Int. J. Middle East Stud. **51** (2019), 395–421
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000345

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GENDER ANXIETIES IN THE IRANIAN *ZŪRKHĀNAH*

Abstract
The *zūrkhānah* is the traditional gymnasium of Iranian cities. Athletes exercised in a homosocial milieu that occasionally allowed for same-sex relations. Beginning in the 20th century, modern heteronormativity made such relations problematic, while gender desegregation allowed women to enter them. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, gender segregation was again imposed, while heteronormativity was maintained. In recent years, women have endeavored to make the *zūrkhānah* more inclusive. This article analyzes the contradictions and paradoxes of gender relations in the *zūrkhānah* by using classical poetry, modern novels, anthropological accounts, autobiographies, travelogues, and press reports.

Keywords: gender; Iran; literature; sexuality; sports

When I lived in Iran in the late 1960s, I was often tasked with showing visiting European guests, both men and women, the city of Tehran. In those days few historic sites in the capital were open to the public, and one of the few culturally specific places I could take our guests was the traditional gymnasium of Iran, known as the *zūrkhānah* (house of strength), where men exercise in a pit (*gawd*) to the rhythm of a *murshid*, a man who recites poetry while accompanying himself on a goblet drum.[1] In those days Tehran had about thirty of them, but the one that staged regular daily performances for visitors was the club of Shaʿban Jaʿfari (popularly known as Shaʿban Bimukh, Shaʿban the Brainless), a "tough guy" who had been one of the ringleaders of the royalist crowds in the early 1950s showdown between the shah and Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq[2] (Figure 1).

For his services he was rewarded by the monarch with a modern club that, while respecting the spatial structures of a traditional *zūrkhānah*, was much better appointed than the old and often somewhat shabby and dingy buildings that housed *zūrkhānah*s in Tehran's déclassé southern neighborhoods. My explanations of the exercises and rituals to our guests uncritically reiterated the oft-repeated refrain that the house of strength was an institution dedicated not only to physical education but, equally importantly, to chivalry and virtuous living. The word *pahlavān*, so I explained, meant a champion athlete (especially a wrestler) but also a man dedicated to selflessly helping the poor and vulnerable, one who practiced fairness, hospitality, forgiveness, humility, and generosity, and who eschewed haughtiness, rancor, greed, and subservience to the powerful; in other words, one who embodied the ethos of Persian chivalry (*javānmardī*).[3]

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FIGURE 1. Shaʿban Jaʿfari leading a mob in the early 1950s.

In subsequent years, it sometimes happened that when I told Iranians about my visits to the *zūrkhānah*, my interlocutors would smirk and exchange knowing glances with each other. It was only in the late 1980s that I found out why: after a lecture on the *zūrkhānah* by Sadr al-Din Ilahi, a senior Iranian journalist with a doctorate in sport sciences, a member of the audience asked him a pointed question about the reason why so many Iranians hold the institution in contempt. He chuckled and admitted that in the past *zūrkhānah*s had the reputation of being dens of sodomy and pedophilia.[4] This rekindled the memory of a lanky blond and very pale youth wearing clothes that were tight even by the standards of the late 1960s surreptitiously entering the practice room behind the public space of the Jaʿfari club during one of my visits, a sight that I had found vaguely incongruous but that I had been too innocent to find intriguing.

In this article, I propose to unravel how gender relations in Iran's native athletic tradition have changed as a result of developments in Iranian society as a whole. This involves a discussion of its homoerotic dimension,[5] which will be done by adducing evidence from classical literature and more recent accounts of real-life *zūrkhānah*s. I will then examine the dilemmas faced by athletes and Iran's sports authorities, both before and after the 1979 revolution, as they faced the pressures of heteronormalization in a social institution that traditionally mandated sexual segregation.[6] This will be followed by a discussion of contemporary women's quests for participation in what is now called "ancient sports." I will end with a brief look at contemporary artistic expressions of the unresolved dilemmas faced by an ancient institution as it faces a changing world.

THE EVIDENCE FROM CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Physical exercises were not considered a particularly noble pursuit in premodern society, for which reason they and their practitioners are rarely mentioned in classical Persian literature. The various works of Iran's epic tradition, most importantly the *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings), mention numerous games of polo and wrestling bouts between warriors, some of them women, but the stories in which these occur take place in a mythical past and are almost always rendered in a formulaic way.[7] To the best of my knowledge, the first depiction of an individualized *pahlavān* can be found in the *Gulistan* of Saʿdi (1210–92), a 13th-century work on ethical topics in mixed prose and verse that ranks perhaps as the most influential work of Persian literature. In it we find the story of a wrestling master who teaches one of his pupils 359 of the 360 holds and moves that he knows. When the young *pahlavān* boasts to the king that he has become the equal of his teacher, the king arranges for them to wrestle. The old man uses his last move to defeat his disrespectful pupil. When asked by the king to explain how he did it, he reveals that he had saved the last hold for just such an occasion, the morale of the story being that one should not give a friend enough strength that, if he becomes a foe, he would be stronger than oneself. In contemporary Iran, the lesson drawn is that one should never reveal all one's secrets to anyone, even one's closest friends, as they might take advantage of what they know if one day they are no longer a friend. What is overlooked in most references to this well-known story, is that the wrestling master had also taken a shine to this particular student: "In a corner of his mind he was attracted to the beauty of one of his pupils,"[8] a detail that adds to the poignancy of the betrayal. The *Gulistan* contains many other stories involving same-sex love,[9] a common feature of premodern Persian literature.[10] Almost all the love relationships of which these stories speak are chaste, however, and can be interpreted metaphorically as expressions of love of God, to whose beauty the lovely mien of a youth is a testimony.[11] Moreover, none occurs in the modest world of athletes. In other works by Saʿdi, however, we find stories about sexual encounters involving athletes that are rendered in too explicit a language to admit of a spiritual interpretation. These texts have often been excised from his "Complete Works" by prudish 20th-century editors.[12]

In Saʿdi's *Hazliyyāt* (Pleasantries), there is a story about a man falling in love with a beautiful young wrestler. He desires the athlete, but the latter will only accept his embrace, "lip on lip and mouth to mouth, like two nuts in one shell." The man, however, cannot contain his sexual desire, and eventually manages to sodomize the wrestler, and "he who had never had his shoulders pinned to the ground, ended up with his forehead on the ground."[13] In another poem, we read:

A learned Sufi's heart was once enraptured,
His reason by the face and ringlets captured.
Of a well-muscled, power wrestler boy,
A doe-eyed flirt whose arms could chains destroy.
For days and days he thought with all his might
About getting the lad alone one night;
He groped the boy's apple in hot pursuit,
To take his turn kissing that musky fruit.
He wished to get inside the grappler's crotch
And shoot his arrow to its very notch;

But the *amrad* was quick-tempered and rough,
He warned of cat-o'-nine and fisticuff.
"Never will I permit this shame," he spat.
"You'll never pin my face onto the mat;
But if my hugs and kisses will suffice,
I'm your young man – so come along, be nice."
The Sufi said, "This pact is fine with me,
O budding youth, my stately cypress tree;
I merely want to hold you in my arms,
And fall down dead before your lofty charms."[14]

A hundred years later, the satirist ʿUbayd Zakani (1300–71) used similar similes of pinning and penetration. In a short text called *Sad Pand* (Hundred Admonitions) in which he reverses all the usual moral precepts (rather like Jonathan Swift's *Devil's Dictionary* or Oscar Wilde's *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*), two of the admonitions contain references to wrestling: "As a child, do not withhold your arse from friend and foe, relative and stranger, near and far, so that in old age you can become a venerable old man, a preacher, a champion wrestler, or a famous man." And: "Don't call a champion him who can pin his opponent's back to the ground, instead deem him a true champion who will put his face on the ground and out of devotion take a penis in his arse."[15]

In the pantheon of Iran's traditional athletic culture, the most prominent figure is Pahlavan Mahmud Khᵛarazmi, known in Iran as Puriya Vali.[16] He started as an athlete and later became a Sufi master; his tomb in Khiva (in what is now Uzbekistan) is still visited today. In an oft-quoted story, he lets himself be beaten by an ambitious younger contender after seeing that man's mother pray for her son because the poor family needed the prize money. One version of this story has Puriya Vali fall in love with this young man.[17] In another story, related in the chapter devoted to Puriya Vali in an early 16th-century work from Herat that contains "75 short biographies of celebrated figures, mystics, poets . . . and rulers narrating their lives with a view to explaining that one cannot reach true spiritual love without having endured and understood the pangs of earthly longing,"[18] we read that a youth of outstanding beauty arrived from Hamadan with the intention of being among the beloveds of Puriya. At the height of passion, when the *pahlavān* was insanely drunk from the wine of oblivion, and upon beholding that youth's countenance, he fell in love with him. He decided to teach him wrestling, and trained him until he had adorned the palm tree of his body with the branches and twigs of wrestling holds. And after that it so happened that he never recovered. The love of that youth had such a disorienting effect on the *pahlavān* that he fell ill.[19]

A few years later, Zayn al-Din Mahmud Vasifi (1485–1551 or 1566) wrote a long book about famous figures of his time in which he dedicates a whole chapter to the *pahlavān*s of the Timurid court of Sultan Husayn Bayqara at Herat.[20] One story tells of a match between a studious youth, Darvish Muhammad, and an established wrestler from outside the city of Herat, Pahlavan ʿAli Rustaʾi. The boy is a nephew of a famous local wrestler now retired, and his uncle takes him away from his studies and trains him for three years. The homoerotic dimensions of the rest of the story are readily apparent. The king orders a water basin to be emptied and to be transformed into an arena.[21]

When Darvish Muhammad disrobed, it was as if he was a corporeal spirit [*rūḥ-i mujassam*]. The king said that no pleasure equaled beholding Darvish Muhammad, and gave him the title of *tupchāq-e kushtīgīrān*.[22] Compared to him, Pahlavan ʿAli Rustaʾi was the epitome of ugliness and lack of proportion [*nāhamvārī*].

