

“Veiled with a Special Veil”:
Ascetic Reconfigurations of Identity in
‘Aṭṭār’s *Memorial* of Rābi‘a of Basra

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AT THE BEGINNING OF his entry on Rābi‘a of Basra (Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīya, d. 801 CE), Faridu d-Dīn ‘Attār, the author of the hagiographical collection *Memorial of the Friends of God*, launches a forceful defense of his choice to include a woman in the ranks of Sufi saints. To forestall any potential objections, he presents an array of evidence suggesting that on “the path of the Lord Most High” there is no room for gender-based discrimination. Women, ‘Attar points out, were recognized as teachers and exemplars of true faith in the early days of Islam and in its sacred history.¹ Putting a distinctively Sufi spin on the conception of *tawḥīd* (a term meaning both God’s uniqueness and human recognition of it), he insists that “affirmation of unity” abolishes all conventional divisions.² Finally, ‘Attar contends that Rābi‘a’s accomplishments exceeded those of her contemporaries, and her spiritual authority was recognized by the great Sufi masters of her time. Thus, he insists that his inclusion of this figure in the *Memorial* is not only permissible but particularly fitting. “Veiled with a special veil, veiled with the veil of sincerity, burned up in love and longing,” Rābi‘a is a paradigmatic devotee of God and, thus, a model Sufi and Muslim.³

By choosing to present Rābi‘a as a paradigm of sanctity—and in particular as a *contested* paradigm—‘Attar engages several important issues in the construction of religious identity in Sufism and the broader tradition of Islam. The issue of gender is the most immediately visible of these: both in his opening apology and throughout his account the

NOTE: It is acceptable to drop diacritics in Arabic transliteration after the first use.

author draws attention to the fact of Rabi'a's womanhood in ways that both evoke and challenge the dominant cultural perceptions of women. This issue in its turn throws into sharp relief several other ritualistic and spiritual concerns addressed in 'Attar's text, such as the question of a proper relationship with God, the possibilities and methods of self-transformation, and understanding of a truly pious life.⁵ As I will demonstrate in my discussion, 'Attar's portrayal of this female saint dramatizes the insufficiency of conventional conceptions of piety and religious standing and articulates their alternatives. I also suggest that this countercultural dimension of Rabi'a's image is closely linked to her identity as an ascetic. In this analysis I draw on contemporary revisionary theories of asceticism that emphasize its positive nature and its important function as a system of sociocultural formation. In this way, my discussion also aims to offer a correction for what I perceive to be a problematic historiographical construction in studies of early Sufism. It is to this question that I now turn, before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of Rabi'a's portrait.

Approaching Asceticism

Unlike those hypothetical reluctant readers 'Attar is trying to convince of Rabi'a's significance, contemporary scholars of Islamic mysticism require no such special persuasion. For historians of Islam interested in gender issues, Rabi'a's story serves as a privileged reference in their discussions of women in Islam and of what they regard as Sufism's more egalitarian perspective.⁶ Even if (as some of these interpreters suggest) the "Rabi'a" we encounter in the *Memorial* should be regarded as a textual construct rather than an actual "historical woman," the way in which she is portrayed is still—or, even, especially—revealing of Sufi views.⁷ General accounts of the history of Sufism likewise invariably feature Rabi'a among important representatives of this tradition. Moreover, she is typically positioned as a pivotal figure in Sufism's transformation from its more primitive ascetic form into a mature mystical tradition. For instance, a distinguished interpreter of Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel, describes Rabi'a as "the person who introduced the element of selfless love into the austere teachings of ascetics and gave Sufism the

hue of true mysticism.”⁸ In her trailblazing study of Rabi‘a, Margaret Smith likewise identifies her as the earliest proponent of Islamic love mysticism. Accordingly, she contrasts her with the Sufi ascetics whose piety was motivated by their fear of God.⁹ Many other classic overviews of early Sufi history similarly plot it as a progression from asceticism to mysticism, with Rabi‘a’s figure marking the divide.¹⁰

An interesting contrast to this assessment of Rabi‘a is offered by Christopher Melchert whose recent article analyzes Sufism’s transition from asceticism to mysticism, which he believes took place around the middle of the ninth century CE.¹¹ In order to document this process, Melchert offers a meticulous survey of early Sufi figures with the aim of finding evidence of their “ascetical” or “mystical” perspectives. Unsurprisingly, his survey features Rabi‘a of Basra; what is surprising, however, is his conclusion regarding an appropriate classificatory rubric for this figure. As Melchert states, “Rabi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah has been cited as inventor of a new love mysticism. On sober examination, though, her sayings plainly express just the common, ascetical concern for single-minded devotion to God.”¹²

