any concern about punishment and reward in the next life.<sup>14</sup> Fāṭimah bt. al-Muthannā found it ludicrous that anyone truly devoted to God would fear Him, and felt that a real relationship with God could only result in ecstatic joy.<sup>15</sup> One woman claimed that her sins were too meager for her to worry about divine chastisement,<sup>16</sup> while another anticipated a joyful afterlife, not because of her good works, but simply because of her love for God. When a man asks her how she can be so certain of her own salvation, she answers with the rhetorical question: "Do you think He would torment me when I love Him?"<sup>17</sup>

The certitude many Sufi women had in their state of mutual love and attachment with God seemed to enhance their desire to preserve themselves exclusively for His love and to see themselves as "His." In one anecdote, Rābi'ah rejects one of many marriage offers, asking the potential suitor how she could possibly "belong" to him or give herself to him when she did not even belong to herself; he would have to ask her hand from "Him."<sup>18</sup> According to some accounts, Rābi'ah even found it hard to make room in her heart for love of the Prophet Muḥammad, consumed as she was by her love of God.<sup>19</sup> Lubābah of Jerusalem reportedly said that she felt "embarrassed" if God found her attention engaged by anything other than Him.<sup>20</sup> Indeed some Sufi women envisioned the God to whom they were devoted as a "jealous God," who was displeased when they turned their attention to anything but Him—a mystical personalization of the metaphysical principle of monotheism which rejects worship to any but the one God. Jealousy [*ghayrah*] is an interesting concept in Islamic ethics because it can be a virtue or a vice, depending on gender context. A man's jealousy and jealous protection of his wives, in particular, can be considered a virtue. When the early companion, Sa'd b. 'Ubādah, threatened to kill any man he found with his wife, the Prophet declared that he was even more jealous of his honor than Sa'd, and that God is more jealous than himself.<sup>21</sup> Such jealousy on the part of God, and (by extension and association) on the part of justifiably jealous husbands,<sup>22</sup> was said to prevent immorality. But jealousy was not a praiseworthy quality for a woman with regard to her husband, who could take other wives and thus have legitimate romantic interests elsewhere. In fact, most of the

*ḥadīth* narrations that deal with jealousy as a negative trait do so in the context of the rivalry between the Prophet's wives—something for which he once sanctioned all of them by abstaining from them for an entire month. A tradition attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib goes so far as to say that jealousy for men is a part of faith, but for women it is a mark of unbelief.<sup>23</sup>

Envisioning God as their masculine Beloved, some Sufi women conceived of Him as exhibiting this kind of virtuous, masculine jealousy when they turned their attention to worldly things, even to the point of His meting out physical punishment in the form of illness and affliction, in order to preserve their spiritual purity. Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah, for example, says: "I saw Paradise at dawn and desired it. But then, out of His jealousy, God made me sick."<sup>24</sup> In another interesting passage, Fāṭimah bt. al-Muthannā, a female Sufi teacher of the famous Ibn al-'Arabī, gleefully plays the tambourine, chanting:

I rejoice in Him, who has turned toward me and claimed me as one of His friends, who has used me for His own purposes. Who am I that He should have chosen me among all of humankind? He is jealous of me and if I look to others, He loosens afflictions against me.<sup>25</sup>

Here we see a rather traditional conception of the male–female love relationship being expressed, with Fāṭimah telling us that God has "turned toward her" and "claimed her," as the active and even aggressive partner in the relationship. He has "used her for his own purposes." He is jealous, and punishes her when she turns her attention from Him.

Although jealousy is a gendered concept in Islamic ethics, the idea does not appear only in connection with female mystics. In fact, it plays a more extensive role in the writing of certain male Sufi writers—notably Aḥmad al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-'Arabī. In his *Sawānīḥ*, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī discusses a complex three-way relationship between the lover (the Sufi), the Beloved (God), and a personified notion of "love" itself. All three can demonstrate a mode of jealousy, and his description of the jealousy of the Beloved is similar in its harshness to what is expressed in the citations from Rābi'ah and Fāṭimah—it is the "sword... that keeps the lover from paying attention to things other than the beloved."<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī speaks of a "divine jealousy" that derives from, and is in fact a manifestation of, the metaphysical and existential oneness and absoluteness of God relative to all things.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, he also speaks of the virtue of exhibiting jealousy "for God"—that is, protecting the notion of God's oneness from all that might be seen to detract from it<sup>28</sup>—and even of the jealousy of the male Sufi gnostic when he realizes that someone has preceded him to the divine Presence (even though he learns that this person is none other than the Prophet, himself).<sup>29</sup> While the concept of divine jealousy, in all these modes of Sufi thought, has its origin in the basic Sufi sentiment of avoiding distraction from God, the notion as expressed by the female Sufis just cited is personal and direct, rather than metaphysical and abstract. It is connected to

notions of divine love in the metaphor of human love, rather than to the awesomeness of God (as in Ibn al-‘Arabī) or to the tyrannical and cruel nature of metaphysical love on the Sufi path (as in Ghazālī).<sup>30</sup> Even when Rābi‘ah or Fāṭimah speak about divine punishment resulting from their distraction from God, this is part of an overall discourse of love, adoration, and intimacy with God that well overshadows any talk of divine harshness or vengeance. In fact, their conceptions of divine love, like those of most other female practitioners of love mysticism known to us in the sources, are frequently expressed with spiritual confidence and warm devotion. The emphasis of some earlier studies on the asceticism, weeping, and fearfulness of some Sufi women<sup>31</sup>—and indeed the emphasis some Islamic hagiographers place on this as well<sup>32</sup>—has tended to obscure this other strain of female Sufi love mysticism that is, on the whole, positive and comforting in nature, and places far less emphasis on the harshness and cruelty of mystical love that are such standard stock in the works of male love mystics.<sup>33</sup>