Darvish Muhammad easily defeats his opponent but gives him all the prize money, saying that the honor he acquired is enough for him.[23] He went on to have a distinguished career as a musician, poet, and courtier. When he grew older, he spent considerable time training a wrestler, Pahlavan Piri, "with the view that in his old age, he would be the beloved child and delight of Pahlavan. . .. But he was unfaithful, and separated from Pahlavan. Pahlavan was a man of great honor and virtue, and though his heart was aflame and his body wounded by grief, he did not reveal it to anyone." He went on compose a *maṯnavī* in on the subject of his aging, and the infidelity of Pahlavan Piri.[24]

Another poet active in Herat, Sayfi Bukharaʾi, wrote a ghazal about a young strongman performing in public:

I had no desire for the silver-hearted youth
By his strength, the athlete made me his lover.
Although I was on the mountain of sadness because of the rocks of fate,
Your waist dragged me to you.
I am your slave, if you so desire,
On the day of the performance, you can twirl me around your head.[25]

Timurid rule in Herat ended in 1506, and soon the city was incorporated into the Safavid empire. Safavid shahs patronized wrestling, and Iran was dotted with many *zūrkhānah*s. The 17th-century French traveler John Chardin relates that

Wrestling is the Exercise of People in a Lower Condition; and generally Speaking, only of People who are indigent. They call the Place where they Show themselves to *Wrestle*, *Zour Kone*, that is to say, the House of Force. They have of'em in all the Houses of the great Lords, and especially those of Governours of Provinces, to Exercise their People. Every Town has besides Companies of those Wrestlers for Show.[26]

Around 1700, Mir ʿAbd al-ʿAdil, a minor poet known as Nijat-i Isfahani, wrote a *maṯnavī* on wrestling that was to acquire lasting fame: the *Gul-i Kushti* (Rose [or Gage] of Wrestling).[27] This poem of 268 diptychs skillfully weaves wrestling terminology into the narrative, which again praises the beauty and charm of young athletes—so much so that a British scholar of Persian literature thought that "in spite of its ostensible theme the poem contains very little on wrestling and is mainly of erotic content."[28] Mention should also be made of a number of short poems in the *shahr āshūb* genre that also praise young athletes and their beauty.[29] However, one should be careful in drawing conclusions from these because *shahr āshub*s exist for most professions, from tailors and fruit-sellers to iron smiths and butchers.

THE WORLD OF THE PREMODERN *ZŪRKHĀNAH*

Having shown that a certain homoerotic sensibility can be detected in the few classical texts that deal with athletes, let us now look at actual practice. Was the eroticism of a discursive nature or is there evidence of actual carnal relations? One might dismiss a *maṯnavī*

such as Mir Nijat's *Gul-i Kushti* as yet another example of an old poetic trope, except that the author, very probably an athlete himself, had particular persons in mind:

> There is a treatise by Mir Nijat, who wrote these verses on the life and times [*aḥvāl*] of a young and beautiful youth who was a *zūrkhānah* goer, and anybody familiar with *zūrkhānah* terminology knows how much his verses on the *zūrkhānah* and *pahlavān*hood are amusing, for this type of poetry is original and unprecedented.[30]

Mir Nijat's work inspired four different commentaries, known as *Sharh-i Gul-i Kushti*, penned in India, and the one to which I have access actually names the two young *pahlavān*s with whom the author was in love: "Haji [*sic*] and Rustam were both beloveds of Mir Nijat, and Gul-i Kushti is about them."[31] The fact that *Gul-i Kushti* was annotated by four different authors in India may not be unrelated to the fact that the connection between male eroticism and athletics was not unknown there. In a text written in Persian in the 1740s, we learn about *akhara*s, the Indian analogs to the *zūrkhānah*, that "handsome boys frequent them and the licentious and libertines enjoy their beauty."[32]

But back to Iran: inside the *zūrkhānah*, members did not hesitate to show their affection for each other openly. In the 1930s an English lady traveler, Mary Weston, managed to visit a house of strength, entrance to which was then forbidden to women. It is not astonishing that the very un-British physical intimacy reigning in the pit struck her:

> At last the wrestling began. The opponents took hands and, giving a quaint sudden pull, touched each other, right shoulder to right shoulder, before the bout began. None lasted long and when they finished the men touched each other on the right brow, the right cheek, pretended to kiss or did kiss each other, full upon the lips. In the intervals some of the men stood close together, their hands clasped or their arms about each other.[33]

We also know of two brothers, ʿAbbas and Husayn, sons of a *pahlavān*, who were both athletes and "unsurpassed in their knowledge of the holds of wrestling." "Their love for each other surpassed that between brothers, and they could not stand being separated for an instant." When ʿAbbas suddenly died, his brother put his head on the deceased's tomb and died on the spot. Husayn was buried next to ʿAbbas, and their tomb became a shrine for the sports lovers of Sanandaj, the capital of the Iranian province of Kurdistan.[34]

Finally, there is the curious story of a murderer whose life was spared because of his good looks. A pupil of Mustafa Tusi, a much-respected wrestling champion in the 1940s and 1950s, killed another man in a fight over a trifle. When a court condemned the pupil to be hanged, Tusi set out to save him. First, he obtained the consent of the victim's family to save his life, but that did not sway the court. So he went to the shah himself, told him of the youngster's virtues, and then showed him his half-naked photos: "Look how beautiful his face and body are. Wouldn't it be a shame if such a proportionate body were to be hanged because of a blunder?," he asked. The shah commuted his sentence, and he was released after a few years on the occasion of an amnesty.[35]

Of course physical displays of affection, the admiration of beauty, and *a fortiori* brotherly love do not automatically connote physical homoerotic relationships. But if we consider the physical and social setting of an Iranian house of strength, the *potential* for such relationships was certainly present. Like many institutions in traditional Islamic societies, the *zūrkhānah*, too, constituted a homosocial milieu. Not only were women not allowed to be present, but men covered only their intimate parts, *ʿawrah*, which according to the

shariʿa is the area between the navel and the knees.[36] "Exercising with clothes on was forbidden in the *zūrkānah*,"[37] as the following two verses show:

Mighfar u khaftān bih maydān-i muḥabbat nang-i māst
Hamchu kushtīgīr ʿuryāni salāḥ-e jang-i māst.[38]
[Entering the arena of love wearing helm and armor is shameful
Like the wrestler, nakedness is our weapon.]

and

Bāyast birihnah hamchu shamshīr shavī
tā jawhar-i khᵛīsh rā namāyān dārī.[39]
[You have to become naked like a sword
So that you reveal your substance/essence]

Moreover, it seems that athletes often did not marry and avoided having intercourse with women.[40] The medieval historian Juvayni tells the story of a champion wrestler, Filah Hamadani, who had been called to the court of Genghis Khan's son and successor Ögedei Khan (r. 1229–41). The Mongol ruler rewarded Filah after a decisive victory with a beautiful and charming young woman, but practicing abstinence, he did not touch her. When she complained that her husband did not pay any attention to her, Ögedei asked the *pahlavān* why this was so, and was told that he sought to conserve his strength. The ruler told him the point was to have children, and absolved him from wrestling ever again.[41] This abstinence is congruent with practices elsewhere, and we find this belief in the strength of semen both in Greek antiquity[42] and in South Asia. In India, "wrestlers, on the whole, avoid the company of women assiduously. Women, when encountered, are to be treated as mothers or sisters."[43] In Pakistan, traditional wrestlers are celibate and "keep their loin cloth firmly tied" while they are active, and "open their loincloth" when they get married in their mid-thirties.[44] According to a physical education teacher quoted to me by the aforementioned Sadr al-Dan Ilahi, the great *pahlavān*s of the past used to collect their nightly semen emissions and drink them in the morning, so as not to lose strength. As late as the late 1950s, an American living in Iran was told by *zūrkhānah* athletes that while sleeping with women sapped their strength, sleeping with men did not.[45]