Although Melchert’s evaluation of Rabi‘a explicitly contradicts those of other scholars, his interpretation of the material is structured by the same conceptual dichotomy in which “asceticism” and “mysticism” denote two opposing religious perspectives. The former is defined by these interpreters as pessimistic, characterized by a negative valuation of the world and human nature, and emphasizing fear in one’s relationship with God. By contrast, the “mystical” perspective is seen as optimistic, defined by positive valuation of the world, and by the notion of human-divine closeness.¹³

I would like to suggest that this interpretive dichotomy is unhelpfully reductive because it does not do justice to the complexity of Rabi‘a’s figure and her position vis-à-vis her fellow early Sufis. I also suggest that this approach points to a broader methodological problem—namely the interpreters’ reliance on outdated negative conceptions of asceticism. Although the understanding of asceticism described above has a long history in scholarly tradition, in the past three decades studies of asceticism have moved considerably beyond such a simplistic vision.¹⁴ In their varied ways, contemporary interpreters of asceticism highlight

its positive dimension and its important function as a means of social, ethical, and cultural formation.¹⁵ In particular, this formative function of asceticism is identified with its ability to offer alternatives to conventional models of identity, relational patterns, and worldviews. To use a definition offered by the historian of religion Richard Valantasis, asceticism can be seen as “performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”¹⁶ Viewed from the perspective of this countercultural orientation of asceticism, its negative aspects of renunciation and withdrawal become part of a broader and inherently constructive process of self-transformation in which conventional markers of identity are rejected in order to allow a new identity to emerge.

So far, these theoretical advances in the study of asceticism have had little or no impact on interpretations of Islamic material.¹⁷ Yet, as I hope to demonstrate below, this understanding of asceticism offers a fruitful framework for an analysis of Rabi‘a’s figure. For one thing, it allows for a better appreciation of those aspects of her image that otherwise appear to be overly negative or contradictory.¹⁸ This framework also helps illuminate an interesting dynamic defining Rabi‘a’s relations with her fellow early Sufis—a dynamic which is easily obscured by the interpretive convention of placing Rabi‘a the “mystic” in opposition to the “ascetic” Sufis. I suggest in my analysis that the challenge posed by Rabi‘a to her pious friends is to become not less but, rather, more radically ascetic, and that it is the saint’s ascetic eminence that makes her a paradigmatic mystical “lover.” Let us now take a closer look at ways in which ‘Attar presents Rabi‘a in his text.

Rabi‘a the Ascetic

As one quickly discovers, many depictions of the saint in the *Memorial* can hardly be regarded as conventionally inspiring or appealing. An anecdote appearing early in the account vividly conveys a visitor’s shocked reaction to Rabi‘a’s condition:

I saw she had a broken pitcher that she used for ablutions and drinking water. Her reed mat was old and worn, and she had a

brick to rest her head on. This sight hurt me to the core, and I said, “I have wealthy friends. If you permit, I’ll ask them for something for you.”¹⁹

What makes this episode particularly poignant is that the visitor in question is identified as Mālik ibn Dīnār, one of Basra’s distinguished ascetics.²⁰ If such a stern renunciant finds Rabi‘a’s lifestyle disturbing, it must be very austere indeed! Of course, the saint immediately rejects this well-meant offer, sternly rebuking Malik for making it, just as she does with other offers of financial assistance.²¹

Other anecdotes in the *Memorial* likewise highlight this austere quality of Rabi‘a’s life; in fact, ‘Attar’s depiction references many of the attitudes and practices traditionally associated with the ascetic lifestyle.²² Several stories besides Malik ibn Dinar’s account graphically illustrate the saint’s lack of concern for physical comfort, occasionally crossing over into outright distrust and condemnation of material goods.²³ Another standard ascetic “performance,” fasting, likewise comes into play regularly throughout the *Memorial*, in the form of both abstinence from “unlawful” foods and prolonged fasting marathons that leave Rabi‘a faint with hunger.²⁴ Night vigils in particular are represented as the saint’s ascetic forte (a trait she shares with many other early Sufi women).²⁵ In fact, it is one such night-long prayer session that launches Rabi‘a’s career as a full-time mystic, compelling her awestruck master to free his uncanny slavegirl.²⁶ The rest of the account likewise highlights the saint’s propensity for nighttime prayers, as well as her intensive daytime prayer regimen. Finally, the attitude and practice of withdrawal from “the world” defines Rabi‘a’s lifestyle on several levels. Socially, it manifests itself as a rejection of conventional social relations such as marriage—an issue that will be addressed in more detail below. More literally, it takes the form of physical withdrawal, with Rabi‘a retiring to her “meditation cell” or, as related in the anecdote below, refusing to leave her room even in order to look at nature’s beauty:

It is related that in the springtime she entered the house and did not come out. Her serving girl said, “O mistress, come outside and see the effects of the creation!”