### Intimacy and Passion in Female Sufi Thought

The female Sufi perspective presented in the sources is hardly a monolithic one: a variety of distinct personality traits and approaches to the spiritual life are ascribed to the hundreds of named and unnamed women whose stories are told in Sufi literature; and some Sufi authors tended to emphasize particular themes over others. However, the notion of intimacy [*uns*] with the Beloved is a *motif* that predominates in female Sufi discourse on the nature of divine love. Intimacy [*uns*] is a technical term in Sufism, and was considered by many Sufi masters to be one of the highest stations along the mystical path. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī describes the state of *uns* as one in which the individual is “overcome by joy [*sarah*] and nearness [*qurb*] and presential witnessing [*mushāhadat al-ḥuḍūr*], by virtue of the unveiling he has obtained.... [T]he heart is made glad by what it sees, and we call this gladness ‘intimacy [*uns*]’.” He also tells us that “one who is overcome by the state of intimacy desires nothing but solitude and seclusion...because intimacy with God [*uns bi’llāh*] requires separation from all that is other than God.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, for a person in such a state of intimacy, the practices of solitude and social withdrawal—classical elements of the ascetic life—are driven not by fear, but by love. It is not a solitude of suffering introspection that *uns* engenders; rather the joyful intimacy with the Beloved makes all other company superfluous and spiritually distracting.

While both male and female Sufi mystics spoke of intimacy, the theme is particularly prevalent in female Sufi discourse on the nature of their relation to the Beloved, and the hagiographical literature suggests that women were particularly skillful in achieving and maintaining this state of “intimacy” with the Beloved, relative to their male counterparts. In one anecdote, for example, a



female Sufi publicly criticizes a prominent male Sufi authority for giving a public lecture on *uns*. Speaking apparently from experience, she tells him that if he had truly known the state of *uns*, he would remain silent, rather than seeking out a public audience.<sup>35</sup> In the words attributed to many Sufi women, intimacy and nearness to God, rather than metaphysical union with Him, seems to be the highest and most desirable state along the mystical path. Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah says that intimacy with God is “the only pleasure of paradise”<sup>36</sup> and ‘Ātikah al-Ghanawiyah declares that “there is no pleasure sweeter than obedience and nearness [to God].”<sup>37</sup> Mu‘minah bt. Bahlūl, a Sufi woman of Baghdad, states that “there is no blessing save intimacy with God and following His decree,”<sup>38</sup> and Lubābah of Syria considered intimacy to be a mystical state beyond even knowledge and love of God.<sup>39</sup> Sufi women’s discourse also suggests that achieving a state of *uns* was not solely in the hands of the Sufi mystic, and many women express a distinct sense of their own “chosenness” for this. In Jāmī’s highly literary account, the singing slave girl, Tuḥfeh, is freed by her master because of her spiritual virtues, and later says that her years wandering in solitude and freedom from men have granted her a state of “intimacy” with God.<sup>40</sup> However, she considers this intimacy to be the result of divine bestowal, rather than her own efforts, telling us in one poetic report that God “summoned [her] to intimacy” and she merely obeyed His call.<sup>41</sup> (Note the parallelism between her former relationship as a slave to her earthly master and her relationship with God described here, suggesting the symbolic transferral of her “obedience” from the summons of her former human master to that of the divine.)

Sufi women often cite their intimacy with God as the source of their ability to endure long periods of solitude without loneliness. Wandering alone, outside the safe confines of one’s home, was hardly a normal state for women in medieval Islamic society; yet Sufi hagiographical and biographical works suggest that a number of (anonymous) Sufi women lived in long-term seclusion from social life—either alone or in groups of fellow female hermits. When men reportedly express amazement at these women’s lack of fear, despite their being vulnerably alone in such desolate places,<sup>42</sup> the women’s typical response is that their state of intimacy with God more than compensates for what they lack in human company, and leaves them devoid of either fear or loneliness.<sup>43</sup> ‘Ā’ishah bt. Abū ‘Uthmān Sa‘īd b. Ismā‘īl of Nishapur declares that feeling lonely in a state of solitude reflects a lack of intimacy with God.<sup>44</sup> An unknown devotee of Jerusalem prays: “My God and My Lord! How narrow is the path for those for whom You are not a guide and how lonely is the solitude of the one for whom You are not their intimate companion!”<sup>45</sup> The Syrian mystic al-Bayḍā’ bt. al-Mufaḍḍal likens the lover of God to a “bird who is lonely for the [state of] intimacy that he had in solitude.”<sup>46</sup> Dhu’l-Nūn Miṣrī (who may be the most prolific contributor to the body of anecdotes involving anonymous pious and mystical women) encounters a pious female hermit along the seashore,

supplicating God as "the intimate companion of the pious in their solitary retreats."<sup>47</sup> In another report a man hears an elderly woman crying from within a house. He knocks on her door and, finding her alone and distraught, asks her if she has any family members who could care for her. She responds to her solicitous but uninvited guest: "With me is the one to whom I whisper in confidence; should I be lonely when He is my intimate companion [*anīsī*]?"<sup>48</sup> Maymūnat al-Sawdā', who dwelt alone in the wilderness amid a herd of sheep, declares that when God takes the "love of solitude" from an individual, he experiences "distance after nearness" and "fright after intimacy."<sup>49</sup>

In his discussion of the topic of *uns* in the *Ihyā'*, Ghazālī goes on to describe the signs or symptoms of intimacy in the spiritual seeker. He tells us that persons in such a state "feel constrained in the company of creatures and seek instead the sweetness of divine remembrance"; that even if such a person does engage in social interaction, "he feels solitary when in a crowd and feels in pleasant company when he is alone"; that he is "present in his absence and absent in his presence"; and that he "mingles with others in his body while he is alone in his heart."<sup>50</sup> For those women who did not choose the life of seclusion and celibacy, and so were forced to accommodate themselves to the demands of their husbands, families, and other associates, it is precisely this disjuncture between their bodily presence and their inward or spiritual presence that marks their perspective. Female Sufis are frequently portrayed as disliking company and receiving, only out of a sense of duty, those men who came to visit them to ask for their prayers and advice. A report in Ghazālī's *Ihyā'* says that a group of pious men went to see the Sufi 'Ufayrah,<sup>51</sup> but she "concealed" herself from them, so that they continued to wait at her door. She eventually became embarrassed and rose to open the door for them, but prayed, "O God, I seek refuge in You from the one who has come to distract me from Your remembrance."<sup>52</sup> This tension between the social demands of a woman's outer life and the spiritual desires of her inner life is perhaps nowhere more clearly addressed than in a moving poem by Rābi'ah bt. Ismā'īl, wife of the prominent Sufi Aḥmad b. Abi'l-Ḥawārī:

I have made you the interlocutor of my inmost heart [*fu'ād*]  
 My body is present to those who would sit with me  
 And my body is the intimate of the one who sits with me  
 But the lover of my heart is the guest of my inmost heart [*fu'ād*].<sup>53</sup>

The concept of the Beloved as the intimate "guest," and the juxtaposition of the outward body made available to other people and the heart in which she is always "alone with God," creates a dual inner or "domestic" space—one for the worldly guests, with whom she is intimate only on the level of her outward physical form, and one for the divine guest, exclusively, whom she hosts in her "inmost heart." Lubābah of Jerusalem similarly contrasts the tedious nature of ordinary social engagement to the delights of divine intimacy, telling us that

while she is wearied by human company, she is refreshed by the intimacy she experiences with God in the worship and invocation of Him.<sup>54</sup>

Rābi‘ah’s poem also points to the sense of interiority and even “domestication” that informs many of the anecdotes and statements connected with Sufi women. While all mystical life is inward-looking by nature, for Sufi women, the interior nature of the soul and the process of spiritual introspection is frequently assimilated to metaphors of female domesticity. For them, home is the place where divine intimacy can be found in comforting and constant ways, wherein the Beloved is hosted as a divine “guest,” while the distractions of worldly life are left at the door.<sup>55</sup> While many Sufi men are reported to have abandoned the enfeebling comforts of family and domestic life to wander in search of mystical and religious knowledge, such a way of practicing the mystical life was simply not possible—or perhaps even desirable—for Sufi women. Leaving aside the mysterious female hermits that Dhu’l-Nūn and other Sufis claim to have encountered, the sources make it clear that most Sufi women conducted their spiritual lives in the seclusion of their own domestic quarters; and many of these women reportedly considered the male Sufi inclination to seek out public forums for teaching and preaching, as well as other forays into the life of ordinary society, to be distractions on the path, temptations for the ego, and generally detrimental to the true goals of mystical life. Sufi works are filled with anecdotes about Sufi women chastising their male counterparts for reveling in the public attention their spiritual accomplishments afforded them. In mystical literature, Islamic and otherwise, the outward physical journey is a standard metaphor and expression for the inward spiritual journey; but for most Sufi women, the spiritual journey was both symbolically and physically an inward one. Ukht Fuḍayl b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb says:

The Hereafter is closer than this world, since a man may concern himself with seeking the world and he may undertake long journeys for this, in which there will be great exhaustion for his body and for which he may have to expend great amounts of his money, and even then he may not attain his goal. But the one who seeks the Hereafter can end his seeking with good intention wherever he is, without undertaking long journeys or spending money or wearying his body. It requires only that he resolve himself to obedience to God, and he will have reached what is with God.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Ukht Fudayl contrasts the inward and simple nature of seeking the Hereafter with the painful exertions necessary to accomplish worldly goals (not spiritual ones, necessarily). Yet her words convey something of the familiarity, immediacy, accessibility, and constancy with which Sufi women often described their relationship with the Beloved. The object of their spiritual desire was not an elusive and exotic beloved, but an intimate and ever-accessible presence.

The “domesticity” of women’s mystical metaphors, I believe, has more to do with the social limits within which these women had to create their spiritual

lives, as well as with the psychological tendencies and spiritual needs that those existing social constraints would have engendered or encouraged in these women. For example, for men "unveiling" and climactic "union" represented something highly desirable and rarely attainable in men's experience of love in a medieval Islamic context. Men walked around in a world where all women, save their close family members, were physically concealed from them. The moment of unveiling upon "entering the bridal chamber" must have been a powerful symbol for men living in such a context. For women, on the other hand, no one was absolutely veiled from them—neither men nor other women. Thus the "unveiling of the bridal chamber" could hardly have represented such a powerful emotional image for them—and as such we rarely see it in the discourse attributed to them. Rather, women lived in a social context wherein what was perhaps most desirable and rarely attainable for them was not a beloved who would "unveil" himself to her, but a beloved who would be constant in his intimacy. Given that women were often separated from their husbands by the demands of men's lives outside the home, by men's lengthy journeys for trade, learning, or military service, or by other wives, what was perhaps most desirable for women was a beloved who was ever-present and accessible. This could well explain the emphasis on concepts of intimacy and constancy, rather than on dramatic and climactic union, in women's Sufi love mysticism. The controversial nature of discussions of union—for both the sexual connotations they entailed, as well as the theological issues they raised—may have something to do with Sufi women's avoidance of those metaphors, and/or male compilers' reluctance to attribute them to Sufi women. But I think a consideration of the very real differences between men's and women's social realities can afford us sound insight into the meaningfulness of the different concepts that predominate in men's and women's love mysticism generally.