Given the Iranian tradition of *shāhid-bāzī* (enjoying gazing at beautiful young males), beholding the beauty of God on the face of a half-naked youth in the pit of a house of strength was too much of a temptation, and so one of the standard "rules" for *zūrkhānah*s stated that in addition to women and non-Muslims, beardless (prepubescent) boys were not allowed to enter. Facial hair was (and is) of course "a visible and bodily symbol of a double opposition: to women and to children,"[46] and in the Iranian *zūrkhānah* in theory if a young man's beard was thick enough for a comb to stick to it, he could enter—if not, he had to wait. The story is told of a youngster who was so eager to enter the gymnasium that he stuck a comb into the flesh of his cheek, an act that was considered manly enough for acceptance.[47] There are, however, old photos of athletes showing prepubescent boys, including one which seems to show a complicitous eye lock between one and an adult athlete (Figure 2). The prohibition of youth may therefore be an invented tradition of the 20th century. In fact, an early 16th-century text on the customs of *pahlavān*s and wrestlers does not mention such a rule.[48]

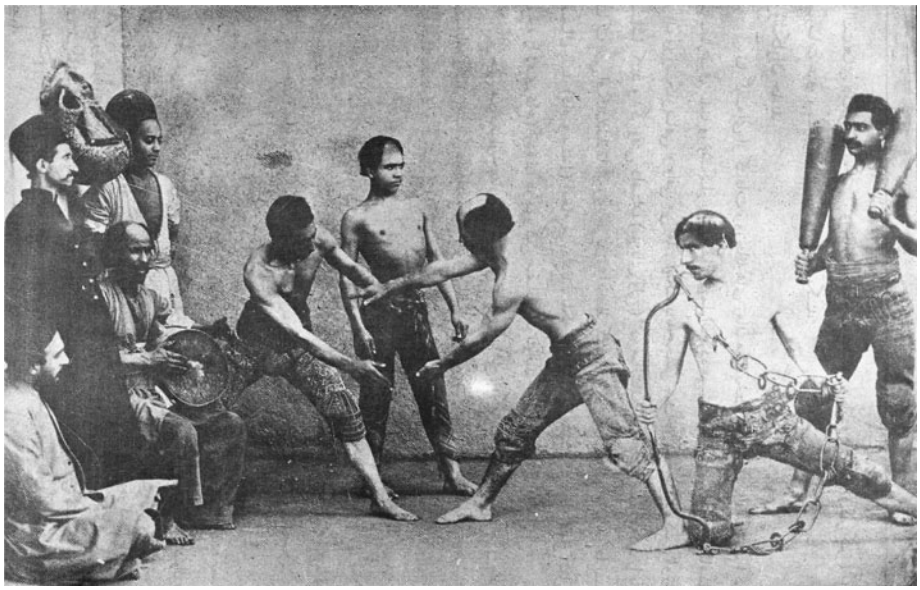

FIGURE 2. A fin-de-siècle (A.H.S.) *zūrkhānah* scene in Tehran.

By the early 20th century, it was known that male–male sexual activity went on in some houses of strength. Older athletes sometimes abused the novices, and some went so far as to brand their boys so that they could never again show off (*ʿarẓ-i andām kunand*).[49] The boys were called *arbāb*, *ādam* (person), or simply *nawchah*, the latter being actually the legitimate term for novices.[50] These practices have left traces in the Persian language. The expression *kundah bālā kashidan*, for instance, denotes a wrestling move but can be colloquially used in the sense of "screwing someone." (A similar polysemy existed in ancient Greece.)[51]

MODERN TIMES

In the 19th century, many habitués of the *zūrkhānah*s were *lūṭī*s, a marginal group of men who flaunted some rules of propriety: they drank, organized and bet on cock and ram fights and pigeon races, gambled, fought with knives, and had a reputation for sexual deviance; in fact, the word *lūṭī* derives from the same trilateral Arabic root as the word *liwāṭ*, meaning sodomy.[52] Some were entertainers—musicians, jugglers, acrobats, strongmen, snake-charmers—others neighborhood toughs who extracted protection money from the rich, occasionally helped the poor, defended the "honor" of their neighborhood by brawling with rival *lūṭī*s from other neighborhoods, ran prostitution rings and opium dens, rioted in the pay of a local notable or religious leader, or maintained law and order in the pay of the state and its local representatives. However, the term *lūṭī* also connoted a man who is truthful, honors his promises, helps the poor and weak, disregards status distinctions when dealing with his social inferiors, and puts the welfare of others above his own, in short, one who lives by the ideals of *javānmardī*.

Under the Qajars, both the court and provincial grandees patronized *pahlavān*s, who entertained courtiers and governors with their wrestling matches. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 put an end to that, as the modernists who came to power were highly critical of the *zūrkhānah*, mainly because of the louche reputation of many of its *lūṭī* devotees. They favored modern European sports, especially team sports that, so they thought, would teach young Iranians to cooperate with one another in contrast to the individual exercises of Iran.[53] *Zūrkhānah* sports fell on hard times, kept alive by a few dedicated amateurs. A modest state patronage resumed only in 1934, when the millennium of Iran's national epic, the *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi (940–1020), was celebrated all over Iran and traditional athletes performed their exercises as part of these celebrations.[54] What had been called simply *varzish* (sport) was now called *varzish-i bāstānī* (ancient" sport), as the unqualified word came to connote modern, i.e., European, sports and physical exercises. To ennoble activities that had had, as we have seen, an ambiguous reputation in society, they had to be discursively connected with Iran's ever-so-glorious ancient (read: pre-Islamic) past. Whatever negative traits they may have had, were now ascribed to the general "decadence" of Iranian society under the Qajar dynasty, whose rule ended in 1925. The imputation of moral "decadence" to the Qajars was a common trope in Iran after their fall, and the idea has to be taken with a grain of salt.[55] True, Nasir al-Din Shah's (r. 1848–96) Austrian court physician noted in a book published in 1865 that "since a lot of dissolute and merry types frequent [the houses of strength], young men of good families do not go there."[56] But this was nothing new: during the reign of the last ruling Safavid king, Shah Sultan Husayn (r. 1694–1722), "*pahlavān*s and wrestlers . . . wherever they saw a women, a beautiful girl, or a beautiful boy would abduct them by a variety of tricks, [abuse them] until they were satisfied, and then return them."[57]

The *pahlavān* therefore had to be reinvented as a chivalrous and patriotic figure. In the ideal heteronormalized Iranian society that came to be propagated in the 1920s and 1930s, there was no place for love and sex among males,[58] but now that the *zūrkhānah* was a patriotic institution embodying the most noble values of a "renascent" Iran, overt criticism of it was rare and focused on the hygienic conditions prevailing in the insufficiently ventilated gymnasiums and the inadequacy of some exercises for the development of a harmonious body.[59] Such was the taboo that attached to same-sex dalliances that their prevalence in the *zūrkhānah* was criticized only in works of fiction.[60]

Already in 1908 Muhammad Baqir Mirza Khusruvi had hinted at the normative obsolescence of same-sex sentiments in the Iran of his time. In his novel *Shams va-Tughra* (Shams and Tughra), whose story unfolds in the 13th century and which is considered the first Persian historical novel, one of the male characters embraces and kisses one Pahlavan Muhammad and they speak of love and enjoyments (*ʿishq va ṣafā*). But the author felt compelled to clarify that these "were common in that time."[61] Jaʿfar Shahri, a chronicler of urban life in early 20th-century Tehran,[62] went further in his autobiographical novel *Shikar-i Talkh* (Bitter Sugar). Deploring the spread of pederasty and even sexual relations among people of the same age around the turn of the 20th century (the first being apparently less heinous than the latter!), he writes that a merchant who employed a beautiful youth in his shop would attract more business. He adds that this bad habit had spread to the *zūrkhānah*s, for here such youth gathered in great numbers and "their crystalline bodies were available to the gaze of their admirers without any

obstacles." In the past, he avers, a *pahlavān* would readily lose to spare his opponent embarrassment, but today a *pahlavān* rapes his novices, if need be by inebriating them, so that once they have grown up they will be of such ill repute that they would never dare pin the *pahlavān* to the ground. He even claims that the great Pahlavan Khurasani had young men branded in their private parts after abusing them.[63]

Nor did modernization necessarily quell the anxiety felt among athletes. One aspect of modernization in the realm of sports was that in the 1930s international freestyle wrestling replaced the style practiced in the *zūrkhānah*, which was later constituted as a separate discipline known as "*pahlavāni* wrestling." In the beginning, the singlets used in modern international wrestling were deemed indecent because they left a man's thigh, part of his *ʿawrah*, uncovered. This is how some youths' first efforts on the mat are described in an autobiographical novel whose action takes place among traditional lower-class Iranians of Tehran's South End in the late 1950s:

> In the beginning he and Murtiza were ashamed to step onto the mat in singlets. Well, they were right to be afraid, such fair and handsome things [*chīz-i bih ūn tar u tamīzī*], and that on a wrestling mat to boot. The upshot was to be careful not to get caught in a scissors hold [*sagak*] by Mr. Davudi [the coach].[64]

Later in the novel, as a group of young men discuss their sports heroes, one mentions soccer players and another lists wrestlers and practitioners of "ancient" sports, but he is interrupted by a third person who says: "and among the pederasts [*bachchahbāz*] we have Mr. Davudi, Sayyid Husayn Maddah, and Shaykh Ghulam Dakalbaz."[65] However, sexual activity was fluid and embraced both sexes, for in the same novel we read that people respected men sporting cauliflower ears, who received a particularly warm welcome in Tehran's Red Light District.[66] Obviously, as the *Shahnamah* has it in an oft-quoted line, *bih kushtī padid āyad az mard mard*, translatable as "wrestling makes a *man* out of a man."