She said, “You come in for once and see the creator! Witnessing the creator has preoccupied me from gazing on the creation.”²⁷

In all of these respects, ‘Attar’s Rabi‘a is not particularly different from her ascetic male colleagues; in this, I would agree with Melchert’s verdict. It seems to me, however, that to interpret these behaviors and attitudes as an expression of “typical” ascetic pessimism, fear of God, and world-rejecting tendencies would be to drastically oversimplify the matter. Instead, Rabi‘a’s attitudes and behaviors can be more fruitfully approached from the perspective of the transformational “ascetical dynamic” described by Valantasis. As he explains, what marks a particular practice or perspective as ascetic is the presence of an “intention to create an alternative identity within a larger social or religious setting.”²⁸ Such a refashioning of the self consists of two simultaneous and interdependent movements: a renunciation of the old, existent identity (often coinciding with the normative cultural model) and a movement toward construction of a new one. Relationships that provide a social location and support for these identities must be restructured accordingly. Finally, ascetic refashioning of identity involves a conscious development of an “alternative symbolic reality”—a particular way of understanding the world that is opposed to the culturally dominant perspective.²⁹

When seen within a larger sociocultural context, Rabi‘a’s ascetic lifestyle clearly displays this countercultural orientation. Her poverty and rejection of material comforts serve as an antithesis to the “cultivated discipline of the externals of living,” and her withdrawal and her unequivocal refusal of positions of religious and social eminence as a critique of the misplaced preoccupation with worldly reputation and power.³⁰ In this regard, ‘Attar’s portrayal of Rabi‘a simultaneously articulates the insufficiency of the conventional model of identity and offers an alternative, metaphorized in the *Memorial* as the attainment of absolute intimacy (*uns*) with God—or, paradoxically (as seen from the perspective of the ordinary self) as one’s “extinction” and loss of all attainments.³¹

This new conception of the self also presupposes different relational patterns and existential orientation. These are defined, on the one hand, by a complete “preoccupation” with Rabi‘a’s divine Friend, and, on the other, by her freedom from worldly cares and “creatures.”³² It is this

dual movement—negative, away from the normative configurations of desires, interests, and relations, and positive, towards a new one—that is enacted in many episodes of the *Memorial*. As the exchange quoted above suggests, Rabi‘a’s turning away from the “effects of the creation” is simultaneously turning to its creator. Another anecdote expresses this dynamic even more explicitly. Relating a conversation with her divine Companion in which the latter warns his friend that a desire for “the bliss of the world” and a desire for him “cannot be joined in one heart,” Rabi‘a explains:

When I heard this address, I so detached my heart from the world . . . that for thirty years now I have performed each prayer as though it were my last. . . . I made myself so independent of creatures, so cut off, that when day broke, for fear that creatures would preoccupy me, I prayed, “O Lord, so preoccupy me with yourself that no one will preoccupy me from you.”³³

Here, “preoccupation with the Lord” and “preoccupation with creatures” define the two poles of the ascetic contest of the selves—one rejected and one sought after—marking the trajectory of a desired transformation. Detachment from the world and “independence of creatures” is what allows for the saint’s new “sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires” to come to the fore.³⁴ Accordingly, Rabi‘a’s ascetic attitudes and practices—withdrawal, sexual and physical renunciation, refusal of positions and marks of social prominence—can be seen as “performances” that enact her new, alternative identity as a “friend of God.” Contrary to the negative conceptions of asceticism reflected in the scholarly analyses discussed above, these practices—however negative they may appear—are not indicative of “pessimism” and a negative valuation of human nature. Rather, as Maria Dakake notes in her discussion of Rabi‘a and her fellow female Sufis, their social withdrawal, solitude, and other classical ascetic practices have a distinctly positive tenor: “It is not a solitude of suffering introversion that *uns* engenders; rather the joyful intimacy with the Beloved makes all other company superfluous and spiritually distracting.”³⁵

Although Dakake’s analysis is mostly focused on aspects of female Islamic mysticism that fall beyond the scope of this essay, it offers

valuable support for my critique of the interpretive dichotomy between “asceticism” and “mysticism.” As she concludes in her discussion of several hagiographical collections, the sayings and actions of early Sufi women do not display any perceptible tension or opposition between ascetic practices and the ecstatic ways of “love” mysticism—instead, here “love mysticism and an ascetic withdrawal from the world and society are seamlessly combined.”³⁶ Not only does these women’s asceticism defy an understanding of an ascetic perspective as pessimistic, fearful, and cold, it is a necessary corollary to their intimate relationship with the divine Beloved.³⁷ In other words, it is Rabi’a’s radical asceticism, not her departure from it, that makes her a great “lover” of God.