The extent to which this represents a real distinction between the male and female Sufi experience is illustrated in a number of examples that stress the more inward and domestic nature of female mystical practice. In his biographical work on Sufi women, Sulamī records the story of the well-known Sufi, Abū Ḥafṣ of Nishapur, and his Sufi wife, Ṣafra' of Rayy, who cohabitate for a while, but then separate from one another when Abū Ḥafṣ decides to leave home and set out on a journey of indefinite length. He offers to divorce his Sufi wife in order to free her for other marital arrangements, but she chooses to remain married to him and asks him instead for some parting spiritual advice. It is interesting that while he feels free to pursue his spiritual life abroad, despite his marital commitments, he gives his wife the directly contrasting advice to stick close to the home and to remain secluded there.<sup>57</sup> In another example, Umm Muḥammad and her son, the Sufi Abū 'Abd Allāh b. Khafif, both spend the *Laylat al-qadr* in prayerful vigil, but she remains inside her house while he prays in the mosque. When their vigil is over and he returns, they learn that

they have both experienced the same spiritual vision from their different—i.e., internal and external—vantage points, making the argument that the interior and homebound mystical practices of women could be as spiritually fruitful as their male counterparts' more outward or public ones.<sup>58</sup> While the emphasis on women's preference for the indoor spiritual life may be based upon the male author's stereotyped views of how good women should conduct their spiritual lives, it is equally likely that it is simply a reflection of women's social limitations. From a practical point of view, women had to practice their spirituality largely indoors, for that is where it was socially acceptable and safe for them to be. In fact, these accounts may be intended, not as recommendations about the appropriate location of female spiritual practice, but rather as admonitions to other men who might be inclined to discount women's spiritual endeavors and achievements merely because they take place within private rather than public space.

Indeed, many anecdotes—including some which have already been mentioned—portray the spiritual lives of Sufi women as expressly practiced in the home. In one account, Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah's servant implores her to come outside and witness the beauty of the day, but Rābi'ah says she prefers the delights she finds in her secluded worship within the house.<sup>59</sup> Another woman, Umm Aḥmad bt. 'Ā'ishah, whom Sulamī names as one of the most advanced gnostics of her age, is said to have remained in her house for fifty years without setting foot outside.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, there are numerous examples of Sufi women, especially in Basra, holding their night vigils outside on the roofs of their homes—but only at night, when they would be hidden by the cover of darkness and when most other people would be asleep. The Sufi woman Salmūnah would strictly avoid social interaction, secluding herself in her house by day, and only venturing into the fresh air when she climbed on her roof to pray in the desolate hours of the night.<sup>61</sup> The rooftop is, in many ways, a spiritually symbolic area. In a famous poem in the *Dīvān-i Shams*, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī chides his fellow Muslims for seeking religious renewal via a desert trek to Mecca, telling them that the Beloved is "right here"; instead of leaving their house to wander in the desert, they should ascend to the roof of their dwelling and find the Beloved there. As if to illustrate this poetic point, another anecdote tells us that when one of Rūmī's female disciples expressed a desire to journey to Mecca, he summoned her to the roof of the house, where she had a vision of the Ka'bah *circumambulating her* in the night sky, thereby obviating her spiritual need to make the pilgrimage.<sup>62</sup> The rooftop is also a profoundly liminal zone: a woman on the roof of her house has symbolically transcended the limits of her domestic environment without transgressing the boundaries of social seclusion. Alone at night on her rooftop, she is both outside and within her home, both concealed and liberated by the darkness of the night.

Given the perpetual domestic responsibilities of women in traditional society and the difficulties they may have had in finding moments of solitude among the hustle and bustle of the extended family homes to which many of them were largely confined, it should come as little surprise that the primary locus of female devotional and mystical activity was the night, with lengthy and regular night vigils being cited as the primary devotional-ascetic practice of a substantial number of Sufi women in the biographical tradition. The notion that night was the time for intimacy with God is attributed to Sufi women from markedly different backgrounds, regions, and time periods. The Sufi women of Basra seem to have particularly favored this practice, and reportedly shared a poetic mode of addressing and invoking God as they embarked on their nightly vigils. Slightly different versions of this invocation are attributed to four, roughly contemporary Sufis of Basra: Rāb'iah al-'Adawiyyah, Ḥabībah al-'Adawiyyah, Bint Umm Ḥassān, and Bardah al-Ṣarīmiyyah. The version attributed to Ḥabībah, which she would recite on her roof at nightfall, reads:

My God, the stars are shining, and eyes have gone to sleep,  
The kings have shut their doors, and Your door is open.  
Every lover is alone with his beloved, and this is my place, before You.<sup>63</sup>

Among the many women of Basra who practiced the night vigil is Maryam, an ecstatic and authority on spiritual love, who would stand all night, repeating a single Qur'anic verse which declares the kindness of God toward His servants.<sup>64</sup> It was not only the women of Basra who enjoyed divine intimacy in the night, however; other women expressed a similar longing for the spiritual solitude of the dark hours. Rayḥānah of Ubullah, for example, recites:

The lover stands vigil for the One who is expected,  
The inmost heart could almost fly for happiness.  
Don't seek intimacy with those who turn their gaze from you,  
And who are hindered in their remembrance by the darkness  
But strive and toil and be brave in the night.  
You will be refreshed by the cup of the love of strength and generosity.  
And when the night had passed, she would recite:  
The night has gone, and with it closeness and intimacy with Him.  
O I wish that, for the sake of His intimacy, the darkness would return.<sup>65</sup>

The Sufi woman, Ḥayyūnah, reportedly exclaimed: "I wish the day were night, that I might enjoy Your nearness!" and implored God to prevent the sun from rising upon her.<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein, Umm Hārūn of Syria was reported to have said: "How wonderful is the night! Truly I grieve all day until the night comes, and when night falls, I keep vigil from the very beginning of it; and when dawn approaches, the Spirit enters my heart."<sup>67</sup> Indeed the Sufi women of Syria may have gathered to practice their nighttime vigils together, and one report sug-

gests that the Syrian Sufi woman, Umm Dardā', would regularly host these women's vigils in her home.<sup>68</sup>