These anecdotes pertain to the more traditional sectors of society. Under the Pahlavis, the state promoted not only heteronormativity but also sexual desegregation, and this brought about new types of gender anxieties involving women. The logical consequence of this state of affairs for what was now considered "traditional" sports was that by the 1950s the prohibition for women entering the *zūrkhānah*s was occasionally breached.

WOMEN AND THE *ZŪRKHĀNAH*

Whereas the old nonstate *zūrkhānah*s by and large maintained the prohibition on women's presence, the newer ones did not. Foreign visitors, including women, were often invited by their Iranian hosts to attend athletic performances: officials were taken to the well-appointed House of Strength of the Bank Melli in central Tehran; celebrities from the realms of sport and entertainment were often hosted by Shaʿban Jaʿfari in his club.

Traditional circles did not take to this breach of propriety kindly. When the Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida was received with full honors by Jaʿfari, he was criticized for hosting "a woman of ill repute." A rival *zūrkhānah* owner sent a photo of the star with Jaʿfari to the religious authorities, asking them for a condemnation. Jaʿfari had to use all his contacts within the shah's secret police, SAVAK, to avoid a humiliation (Figure 3).[67]

FIGURE 3. Gina Lollobrigida at the Jaʿfari Club in the spring of 1963. Provided by Homa Sarshar.

When the old story of Puriya Vali was updated for a film, women were introduced into the narrative. The film *Babr-i Mazandaran* (Tiger of Mazandaran), which was released in 1968, retells the story of the Sufi saint, shorn of all religious elements, in a contemporary context. Habib (played by Imam-ʿAli Habibi, a multiple world freestyle wrestling champion who also served as a member of parliament under the shah) is a lumberjack and village strongman in Mazandaran, a Caspian province known for the prowess of its wrestlers. He has a sidekick who is a dwarf, and he is at odds with the local land owner's steward, the evil Bashir Khan. (The film was made only a few years after the shah's land reform.) Habib wins a local tournament and is sent to Mashhad to compete in a national championship. At a shrine there, he surreptitiously observes the mother of Kayvan, the man who will be his opponent in the finals, as she prays for her son's victory so that he will not lose face with his fiancée's family. Habib allows himself to be pinned. The

mother sees through Habib's sacrifice, and sends him a gift of money to thank him. When this is discovered, Habib stands accused of having been bribed to lose intentionally. Worse, back in the village he is accused by Bashir Khan of having attempted to rape a blind girl, Lalah. When the mother hears about the problem she created, she resolves to prove Habib's innocence and heads for the village in the company of her son and his fiancée to set the record straight. For some reason Bashir Khan is present when everybody meets, and when the blind Lalah hears his voice, she identifies him as the man who had attempted to rape her. Threatened with arrest, Bashir and his henchmen abduct Kayvan's fiancée and drive away, and together Habib and Kayvan set off to rescue her. After many car chases and fights that allow both of them to display their physique and their grappling techniques, they rescue the young woman and capture Bashir. Kayvan considers it dishonorable to have won thanks to his opponent having allowed himself to be thrown, and demands a rematch right there and then. This time Habib wins fair and square, and everybody celebrates. In the last scene, the dwarf proposes marriage to the blind girl, telling her that "if we wrestle [!], our children will have your height and my eyesight" (Figure 4).[68]

By the 1970s, the Iranian press routinely published photos of female singers or actors in the company of male athletes, usually football players, because football fever was spreading. The following cover of *Iṭṭilaʿat Haftagi*, a mass-circulation weekly, had everything to offend traditional notions of propriety (Figure 5).

As the shah's popularity plummeted among traditional Iranians, the close ties between Jaʿfari, who headed the country's "Ancient Sport" establishment, and the regime soiled the reputation of traditional athletics, which was already ambiguous for all the reasons we

FIGURE 4. The poster for Babr-i Mazandaran.

FIGURE 5. A singer and an athlete starring in a comedy film.

saw earlier. When the revolution broke out in 1978, Jaʿfari tried to mount pro-shah demonstrations, but unlike in the 1950s, found no one to go along.[69] After the revolution he fled abroad and died in Los Angeles, where he is buried at the Pierce Brothers Westwood Village Memorial Park & Mortuary, a few meters from the grave of Marilyn Monroe.

Initially the new power holders in Iran regarded Western sports with a certain contempt. Tennis was outlawed for being elitist,[70] and football was suspect because it distracted the young from more worthy pursuits such as religion.[71] The quest for cultural authenticity being one of the *leitmotive* of the revolutionaries, *zūrkhānah* sports would have seemed to be an obvious choice for official support—except that they were soiled by association with the old regime. For "ancient sport" to survive, therefore, it had to be cleansed of all associations with the Pahlavi state. To legitimize it in the new postrevolutionary order, its Islamic, more particularly Shiʿi, dimensions were stressed again, and these included strict sexual segregation. In his memoirs, the first postrevolutionary head of Iran's national physical education organization recalls that "in principle the attire of traditional athletes is a *lung* [a broad cloth wrapped around a man's hips], and even if

they wear shorts underneath this, their torso is naked, and it is contrary to Islamic and Iranian etiquette for a woman to enter a *zūrkhānah*."[72] Women were no longer allowed to visit the gymnasia, in line with the state's general sports policies, which did not allow women to attend men's sports events, most notoriously football matches.[73] Conversely, men could no longer attend women's sports events. This created problems for the state-run television service, which faced the difficult task of broadcasting sports events without showing too much skin.[74] Women's sports, which had been encouraged under the Pahlavis,[75] were marginalized, as facilities were used mostly by men and there was little money to build new ones given the expense of the war with Iraq. Beginning in the 1990s, after the end of the war and the social liberalization under Presidents ʿAli-Akbar Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, the demands of women activists for equal treatment in the realm of sport were twofold: access to male sports events as spectators,[76] and equal facilities for practicing sports. Most of the demands concerned modern Western sports, and though women are still not allowed to attend soccer matches in Iran, considerable progress has been made in the provision of facilities and the organization of competitions for women.[77] By the 2000s a few women showed interest in "ancient" sport as well, as we shall see shortly.

In light of the newly enforced sexual segregation in *zūrkhānah*s, it is intriguing that the authorities also decided to innovate by requiring *zūrkhānah* athletes to wear T-shirts in the *gawd*—a dress code for which there was no precedent. In another break with (invented?) tradition, boys and adolescents were allowed into the pit, a necessity for ensuring the future of an institution most young Iranians deem hopelessly old fashioned and uncool (Figure 6). In view of the prescribed absence of women, the imposition of

FIGURE 6. Two generations at a contemporary *zūrkhānah* in Kashan. © Eric Lafforgue / age fotostock.