While the masculine image and character of the Beloved as found in female Sufi prayers and poetry often showed the Sufi herself as the passive recipient of His attentions and as withdrawing inwardly and waiting faithfully for His intimacy during her private night devotions, Sufi women do not always assume such a passive role in the relationship. Many female Sufis openly expressed their spiritual attachment to God in passionate terms, and some accounts indicate that women occasionally exceeded their male Sufi counterparts in their desire for the Beloved. In one case, Riyāḥ al-Qaysi<sup>69</sup> is asked: "O Riyāḥ, have the nights and days become long for you...with the desire for meeting God." Riyāḥ grew silent, wanting neither to lie and say "yes," nor to disappoint him with the truth. Riyāḥ later asked Rābi'ah the same question: have the days and nights become long for you? At this, he heard the sound of her shirt tearing from beneath her robe, as she answered: "O, but yes!"<sup>70</sup> Maryam of Basra, an associate of Rābi'ah, is said to have fainted every time she heard mention of the love of God [*maḥabbah*], and when a local Sufi authority delivered a particularly powerful public sermon on the subject, she died on the spot.<sup>71</sup>

In a lengthy report, the passion and desire of an anonymous Sufi woman is compared favorably to the calm, cold piety of Junayd—a Sufi known for his spiritual sobriety and his dislike of the more ecstatic forms of Sufi expression. Here, Junayd encounters an unknown woman going around the Ka'bah in the middle of the night, calling out, passionately:

Love refuses to speak softly, how long can I hide it?...  
 When the desire intensifies, my heart is infatuated with the  
 remembrance of Him,  
 And when I desire to draw near to my Beloved  
 He suddenly appears and I am annihilated and then  
 revived by Him and for Him,  
 And He fills me with the sweetest and most wonderful joy.

Junayd tries to bring her to contain her open (and apparently loud) emotion and warns her to fear God with regard to what she is saying. But she responds, again, in poetry:

If it were not for fear [of God] you would not see me  
 Abandoning the sweetness of sleep.  
 Truly, fear [of God], as you can see,  
 has driven me from my home  
 I am put to flight by my intense desire for Him  
 And His love has left me bewildered

She then turns to Junayd and asks: "Do you circumambulate the House or the Lord of the House?" He said: "I circumambulate the House." At this, she raised

her head to the sky and said: "Glory be to You [O Lord]. How great is Your will in creation, that there are creatures like stones who circumambulate stones!"<sup>72</sup> The spontaneity, warmth, and sincerity of her devotional poetry serves as a clear foil for the dignified and stoic, but cold, attitude of Junayd.

Other pious men also expressed concern that passionate displays of female devotion in public settings would distract men at prayer. In one case, Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī confronts a woman who is loudly proclaiming her love and desire for her Beloved in the *ḥaram* of Mecca. When he complains to her that her words have distracted him from his own prayers and devotions, she asks him why this should be, since "God has servants who are never distracted from Him and are not drawn toward the remembrance of anything other than Him?"<sup>73</sup> As in the previous account involving Junayd, the Sufi woman turns the tables on her male detractor: the issue is no longer the impropriety of her public devotions, but the spiritual inadequacy of Dhu'l-Nūn and those other men who are disturbed or distracted by her voice. A similar anecdote tells of an anonymous woman crying out in the precinct of the Ka'bah:

"Such loneliness after such intimacy! Such lowliness after such strength! Such poverty after such wealth!" Abu'l-Ashhab al-Sā'ih says to her: "What is wrong with you? Did you lose some money or suffer some tragedy?" She says: "No, rather I had a heart and then lost it." He said: "This is what is afflicting you?" She said: "What affliction is worse than the loss of hearts and their being kept from their Beloved?" He said: "The beauty of your voice has made those who have heard it abandon their circumambulation of the Ka'bah." She said: "Old man, is this your house or His?" He said: "His, of course." She said: "Is this *ḥaram* your *ḥaram* or His?" He said: "His, of course." She said: "Then leave us alone. We behave coquettishly toward Him because we desire to be visited by Him."<sup>74</sup>

The use of the term "coquettish" is interesting for its peculiarly female connotations. This is a behavior that women direct toward a male object of desire, but such behavior is quite against the norms of female conduct in Islam. Her point seems to be that her bold behavior, whatever its effect on the men around her, was directed toward God. She is in His house, and what she does there is not the business of other men who happen to be there, like herself, as "guests." Here, as elsewhere in this literature, the case is made that divine authority over His servants trumps the social and religious authority of men over women—a potentially subversive idea that is nonetheless celebrated, not castigated, throughout the hagiographical accounts of female Sufis.

While the words and anecdotes attributed to Sufi women in our sources hardly seem shy about attesting to the deep passion with which these women devoted themselves to God as their Beloved—the sources speak of their being infatuated, swooning with love, burning with desire, and appearing, at times, crazed and intoxicated with spiritual love—they very rarely speak openly about



the desire for union with God. The few reported examples of the concept in female Sufi discourse are usually found in late, and highly literary, sources, and are almost always presented in poetic rather than prosaic form. Discussions of union can indeed be found in the writings and poetry of later female Sufis—notably those who were literate and known to have composed and recorded their own works. Perhaps the best example is the Mamluk-era female poet, ‘Ā’ishah Bā’ūniyyah, who composed a good deal of divine love poetry that speaks openly about her desire and quest for union with the Beloved.<sup>75</sup> Such references are quite uncharacteristic of earlier Sufi women, however. Moreover, when the concept of union with the Divine is invoked by either early or later Sufi women, whether in works they composed themselves, or in reports included in works of male Sufis, it is almost exclusively in the sense of a symbolic consummation of their mystical love of God, and as such, is part of the metaphorical language of human love that Sufi women (and men) used to describe their relationship with God. We almost never see the idea of metaphysical union, in the sense of unity of identity with God, invoked by female practitioners of the mystical path. This notion of metaphysical union is a relatively early development in the history of Sufi thought. It figures prominently in the thought of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī and, of course, al-Ḥallāj, as early as the third and fourth Islamic centuries, when many of the early Sufi women in our sources flourished. Yet it rarely appears in attributions to these early women.