T-shirts can reasonably be ascribed to anxiety about homosociality veering into homoerotic or pedophile desire. The new dress codes also made it possible to showcase *zūrkhānah* sports on television. It was even retroactively applied to historical figures: in an illustration for a children's book on traditional Iranian sports, we find a painting by Muhammad Haqqani of Nasir al-Din Shah fastening the champion's torque onto the bicep of Pahlavan Yazdi, one of the legendary athletes of late 19th-century Iran (Figure 7).[78] Fortunately, we have a photo of the historical Pahlavan Yazdi (Figure 8). Two features of the painting are worth noting. First, the exaggerated musculature of the athlete, which betrays the influence of Western notions of male athletic beauty as propagated by body builders.[79] Second, the addition of a T-shirt, which becomes obvious when we compare it to a photo from the early 1950s which must have been its model, at least as far as the posture of the athlete is concerned (Figure 9). By the same token, *Zuran*, a documentary made in 2001 for the Kermanshah affiliate of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (the state radio and television corporation) was not granted permission to be screened on the network or be shown at festivals because the filmmaker insisted on

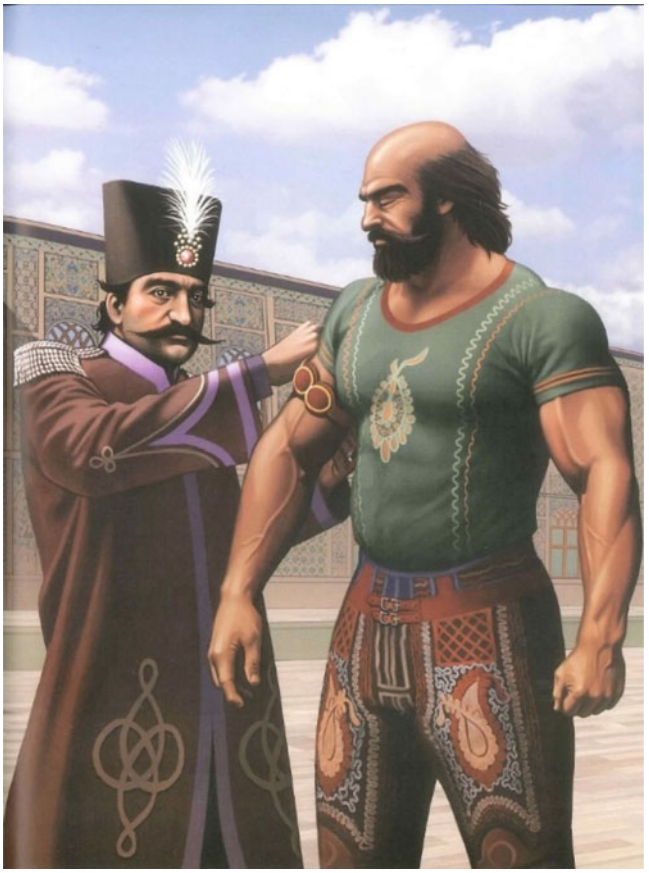

FIGURE 7. Painting of Nasir al-Din Shah and Pahlavan Yazdi by Muhammad Haqqani, 2016.

FIGURE 8. Pahlavan Yazdi.

showing athletes in their traditional attire (Figure 10).[80] *Pahlavānī* wrestlers were exempted from wearing T-shirts for a while. When I attended the national *pahlavānī* wrestling championship in Isfahan in the summer of 2003, contestants wore only the traditional breeches (*tunbān*) while they battled in front of an all-male public some of whose members made obscene cat-calls.[81] But when a TV crew arrived to film one bout for the evening news, the wrestlers donned T-shirts, presumably out of respect for female viewers. More recently, *pahlavānī* wrestlers have been made to wear standard singlets underneath their breeches, which are maintained to enable holds that are specific to that style of wrestling and that would be impossible if the contestants wore only singlets (Figure 11).[82]

The imposition of T-shirts has been criticized for its inauthenticity, and its juxtaposition with the traditional breeches has struck many as an "aesthetic dysfunctionality."[83] True, but one must keep in mind that, given the official puritanism in Iran, it was only by making compromises that practitioners of "ancient" sports could open a space for their activities and receive state support, without which their activities would not be viable.[84] For the fact is that young Iranians are overwhelmingly attracted to modern sports, and to the extent that they engage in combat sports, their preferences go to East Asian disciplines such as Wushu and Taekwondo. It is precisely in the latter that the first Iranian woman gained an Olympic medal when Kimiya ʿAlizadah Zunuzi won a bronze

FIGURE 9. Mohammad Reza Shah decorating Pahlavan Aḥmad Vafadar, 1950.

FIGURE 10. *Zuran*, a documentary "not fit for broadcasting," by Muhammad Riza Haji Ghulami.

FIGURE 11. International *pahlavānī* wrestling.

medal in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 (Figure 12). The presence of women athletes wearing hijab in the Iranian martial arts scene has opened up the question of their participation in *zūrkhānah* exercises, which are often presented as a form of martial arts in view of the popularity of that concept around the world.[85]

Discussions on the place of women in *zūrkhānah* sports were triggered by the sustained efforts to internationalize them.[86] These efforts were motivated by the need to render them more attractive in the eyes of the young by offering possibilities for international competition. As the head of the International Zurkhaneh Sports Federation confirmed in a recent interview, the ultimate goal is to make *zūrkhānah* sports an Olympic

FIGURE 12. Olympic medalist Kimiya ʿAlizadah Zunuzi, 2016. https://www.hindustantimes.com/olympics/rio-2016-iran-hail-their-first-ever-woman-medallist-kimia-alizadeh/story-Ttgl6xLzWigVDQQIHgav4J.html.

discipline. But for that to happen, numerous conditions had to be met, including equality between men and women.[87] Movement towards that goal is already evident: as Iranian instructors fanned out to coach people around the world in the techniques of *zūrkhānah* exercises, they found themselves having to teach women. By 2008 women participated in *zūrkhānah* sports in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.[88]

Whereas Iranian sports functionaries grew concerned with women's participation because of the attempts at internationalization, Iranian women athletes did not wait for their involvement to become an issue because of outside pressures. In Kermanshah, a woman by the name of Simin Muʾayyidi opened a *zūrkhānah* for women, but it was soon closed down by the authorities. Supporters of women's participation in "ancient" sports opine that the prohibition stems from tradition, not the sharīʿa. Indeed, conservative elders argue that inside the sacred space of a *gawd* a man must be in a state of ritual purity, i.e., have done his ablutions (*vuẓū*/*wuḍū*), which, according to them, is problematic for women (probably a reference to women's menstruation). But this argument has been refuted by a cleric who retorted that women are allowed in mosques, and *zūrkhānah*s are certainly not more hallowed spaces than mosques. However, for the then vice president of the International Federation, Mitra Ruhi, this was of minor importance. Although she found the argument insulting, she did not advocate women's presence in the *zūrkhānah*, preferring that women exercise in modern sports halls: "What's the difference with aerobics, other than that the music is our own?"[89]

In the meantime, a number of *marjaʿ*s (the highest religious authorities in Twelver Shiʿa Islam) have been asked for a fatwa concerning women's participation in *zūrkhānah* sports, and many, including Iran's Supreme Leader ʿAli Khaminihʾi, have found no reason to prohibit it as long as there is no intermingling of the sexes. While the national federation in Tehran (which has been at odds with the International Federation) dithers in Tehran, athletes in the provinces have taken matters into their own hands. In Shiraz, a Mr. Jaʿfari who heads a *zūrkhānah*, reported that his wife learned the exercises when he exercised at home, and now occasionally joins him in the *gawd* of his club when no other men are around.[90]

A woman artist, Maryam Akhondy, who trained in classical Persian music but left Iran after the revolution when it became illegal for women to sing as soloists in public, recorded a video clip titled "Maryam Akhondy's Zurkhane" in which she recites poetry while accompanying herself on the goblet drum, having mastered every detail of a traditional *murshid*'s art—except that the poetry she performs is feminist:[91]

Ay bih nām-i zanān-e jahān
Kih hastī-yi mā u shumā hast z'ishān

[In the name of the women of the world
To whom we and you owe our existence.]

While sports functionaries argue for and against women's participation in "ancient" sports, be it as spectators or as practitioners, artists have given their own interpretation of the gender dimension of the *zūrkhānah*.

ZŪRKHĀNAH AND GENDER IN THE VISUAL ARTS

The travails of Iran's sports authorities are paralleled by artists who have cast an ironic eye on the *zūrkhānah*'s gender dimensions. In 2013 Anahita Razmi, an Iranian based in Germany, exhibited a video installation in Dubai consisting of a videoloop that shows her going through the exercises associated with the *zūrkhānah*, and an octagonal colored floor sticker. Her website explains that

> the sport is only executed by men in Iran, - women are not allowed in the clubs. Initially disturbing this patriarchal base of the sport, the work *House of Strength* replaces the body of the male athlete with the body of the female artist. The ever repeating exercises are meanwhile reminding of a mechanical process without any output. The octagonal floor installation is referring to the shape of a typical zurkhaheh ring, - located somewhere between an abstract geometrical floor painting and a ring, which can be entered by the audience to follow the video.[92] (Figure 13)

Occasionally, some women find ways to visit a *zūrkhānah* in Iran, and in recent years some historic *zūrkhānah*s have allowed foreign women tourists to attend performances. In 2004 the photographer Mehraneh Atashi snuck into a house of strength and took a number of photos of bare-chested athletes while she herself was dutifully covered. Using mirrors, the photographer managed to be present in all the photos she took. In theory, there is nothing objectionable to these images, because both the artist and her subjects observe the rules of the shariʿa for covering one's *ʿawrah*. In practice, however, they are an ironic inversion of the more common (at least in the West) scene of a fully dressed man ogling scantily clad women and can be interpreted as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Islamic Republic's dress codes (Figure 14).[93]

More daring still are the works of male artists that have cast a homoerotic gaze on the *zūrkhānah* and its practitioners, which brings our discussion full circle. Because many of

FIGURE 13. Anahita Razmi and Carbon12 Gallery, Dubai, 2013. © Anahita Razmi © Mehraneh Atashi.

FIGURE 14. Mehraneh Atashi photographing a *zūrkhānah* athlete in 2004.

these artists are active in Iran, I will here name only the late Sadegh Tirafkan. In a series of photographs of bare-chested men (2003–4) posing with the exercise instructions used in a traditional house of strength, he tried to show, as he put it, that "the same environment and looks are kept, but not the same spirit and attitude."[94] He did not elaborate on what the new "spirit and attitude" were, but one has a hunch that they had much in common with the premodern world of Iranian athletics, before the heteronormalization decreed by the modernizers erased consciousness of what is there for everyone to see (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15. Photo by Sadegh Tirafkan. http://www.payvand.com/news/11/jul/1055.html.

CONCLUSION

What remains is to put the above analysis in context. By focusing on one aspect of a topic, one can easily create a fallacy of *pars pro toto* in the mind of the reader. The homoerotic dimension of what is now called "ancient sports" is something of which most people who are intimately familiar with the tradition are aware, and yet societal taboos have so far prevented its systematic discussion. The fact that this aspect of the tradition has been the subject of this study should not be taken to mean that Iranian *zūrkhānah*s are, or have ever been, primarily dens of quotidian pedophilia or homoeroticism. Historically, *zūrkhānah*s and their habitués have reflected the diversity of the population at large: thugs who misuse their physical power to terrorize peaceful citizens or lend their strong-arm services to political figures have coexisted with God-fearing athletes who have tried to lead the good life to the best of their abilities;[95] pedophiles have coexisted with upright family men; and presumably men whose primary attraction was to other men (or chose them *faute de mieux*) have exercised in the company of men who preferred women.

Second, the presence of homoeroticism at athletic venues is not unique to Iran.[96] In India the 18th-century Urdu poet Sauda gives a detailed account of one Mirza Muft Birji of Delhi, "who maintained an *akhara* to attract handsome boys with whom he satisfied his carnal desires."[97] Similar encounters are reported from Pakistan in the 1990s.[98] Nor is this complicity between athletes and their gay admirers limited to the Indo-Persian world: in late Wilhelmine Berlin, some athletes maintained close contact with gay subculture. In one gymnasium, which was located adjacent to a restaurant and presided over by a dressmaker in drag, unmarried working-class men exercised for the edification of "gentlemen whose distinguished miens and elegant suits contrasted strangely with those of the strongmen." The guests "paid for the weights and wrestling mats, and provided sustenance for the athletes, which consisted of seltzer, lemonade, and cigarettes before and while they worked [*sic*], and of beer and supper after they had wrestled and lifted weights."[99] There have also been speculations about John E. du Pont's motivations for hosting male athletes on his estate in Delaware, an episode that ended in tragedy.[100]

In this study I have attempted to do four things. First, to broaden our awareness of same-sex practices in the premodern world. In the all-male world of the premodern *zūrkhānah*, there is none of the ambiguity that attaches to amorous discourse in ghazals, lyric poetry that leaves the identity of the beloved open because the Persian language has only one ungendered third-person pronoun. There is both textual and historical evidence that the attraction between males was not merely of the spiritual kind that is associated (or said to be associated) with Sufism.[101] Second, I have tried to document how the evidence for these practices has been excised from more recent published materials. Third, I have tried to lay bare the anxieties caused by this heritage for the practitioners and officials of Iran's native athletics, as modernization put an end to the fluidity that characterized affective ties. This anxiety was heightened after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, after which the state mandated—with varying degrees of diligence and success—sexual segregation in public spaces. And finally, I have tried to document how enterprising women, both athletes and artists, have tried to subvert official policies that discriminate against them.

NOTES

Author's note: I should like to thank Kathryn Babayan, Babak Fozooni, Marion H. Katz, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Philippe Rochard, Sunil Sharma, Houman Sarshar, Anthony Shay, and three anonymous readers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

[1]For a concise introduction to this institution, see H. E. Chehabi, "Zūrkhāna," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 11 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 572–74. For a somewhat longer overview see Birgit Krawietz, "Martial Arts Iranian Style: Zurkhane Heavy Athletics and Wrestling Contested," in *Sport across Asia: Politics, Culture, and Identities*, ed. Katrin Bromber, Birgit Krawietz, and Joseph Maguire (New York: Routledge, 2013), 144–66. Unfortunately the most comprehensive account of the institution in a Western language remains unpublished: Philippe Rochard, "Le 'Sport antique' des zurkhâne de Téhéran. Formes et significations d'une pratique contemporaine" (PhD diss., Université Aix-Marseille I, 2000). In Persian, the best study is still Husayn Partaw Bayzaʾi Kashani, *Tarikh-i varzish-i bastani-yi Iran: Zurkhanah* (Tehran: Zavvar, 2003 [1958]). In Arabic, see Jamil al-Taʾi, *al-Zurkhanat al-Baghdadiyya* (Baghdad: al-Nahda al-ʿArabiyya Bookstore, 1986).

[2]On Shaʿban Jaʿfari, see Homa Sarshar, *Shaʿban Jaʿfari* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Nashr-i Nab, 2002); and H. E. Chehabi, "Jaʿfari, Šaʿbān," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 14 (New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2008), 366–67.

[3]See Lloyd Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A History of Sufi-Futuwwat in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2010), chap. 6; and Arley Loewen, "The Concept of *Jawānmardī* (Manliness) in Persian Literature and Society" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2001).

[4]The lecture was later published, *sans* the revelations of the Q&A: Sadr al-Din Ilahi, "Nigahi digar bih sunnati kuhan: zurkhanah," *Iranshinasi* 6 (1994): 731–38.

[5]Numerous studies have shown that the concepts of "homosexuality" or "homosexual" are not applicable to a premodern setting in the Islamic world, for which reason I avoid them here. See, e.g., Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[6]For a study of heteronormalization as part of the coming of modernity to Iran, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005).

[7]See H. E. Chehabi and Allen Guttmann, "From Iran to All of Asia: The Origin and Diffusion of Polo," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 19 (2002): 384–400; and H. E. Chehabi, "Wrestling in the *Shāhnāmeh* and Later Persian Epics," in *The Layered Heart: Essays on Persian Poetry*, ed. Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2018), 237–82.

[8]Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa'di of Shiraz, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, *The Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Saʿdi* (Bethesda, Md.: Ibex Publishers, 2008), 39, 37.

[9]See Minoo S. Southgate, "Men, Women, and Boys: Love and Sex in the Works of Saʿdi," *Iranian Studies* 17 (1984): 413–52; J. Hämeen-Anttila, "Saʿdi – a misogynist?," *Studia Orientalia* 64 (1988): 169–75; and Homa Katouzian, *Saʿdi: The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 42–50.

[10]Ehsan Yarshater, "The Theme of Wine-drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry," *Studia Islamica* 13 (1960): 43–53.

[11]Sirus Shamisa, *Shahidbazi dar adabiyat-i farsi* (Tehran: Firdaws, 2002).

[12]Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology of Forbidden Literature* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 1995), 33.

[13]"Hazliyyat," in *Kulliyat-i Saʿdi*, ed. Muhammad-ʿAli Furughi (Tehran: Dunya-yi kitab, n.d.), 15–17. This episode cannot be found in most editions, but whether it was really composed by Sa'di or not is immaterial for the purpose of this study.

[14]Quoted in Paul Sprachman, "*Le beau garçon sans merci*: The Homoerotic Tale in Arabic and Persian," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J.W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 201. The original can be found in Zuka al-Mulk Furughi, ed., *Kulliyat-i Saʿdi* (Tehran: Javidan, 1992), 930–31.

[15]ʿUbayd Zakani, "Risalah-yi Sad Pand," nos. 46 and 56, *Kulliyat-i ʿUbayd-i Zakani* (Tehran: Adab, 1953), 45–46. In the English translation these two admonitions have been rendered less coarse: "Do not withhold your posterior favors from friends and foes when young, so that in old age you can attain the status of a sheikh, a preacher or a man of fame and dignity," and "Do not consider the man who floors his opponent an athlete or a wrestler, but rather the one who places his face on the floor and eagerly lets the other one mount him." See

Obeyd Zakani, "The Treatise of One Hundred Maxims," *The Ethics of the Aristocrats and Other Satirical Works*, translated with an introduction by Hasan Javadi (Piedmont, Calif.: Jahan Books, 1985), 65.

[16]Hamid Hamid, *Zindagi va ruzigar va andishah-yi Puriya-yi Vali* (Tehran: Sahil, 1975). For a study of the legends surrounding him see Angelo Piemontese, "La leggenda del Santo-lottatore Pahlavān Maḥmud Xᵛārezmi 'Puryā-ye Vali,'" *Annali i.u.o. Napoli* 15 (1965): 167–213.