Some might suggest that the absence of references to union in general, and metaphysical union in particular, in the discourse attributed to early Sufi women reflects the editorial censorship of male compilers who were hesitant to ascribe to women symbolic and metaphorical language that had clear sexual overtones or was particularly controversial, and so may have jeopardized the already tenuous acceptability of male–female interaction in Sufi circles. Yet such an argument is not particularly convincing in light of the fact that these same male compilers were relatively uninhibited about reporting a variety of other shocking statements and actions on the part of these early Sufi women, including everything from the deliberate unveiling of their faces over the protests of their husbands or other men,<sup>76</sup> to their receiving unrelated male company, and even spending the night with them in spiritual discussion and companionship.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the fact that we find more female Sufi references to union with the Beloved in situations where the Sufi woman was literate and left a self-composed body of poetry, may have less to do with her authorial control over the presentation of her spiritual perspective than with her assimilation and reiteration of what were, by this time, well-established Sufi metaphysical terms and stock metaphors—something that only literate women capable of mastering these sources could have done effectively. The simpler and more direct modes of speaking attributed to early Sufi women may therefore represent, by contrast, more spontaneous and genuine, if not particularly learned or erudite, modes of

discourse than what we find in the more self-consciously literary works written by later Sufi women.

Whatever role social convention or the relative learnedness of earlier and later Sufi women may have played in the general absence of discussions of union among early Sufi women, it is clear that female Sufi love discourse, on the whole, placed greater emphasis on the theme of a constant and readily accessible state of intimacy with the Beloved than on the more dramatic and climactic theme of union or unity with God. This is a point on which female Sufi love mysticism and discourse differs clearly in emphasis from its male Sufi counterpart, and there are good reasons to consider this distinction authentic. While it is always difficult to determine whether particular statements or anecdotes can be historically attributed to individual Sufi women, it is hard to imagine that the pervasive emphasis on the theme of intimacy and its related corollaries of interiority, love of solitude, and passionate devotion to God to the exclusion of all else, that we find attributed to Sufi women in a wide variety of Sufi works, is sheer fabrication. The tendency for female Sufis to conceive of the divine in symbolically masculine terms, and to express their relationship with Him in symbolically gendered ways, suggests a distinct female psychological presence behind these reports. Moreover, all of these themes, scattered throughout a wide range of source material, have a certain logic and internal consistency to them, and seem particularly appropriate to the external social reality of these women's lives. It was a mysticism that had its place in the home, not in the mosque or teaching circle, and many Sufi women are reported to have criticized their male Sufi contemporaries for being too engaged in the world—sometimes even for the religiously meritorious pursuit of preaching in the mosque.<sup>78</sup> Their mysticism was—psychologically, if not always actually—the mysticism of the *andarūnī* [the inner sanctuary of the house] and their journey was usually an inward one. It is ironic that while their status as spiritually accomplished women sometimes granted them unusual access to public spaces and afforded them the opportunity to interact with the prominent male authorities of their time, they seem to have consistently preferred seclusion and solitude. This impulse does not seem to arise from a self-effacing deference to the traditional ideal of female seclusion—they certainly never express it as such, and as we have seen, there is little deference overall toward such norms of female comportment—but rather from the strong sense of self-confidence and independence these women seem to have had in regard to their spiritual lives and from their vigilant rejection of worldliness. While anecdotes about Sufi men often portray them acquiring "wisdom" from those whose spiritual advice they have actively sought out, or even from strangers they providentially meet on the road, Sufi women reportedly viewed their encounters with others as spiritually distracting, and their spiritual "wisdom" is usually portrayed as coming from within themselves.

While the state of intimacy with God that these women claim to attain in their solitude may lack the more powerful notion of union with God, it nevertheless has a sense of permanence and stability to it, which makes for a strong contrast with the dramatic tension between anguished spiritual longing and pinnacles of fulfillment that characterize much of male Sufi love mysticism. Much of the discourse attributed to Sufi women, even when it does not mention intimacy specifically, is marked by an overall sense of joy that is quite different from the alternating states of expansion and contraction, ecstasy and dejection, that one sees represented in other Sufi literature. When Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah hears a well-known preacher exclaim that anyone who continues to knock at a door will have it opened for him, Rābi‘ah asks, “When was it ever shut?”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, there are few powerful moments of sudden unveiling in the reports connected with Sufi women; and their sense of divine presence—while often described as inducing states of drunkenness or madness—does not reportedly come in the form of sudden, periodic irruptions into ordinary consciousness, but is rather portrayed as a state that is always available to them. They seem able to encounter this divine presence as a matter of course whenever the distractions of the day had settled and they could again attend to their most interior and ever-present “Guest.” The language and metaphors of intimacy and domesticity that we find attributed to many early Sufi women suggests a more inward and solitary spiritual life than that of the better-known male Sufis, but also one that was warmer and more constant, less dramatic, perhaps, but no less passionate.

## Notes

1. This is a term borrowed from Denise Spellberg’s well-known study of ‘A’ishah bt. Abi Bakr. See *Politics and Gender in Early Islam: The Legacy of ‘A’ishah bt. Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
2. See, e.g., Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān as-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: dhikr al-niswa al-muta‘abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*, trans. and ed. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 78–79.
3. See, e.g., Jamāl al-Dīn Abu’l-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1989), 4.35, where Rāhibah of Basra invokes God, saying: “O my Treasure and my Provision, O You on whom I rely during my life and after my death...” or 4.44, where an anonymous slavegirl of Basra recites: “Every day a new provision from Him / Praise be to God who does not cease / To do more for me than I desire.”
4. Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, ed. Muḥammad Isti‘lāmī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zavvār), 74. A strikingly similar incident is reported of the sixteenth-century Christian saint, Teresa of Avila, where she is likewise stranded on a journey to do charitable work and complains to God about how he treats His friends. See Mirbai Starr’s introduction to her translation of Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 14.