[17]This is in a manuscript titled *Safinah-yi Khushgu*, of which there is a manuscript (no. 2724) in the Sipahsalar Library in Tehran. Quoted in Hamid, *Zindagi*, 27 and 183.

[18]Charles Melville, "Guzargahi's *Majalis al-ʿushshaq*, Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, and Fakhr al-Din ʿIraqi," in *Sufistic Literature in Persia: Tradition and Dimensions*, ed. Azarmi Dukht Safavi (Aligarh: Institute of Persian Research, Aligarh Muslim University, n.d.), 30.

[19]Amir Kamal al-Din Husayn Gazurgahi, *Majalis al-ʿUshshaq (Tazkirah-yi ʿUrafa)* (Tehran: Zarrin, 1996), 199.

[20]Zayn al-Din Mahmud Vasifi, *Badayiʿ al-vaqayiʿ*, ed. Aleksander Boldyrev (Tehran: Intisharat-i Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, 1970), 489–516. For a discussion of this chapter see Angelo Piemontese, "Il capitulo sui *pahlavān* delle *Badāyiʿ al-Waqāyiʿ* di Vāṣefi," *Annali* 16 (1966): 207–20.

[21]The association of wrestling with water is a recurrent one: the most important Turkish oil wrestling tournament has been held at Kırkpınar ("forty springs") near Edirne since 1346, in Varanasi Indian *pahalvan*s exercise on the banks of the Ganges, and in Iran *zūrkhānah*s are often built near public bathhouses. According to Philippe Rochard the desirability of exercising near a source of water has two reasons: the ground on which the athletes exercise or wrestle must be kept moist to avoid injury, and athletes need to take baths to clean up and relax their muscles. Personal communication with the author, 14 January 2018.

[22]In Persian *kushtigiran* means "wrestlers." In modern Turkish and Uzbek *topçak* means "fat," but unless Sultan Husayn Bayqara enjoyed the sight of fat wrestlers, *topçak* in Chaghatai may have meant something like "well-built." Alternatively, Dr. Gulnora Aminova suggests that the word is *töpçak*, which means "stump." *Tupchaq-i kushtigiran* would then mean a wrestler over whom other wrestlers stumble. E-mail message to the author, 28 May 2017.

[23]Vasifi, *Badayiʿ*, 507.

[24]As recounted in Chaghatai by the Timurid vizier and polymath Mir ʿAli-Shir Navaʾi. See "Halat-i Pahlavan Muhammad," in *Alisher Navoiy, Mukammal Asarlar Toʾplami: yigirma tomlik*, vol. 15, ed. K. Iashin et al. (Tashkent: Fan, 1999), 110.

[25]Quoted in Loewen, "The Concept of *Jawānmardī*," 270–71. The original Persian poem can be found in Ahmad Gulchin Maʿani, *Shahr ashub dar shiʿr-i farsi,* 2nd ed. (Tehran: Rivayat, 2001), 45.

[26]Sir John Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1766* (New York: Dover, 1988), 200–201.

[27]For the full text see Partaw Bayzaʾi Kashani, *Tarikh*, 398–427. The title caught on, for there are other texts in the same genre also called *gul-i kushti*.

[28]Reuben Levy, *Persian Literature: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 96.

[29]Gulchin Maʿani, *Shahr ashub*, 16, 45, 63, 151–52, 153, and 221.

[30]Mir ʿAbd al-Karim ibn Mir Ismaʿil Sar Katib Ilchi, *Safarnamah va tarikh-i Afghan va Hind*, quoted in Ghulam-Riza Inṣafpur, *Tarikh va farhang-i zurkhanah va guruhha-yi ijtimaʿi-yi zurkhanah-raw* (Tehran: Markaz-i mardumshinasi-yi Iran, 1974), 95.

[31]*Haji va Rustam har du maʿshuq-i Mir Nijat budand va masnavi-yi gul-i kushti mansub bih anhast*. SOAS Manuscript 46517, which is a collection of Mir Nijat's *masnavī* and two commentaries, f. 3 of the first commentary. Another *Sharh-i Gul-i Kushti*, by the Indo-Persian poet Arzu, was extant until a few decades ago. See Mahdi Raḥimpur, *Bar Khᵛan-i Arzu* (Qom: Majmaʿ-i Zakhaʾir-i Islami, 2012), 23. One wonders whether its disappearance might not be the work of someone bent on safeguarding Arzu's "reputation."

[32]Muhammad Umar, *Urban Culture in Northern India during the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001), 314. The author bases his assertion on a passage in Dargah Quli Khan Salar Jang, *Muraqqaʿ-i Dihli* (Delhi: Shuʿbat-i Urdu-i Dihli Yuniversiti, 1982), 63. It is telling that in the English translation of the latter work, the original Persian phrase *"mardum-i ḥasin*," which Muhammad Umar translates as "handsome boys," is translated as "beautiful women." Dargah Quli Khan, *Muraqaʿ-e-Dehli: The Mughal Capital in Muhammad Shah's Time*, trans. Chander Shekar and Shama Mitra Chenoy (Delhi: Deputy Publication, 1989), 52. I thank Sunil Sharma for bringing Umar's book to my attention.

[33]O.A. Merritt-Hawkes, *Persia: Romance and Reality* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1935), 159. She published this book under a pen name.

[34]ʿAbbas Kamandi, *Varzish va sarguzasht-e varzish-i bastani-yi Kurdistan* (Sanandaj: n.p., 1984), 179–80.

[35]Ahmad Dadashi, *Varzish-i bastani-yi Sari 1300–1370* (Sari: Markaz-i Pazhuhishha-yi Farhangi, 2010), 207–8.

[36]The four Sunni legal schools and Twelver Shiʿa agree on this definition, and differences arise only on the question as to whether the navel itself is included or not.

[37]Partaw Bayzaʾi Kashani, *Tarikh*, 53.

[38]Tik Chand Bahar, *Bahar-i ʿAjam*, vol. 3, ed. Duktur Kazim Dizfuliyan (Tehran: Talayah, 2000), 1695.

[39]From a *Gul-i kushti* quoted in Dadashi, *Varzish-i bastani-yi Sari*, 48.

[40]Gaspard Drouville, *Voyage en Perse* (Paris: Firmin Drouot, 1819), chap. 27 (53).

[41]Partaw Bayzaʾi Kashani, *Tarikh*, 128–31.

[42]Wilfried Fiedler, "Sexuelle Enthaltsamkeit griechischer Athleten und ihre medizinische Begründung," *Stadion* 11 (1985): 137–75.

[43]Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992), 132.

[44]Jürgen Wasim Frembgen and Paul Rollier, *Wrestlers, Pigeon Fanciers, and Kite Flyers: Traditional Sports and Pastimes in Lahore* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

[45]Anthony Shay, personal e-mail communication with the author, 25 July 2018.

[46]Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," *British Journal of Sociology* 38 (1987): 390. For a comparative anthropological study of hair and pilosity see Christian Bromberger, *Trichologiques: une anthropologie des cheveux et des poils* (Paris: Bayard, 2010).

[47]Partaw Bayzaʾi Kashani, *Tarikh*, 53–54.

[48]Mawlana Husayn Vaʿiz Kashifi Sabzivari, "Dar bayan-i kushtigiran," in *Futuvvat-Namah-yi Sultani*, ed. Muhammad-Jaʿfar Mahjub (Tehran: Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, 1971), 306–12. For a discussion of this book see Angelo Piemontese, "Il tratatto sulla *futuvva* (*Fotovvatnāme-ye Solṭāni*) di Ḥosein Vāʿeẓ Kāšefi," *Atti del terzo congress di studi arabi e islamiche* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1967), 557–63.

[49]Jaʿfar Shahri, *Tarikh-i ijtimaʾi-yi Tihran dar qarn-i sizdahum*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Muʾassasah-yi Khadamat-i Farhangi-yi Rasa; Intisharat-i Ismaʿiliyan, 1990), 414.

[50]Ibid., vol. 5, 247. While doing his fieldwork on the *zūrkhānah*, Philippe Rochard was told by older informants that in the Iranian underworld it was customary for gang leaders to sodomize new initiates to bind them to the group. Personal communication, with the author, 14 January 2018.

[51]Fernando García Romero, "Eros A.....s: les métaphores érotico-sportives dans les comédies d'Aristophane," *Nikephoros* 8 (1995): 57–76.

[52]See Reza Arasteh, "The Character, Organization, and Social Role of the *Lutis* (*Javanmardan*) in the Traditional Iranian Society of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Economics and Social History of the Orient* 4 (1961): 47–52; and W.M. Floor, "The Lutis – A Social Phenomenon in Qajar Persia," *Die Welt des Islams* 13 (1971): 103–20.

[53]See H. E. Chehabi, "The Juggernaut of Globalization: Sport and Modernization in Iran," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 19 (2002): 275–94.

[54]Afshin Marashi, "The Nation's Poet: Ferdowsi and the Iranian National Imagination," in *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009), 93–112 and 286–90.

[55]For a critical engagement with the notion of Qajar decadence see Alessadro Bausani, "The Qajar Period: An Epoch of Decadence?," in *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change 1800–1925*, ed. Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 1992), 255–60.

[56]Jacob Eduard Polak, *Persien, das Land und seine Bewohner* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olm, 1976), 189.

[57]Muhammad Hashim Asaf, Rustam al-Hukamaʾ, *Rustam al-tavarikh*, ed. Muhammad Mushiri (Tehran: Chap-i Taban, 1969), 103. In a more recent edition (Tehran: Firdaws, 2000), this passage is censored (91).

[58]See Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. chaps. 4 and 5. For a discussion of same-sex practices before that era see Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2008), 279–350.

[59]Hasan Gushah, "Varzish-i bastani dar Iran," *Payam-i Naw* 3/6 (Farvardin 1326/March 1947): 47–55.

[60]This taboo survived into the 21st century. When I alluded to same-sex practices in a paper I presented under the title "The *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* in Iranian sports" at a conference, the editor of a diasporic Persian-language journal who wanted to publish a translation of my presentation preferred cutting out the

relevant sentences. My article was published as Hushang Shihabi, "Ruyaruʾi-yi sunnat va mudirnitah dar tarbiyat-i badani-yi Iran," *Iran Namah* 24 (2008): 81–103.

[61]This novel is discussed in Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 161.

[62]On Shahri see Abbas Milani, "Tehran & Modernity: Jaʿfar Shahri's Personal Odyssey," in his *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2000), 83–91.

[63]Jaʿfar Shahri, *Shikar-i talkh* (Tehran: Ruz, 1968), 207–8.

[64]Masʿud Nuqrahkar, *Bachchahha-yi aʾmaq* (Cologne: Furugh, 2013), 225. While interviewing a top football player of the 1970s for my article on Iranian football, he justified his disdain for wrestling by pointing out that in the hold of *sagak*, when one man clamps his legs around his opponent, his private parts come into contact with the other man's body, some wrestlers using this opportunity to rub against their opponent for sexual pleasure.

[65]Nuqrahkar, *Bachchahha-yi aʿmaq*, 455.

[66]Ibid., 225.

[67]Rochard, "Le 'Sport antique' des zurkhâne de Téhéran," 71–72.

[68]The director of this film was Samuel Khachikian and its screenplay was by Manuchihr Kay-Maram, a former member of the communist Tudeh party. It won a prize at the Tashkent Film Festival and has been popular in the Caucasus and in Central Asia to this day. It can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=En_jhqOow3w, accessed 3 December 2017.

[69]Personal interview with the author, June 1997, Los Angeles. For details, see Rochard, "Le 'Sport antique' des zurkhâne de Téhéran," 81–83.

[70]Mansour Bahrami and Jean Issartel, *The Court Jester: My Story* (Milton Keynes: Tennis Mania Trust, in association with AuthorHouse, 2009).

[71]H.E. Chehabi, "A Political History of Football in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 35 (2002): 389–93.

[72]Husayn Shahhusayni, *Haftad sal paydari*, vol. 1, *1320–1360* (Tehran: Chapakhsh, 2015), 409.

[73]This prohibition is still enforced and constitutes one of the most controversial issues in Iran's culture wars. See Babak Fozooni, "Iranian Women and Football," *Cultural Studies* 22 (2008): 114–33.

[74]In a joke circulating at the time, a provincial clerical leader was quoted to have suggested separate TV channels for men and women as a solution to the problem.

[75]See Mikiya Koyagi, "Moulding Future Soldiers and Mothers of the Iranian Nation: Gender and Physical Education under Reza Shah, 1921–41," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (2009): 1668–96.

[76]This is thematized in Jafar Panahi's film *Offside* (2006), in which some young Iranian women dress up as men to attend a football match. It won awards outside Iran but was not screened inside the country.

[77]Jaleh Tabari, "Areas of Iranian Women's Voice and Influence," in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hoogland (London: Routledge, 2011), 93–95.

[78]Jamal al-Din Akrami, *Guy va chawgan: sarguzasht-i varzish dar Iran* (Tehran: Kanun-i parvarish-i fikri-yi kudakan va nawjavanan, 2016), 38.

[79]On the changing aesthetics of the male body in *zūrkhānah* sports, see Philippe Rochard, "Les représentations du «beau geste» dans le sport traditionnel iranien," in *Iran: Questions et connaissances*, vol. 3, ed. Bernard Hourcade (Paris: Peeters, 2003), 161–70.

[80]Author's telephone interview with the director, Muhammad Riza Haji Ghulami, 4 November 2018. The film can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_2057992371&feature=iv&src_vid=mOmY2ljQ_Ws&v=0WiIULycBcE, accessed on 4 November 2018.

[81]The rowdy and impolite behavior of male spectators is the official reason women are not allowed to attend men's sports events. Women retort that they should not pay the price for men's disinclination to behave themselves.

[82]Technical manuals have adopted this dress code as well. Compare Habib Allah Bulur, *Fann va band-i kushti* (Tehran: Madrasah-yi ʿAli-yi Varzish, 1976) and Abu al-Qasim Rayigan Tafrishi, *Amuzish-i kushti-yi pahlavani* (Tehran: Safir Ardahal, 2001).

[83]Krawietz, "Martial Arts Iranian Style," 156.

[84]Philippe Rochard and Denis Jallat, "*Zurkhaneh*, Sufism, *Fotovvat/Javanmardi* and Modernity: Considerations about Historical Interpretations of a Traditional Athletic Institution," in *Javanmardi: The Ethics and Practice of Persianate Perfection*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: The Gingko Library, 2018), 244.

[85]On the question of whether it is appropriate to consider *zūrkhānah* exercises as "martial arts" or not see ibid., 239–42.

[86]Lloyd Ridgeon, "The Zūrkhāna between Tradition and Change," *Iran* 64 (2007): 243–65.

[87]Interview with Muhsin Mihr'alizadah, http://varzeshzanan.blogfa.com/category/3, accessed 2 December 2017.

[88]Hadis ʿIlmi, "Tablu-yi vurud mamnu' dar gawd-i zurkhanah," *Iʿtimad*, 24 Tir 1387 [14 July 2008], 16. At http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=1658462, accessed 2 December 2017. For a short clip showing a mixed group of athletes doing *zūrkhānah* exercises in Uganda, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eQW-PnXKg0, accessed 31 October 2018.

[89]ʿIlmi, "Tablu-yi vurud mamnuʿ dar gawd-i zurkhanah."

[90]See untitled article by Rayihah Muzaffari at http://varzeshzanan.blogfa.com/category/3, accessed 2 December 2017.

[91]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0ZGnpv0k5I, accessed 2 December 2017.

[92]http://www.anahitarazmi.de/House-of-Strength. *Nomen omen est*, for Anahita is the name of an Iranian goddess, while Razmi means "martial."

[93]But note that the rules of the shariʿa concerning *ʿawrah* are not the only ones that are relevant to an actual social situation; propriety is based on other criteria as well. In Marion H. Katz's words, "Is it *haram* to look at this body part" and "Is it decent to display this body part" are not identical questions. Personal e-mail communication with the author, 5 November 2018.

[94]http://www.payvand.com/news/11/jul/1055.html, accessed on 28 May 2017.

[95]This point is forcefully made in Philippe Rochard, "The Identities of the Iranian *Zūrkhānah*," *Iranian Studies* 35 (2002): 313–40.

[96]For a general study see Allen Guttmann, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[97]Umar, *Urban Culture in Northern India*, 314. The original poem is "Masnavi dar hajv-i tifl-i za'i'-i rozgar-i lakribaz," in Mirza Rafiʿ Sauda, *Kulliyat-i Sauda* (Lucknow: Naval Kishor, 1932), 386–88.

[98]Badruddin Khan, "Action on the Sidelines: Kushti," *Sex, Longing & Not Belonging: A Gay Muslim's Quest for Love and Meaning* (Oakland, Calif. and Bangkok: Floating Lotus Books, 1997), 51–61.

[99]Magnus Hirschfeld, *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* (1904, Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1991), 100–102. The author (1868–1935) was a major pioneer of the modern movement for homosexual rights.

[100]See Carol Turkington, *No Hold Barred: The Strange Life of John E. du Pont* (New York: Turner Publishing Company, 1996).

[101]More recent scholarship has revealed that even an exclusively "spiritual" interpretation glosses over obvious textual evidence. See Matthew Thomas Miller, "Embodying the Sufi Beloved: (Homo)eroticism, Embodiment, and the Construction of Desire in the Hagiographic Tradition of ʿErâqi," *Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures* 21 (2018): 1–27.