5. There are multiple examples of Sufi women rejecting offers of charity from their male admirers with the formulaic response that they were embarrassed to ask more of “the world” from the One who possesses it, and so certainly could not accept worldly things from those who do not rightly possess it. See, e.g., *Şifat al-şafwah*, 3.23 (for one from Rābi‘ah herself), 3.124; 4.38; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 108–9, 170–71, 206–7; Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Aḥmad Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns* (Luknow: Lith., 1915), 556.
6. The theme of women weeping even to the point of blindness is a common theme in most of the standard compilations on Sufi women, as noticed by Ruth Roded as well in her section on mystical women in *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa‘d to Who’s Who* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 95. Roded only connects this theme of women’s weeping to the fear of death, perdition, and hellfire; however, many of these women expressly weep out of love and desire for God; see, e.g., reports about the early female Sufi, Sha‘wānah, who was particularly known for her weeping, in Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 106–7) and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ḥasan Maḥmūd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, 1993), 156. For examples of women fretting over a sense of their own spiritual insufficiency, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 2.181, 200–201, 4.29, Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 146–47, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah), 4.415. For examples of women weeping or lamenting out of sheer love and desire for God, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 2.186–87, 4.48–49, 334, 337–38. See also the poem attributed to Bībī Fāṭimah in Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā’, *Fawā‘id al-fawā‘id*, ed. Muḥammad Latīf Malik (Lahore, 1966), 416.
7. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.39.
8. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.337–38.
9. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.273.
10. Qur’an 5:54. For an example of a Sufi woman invoking this verse as justification for her certitude in God’s love for her, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.337.
11. See, e.g., *Şifat al-şafwah*, 2.186. See also Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 566, where a poem ascribed to an anonymous woman of Mecca claims that God has special people that He has “chosen” for His love, even before creation.
12. See al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb sirat al-awliyā’*, trans. and ed. B. Radtke and J. O’Kane as *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 142, 151–52; Rūzbihān Baqlī, *Unveiling of Secrets*, trans. C. Ernst (Chapel Hill, NC: Parvardigar Press, 1997), 13; Vincent Cornell, *The Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 225; and Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 141, for the attribution of this idea to the early Sufi, Junayd.
13. See, e.g., *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.336. See also the prayers of Ruqayyah of Mosul, 4.162–63.
14. See, e.g., the supplication of Sha‘wānah in Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 4.415–16.
15. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Traité de l’amour*, trans. and ed. Maurice Gloton (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), 189.

16. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.49.
17. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.353–54 and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Hanbalī Ibn Rajab, *Kitāb al-istishāq nasīm al-uns min nafahāt riyāq al-quds*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sharīf (Beirut: Maktab al-Islāmī, 1991), 96. See also *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.30–31, where Bardah al-Ṣarimiyyah asks the same question directly of God. Similarly, Rābi‘ah bt. Ismā‘īl of Syria asks God if He would really burn her in the Fire, when she has so much hope and love for him (*Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.249). When Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah threatens that if God should burn her in the Fire, she would loudly complain that this is no way to treat one’s friends, the divine voice responds, admonishing her not to think so badly of Him. See ‘Aṭṭār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 87. ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, trans. Barbara von Schlegell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1990), 340.
18. *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 66.
19. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 78–79.
20. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.211; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 82–83.
21. Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl, 9 vols., ed. and trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* (Medina: Dār al-Fikr), 7.108–11, 9.378–79.
22. It is important to note that a number of traditions in Bukhārī and elsewhere warn Muslims against suspicion and unreasonable jealousy with regard to one another (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 8.58, and, generally, A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1943), 5.35.
23. See al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah* (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī 1992), 162.
24. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 84; Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, 265; Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhi, *al-Ta’arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Maḥmūd Amīn Nawāwī (Cairo: al-Azhar Press, 1980), 184. A close connection between this concept of divine jealousy and Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah in early Sufism is suggested by the fact that in Kalābādhi’s work, this citation from Rābi‘ah opens a chapter on the subject of divine “jealous [*ghayrah*],” and throughout the whole chapter, the term “*ghayrah*” itself is only found and directly discussed in this opening report about Rābi‘ah. See also another anecdote in which Rābi‘ah tells Sufyān al-Thawrī that what brings one closer to God is that He know that the person has no other beloved except Him. See Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 552; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 80–81.
25. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Traité d’amour*, 190; Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 45.
26. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ: Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, trans. and ed. Nasrollah Pourjavadi (London: KPI, 1986), 23.
27. See, e.g., Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 13 vols., ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr (Cairo: al-Hay‘ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmaḥ li’l-Kitāb, 1972), 8.298, 475–76; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 176; and William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 109, 231.

28. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 6.108, 11.108–10. He also speaks of a jealousy [*ghayrah*] that derives from man’s nature (and is therefore selfish and negative) and a jealousy that derives from faith [*īmān*], 11.119–20; Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 220.
29. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 145.
30. See Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ*, 36, 39–41, 61, 70, 76–77, for discussions of the cruelty of love and the beloved.
31. See, e.g., Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 95–96.
32. The biographical entries on women included in Sha‘rānī, for example, tend to emphasize the asceticism and spiritual fearfulness of women more than, say, Sulamī or ‘Aṭṭār. This can be seen most clearly in their respective accounts of Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyyah. Both Sulamī and ‘Aṭṭār include reports that emphasize her spiritual strength and self-confidence, whereas Sha‘rānī stresses her weeping, remembrance of death, and fear of hellfire (the last of which she strongly denies in other anecdotes), as well as the extent to which she had been physically weakened by years of asceticism (see, Sha‘rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 153).
33. For a particularly clear example of this, see Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ*, 36, where he says: “Love, in its true nature is but an affliction [*balā*] and intimacy [*uns*] and ease are something alien to it, and are provisionally borrowed.”
34. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ulum al-dīn*, 4.339.
35. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 180–81.
36. Alī b. Sa‘d Allāh Ḥurayfish, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq fi’l-mawā’iz al-raqā’iq* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Jumhūriyyah al-‘Arabiyyah, n.d.), 308.
37. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.316–17.
38. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 2.340.
39. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 124–25. See also pp. 190–91, where ‘Amrah Farghānā considers intimacy to be a spiritual state derived from, and therefore above, the state of knowledge of God.
40. Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 564.
41. Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 564. See also, al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Nīsābūrī, *‘Uqalā’ al-majānūn*, ed. Muḥammad Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (Najaf: al-Maktabah al-Ḥaydariyyah, 1968), 153, where Dhu’l-Nūn meets an anonymous woman, crazed with divine love, who describes her heart as “bound by the chains of intimacy.”
42. In one case, Dhu’l-Nūn Miṣrī asks a solitary woman what she is doing in the wilderness. She responds that in settled areas, God is everywhere disobeyed, and so she cannot remain there (*Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.346).
43. See, e.g., Ḥurayfish, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq fi’l-mawā’iz al-raqā’iq*, 359; Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 567.
44. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 184–85.
45. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.212.
46. *Ṣifat al-ṣafwah*, 4.252.

47. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.304–5.
48. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.354. See also Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 98–99, where ‘Āfiyyah al-Mushtāqah describes God as her confidant in solitude.
49. Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq fi’l-mawā’iz al-raqā’iq*, 131; Yūsuf b. Ismā’īl al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi’ karārāt al-awliyā’*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1972), 2.274. Her story is also told in Nisābūrī, ‘*Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, 151–52, but without this particular anecdote.
50. Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, 4.345.
51. Or “Ghufayrah” in Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 96–97.
52. Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, 4.415.
53. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.249, Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, 555. This poem is also (apparently mistakenly) attributed to Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah, in Ibn Rajab, *al-Istīnshāq*, 79. See also another poem attributed to Rābi‘ah bt. Ismā’īl where she describes God as her peerless lover, who may be absent from her physical senses, but never from her “inmost heart” (*Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.248; Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, 555).
54. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 82–83.
55. We are reminded, here, of the Christian saint Teresa of Avila’s conception of the “interior castle” which the mystic enters on an inward quest to reach the divine presence residing in the “innermost chamber.” See, e.g., Starr’s translation, *The Interior Castle*.
56. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 3.125.
57. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 162–63. It should be noted that in another account, Abū Ḥafş seems to have had a rather negative view of female spirituality generally, at least in his early days; see Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 168–69.
58. Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, 559.
59. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 82.
60. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 218–19.
61. Nisābūrī, ‘*Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, 151. See also the case of ‘Āfiyyah al-Mushtāqah, who like Salmūnah is said to have feared and strictly avoided human company. She would keep vigil at night, but seek out the solitude of the cemeteries during the day (Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 98–99).
62. See Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad Aflākī, *Manāqib al-‘arīfīn*, trans. John O’Kane as *The Feats of the Knowers of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 199–200.
63. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 202–3; *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.27. For versions attributed to other Basran women, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.30–31, 38; and also Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, 4.414. There are other indications in this literature that women with mystical inclinations in Basra may have met and practiced devotional exercises together; the fact that this poem is attributed in slightly variant form to numerous Sufi women, but almost all of them from Basra, suggests that there may indeed have been important links among the Sufi women of Basra and that this may have been a standard supplicatory prayer shared among and used by these women. For a variant version by a Meccan Sufi woman, Fāṭimah bt. Muḥammad al-Munkadir, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 2.136.

64. Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 84–85. The Qur’anic verse cited is 42:19.
65. These three short poems are found in *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.50. Other poetry from Rayḥānah regarding nighttime intimacy with God can be found in Nisābūrī, ‘*Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, 148. For references to nighttime devotions attributed to other women, see *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.26; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 130–31; Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, 4.414.
66. Nisābūrī, ‘*Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, 149.
67. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.251. Umm Hārūn also reportedly said that her breast is only granted a spiritual opening in the middle of the night (Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 155).
68. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.245.
69. This is probably meant to be the Basran ascetic, Rabāḥ al-Qaysī.
70. Ibn Rajab, *al-Istīnshāq*, 96, also in M. Smith, *Rabi’a: The Life and Work of Rabi’a and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 33–34, taken from a ms in Leiden, *Hilya al-Abrār* by al-Sarrāj.
71. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.27–28; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 84–85; Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 555.
72. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.339.
73. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.336.
74. *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.337–38. Note that the verb “*natadallala ‘alā*” which I have translated as “to behave coquettishly toward,” and which is a rather odd phrase to use with respect to God, could be a copiest’s error for *natadhalla* [to abase or humble oneself]. In the edited text, however, the word is clearly *natadallala*, and in any case it more correctly fits with the preposition “*‘alā*” that follows it (the preposition used with *natadhalla* is *ilā* or *li*, rather than ‘*alā*’), and with the general context of the woman’s exchange with Abu’l-Ashhab, wherein she is giving a response to someone criticizing her for distracting men by raising her voice.
75. See Th. Emil Homerin, “Living Love: The Mystical Writings of ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā’ūniyah,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 7 (2003), *passim*.
76. See, e.g., the story of Fātimah of Nishapur, wife of the Sufi Aḥmad Khaḍrawayh, in ‘Aṭṭār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 348–49; and the accounts of the sister of Ḥallāj, and of other women, who reportedly refused to fully veil themselves (Sachiko Murata, *Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1992], 326).
77. Rābi’ah al-‘Adawiyah is known particularly for this (see *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, 76–79, 84–87 for multiple examples, as well as *Şifat al-şafwah*, 4.23 and Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, 4.415). Some Sufi women received welcome or unwelcome male visitors seeking supplicatory prayers [*du‘ā*] on their behalf or spiritual advice (e.g., *Şifat al-şafwah*, 3.124; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 74–77; Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 155–56). The Cairene Sufi and descendant of the Prophet, Nafisah bt. al-Ḥasan was often visited by al-Shāfi‘ī, founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law (see Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 157) and Sha’wānah received visits from the Sufi Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ (Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-*



- kubrā*, 156). There are also cases of women visiting the homes of unrelated men; see the reports of Āminah al-Ramlīyah who visited the Sufi, Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, when he was ill (Sha'rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 157), and 'Ā'ishah of Merv who visited Abū 'Uthmān al-Ḥīrī, and was invited to stay with him in his home (Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 196; and also n. 154 on this issue).
78. See female critiques of public preaching (Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 180–81, 204–5, 224–25).
79. *Tazkirat al-awliyā'*, 81–82; Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, 80–81; Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, 282.

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