Rabi’a and Her Ascetic Friends and Rivals

Perhaps nowhere does this radically ascetic dimension of Rabi’a’s figure manifest itself as visibly as in her criticism of conventional delineations of piety, including certain practices that can be classified as “ascetic.” Two anecdotes appearing early in the text stage a dramatic confrontation between Rabi’a and Ibrahim Adham (Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, d. 770 CE), a legendary Sufi ascetic.³⁸ When we are introduced to Ibrahim he is about to complete a rather astonishing act of piety. Not only has he performed the *hajj*—a fairly demanding journey in itself—but also, ascetic virtuoso that he is, he adds a twist which turns his pilgrimage into a true test of endurance. ‘Attar reports: “He said, ‘Others have crossed this desert with their feet. I will cross it with my eyes!’ He would perform two *rak’as* [a unit or cycle of formal Islamic prayer] and take one step”—a method of travel that would require Ibrahim to spend fourteen years reaching Mecca.³⁹ Unfortunately, the climactic moment of arrival at his destination is rendered patently anticlimactic by the inexplicable absence of the Ka’ba from its place. The hapless pilgrim throws a jealous fit upon being told that it has gone to welcome a “weak woman,” Rabi’a. Of course, what makes the situation even more dramatic is that by then we already have learned how unimpressed Rabi’a herself was with this honor. As the preceding anecdote relates, the saint refuses even to look at the Ka’ba. The power and beauty of the House, she insists, are meaningless without the presence of the Lord himself—who, as Rabi’a tells a

disgruntled Ibrahim, is reached not by painstaking ritual performance but by “longing.”⁴⁰

Another famous Sufi ascetic, Sufyān Thawrī (Sufyān al-Tawri, d. 778 CE), likewise becomes a target of Rabi‘a’s not-so-gentle criticism.⁴¹ A humorous account of a call Sufyan and his friends paid to Rabi‘a portrays the visitors as alternating between an “awed” silence and utterances of pious platitudes which Rabi‘a immediately turns against them. The hardest blow comes when Sufyan finally confesses his insolvency as a spiritual director and begs his host to offer her advice. “You are a good man,” Rabi‘a’s response goes, “but isn’t it the case that you love this world?”⁴² Given the historical Sufyan al-Tawri’s reputation as a strict advocate of withdrawal from the world, one can easily imagine his reaction to such a verdict. ‘Attar’s “Sufyan” displays something of this displeased surprise by pressing Rabi‘a for an explanation.⁴³ Rabi‘a’s response, again, is at first glance quite surprising. Her visitor’s downfall, she claims, is his love of reciting the *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet)—a perfectly respectable Islamic pious practice. What her response, however, further indicates is that Sufyan’s devotion to “traditions” ensues from his attachment to his own reputation—“that this too is a sort of pomp.”⁴⁴ Thus, even one’s commitment to pious practices can be potentially problematic if it perpetuates conventional self-images and concerns.

The character who provides the most effective foil for Rabi‘a’s ascetic perspective is her faithful friend and rival, the illustrious Hasan of Basra (Ḥasan al-Basrī, d. 728 CE) who makes several dramatic guest appearances in the text.⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, it is precisely these two Basran figures who are traditionally featured in scholarly accounts as the epitomes of the opposing “ascetic” and “mystical” trends in Sufism. However, the depiction of Rabi‘a in the *Memorial* subverts any such straightforward opposition. If anything, she is even more uncompromising than Hasan in her ascetic attitudes and practice: after all, she is the one who reprimands him for his negligence in fasting or draws his attention to the problems of the married state.⁴⁶ Her most severe criticism, however, is often reserved precisely for those attitudes and actions of Hasan that figure prominently in his reputation as a great ascetic. Hasan’s (in)famous “weeping” in particular becomes the target of Rabi‘a’s caustic remarks. While the renunciant himself and his disciples see this

habitual lament as an expression of his radically otherworldly stance, and scholarly interpreters point to it as a quintessential mark of his asceticism, Rabi'a is clearly suspicious of his attitude.⁴⁷ As she suggests in her response to the admirers of Hasan's theatrics, his "anguish and weeping and lamentation" are signs not of a single-minded preoccupation with God, but of neglect in his remembrance of "the Real."⁴⁸

Another episode adds an interesting gloss to this critique by hinting at the true source of such "weeping." One day, the story goes, Rabi'a is halted on her walk by water coming down from a roof which upon closer examination turns out to be a stream of Hasan's tears. Unmoved by this impressive spectacle, the saint points out to Hasan that all this weeping is symptomatic of his self-preoccupation rather than of his sincere compunction or self-renunciation—that it comes "from the foolish whims of the self."⁴⁹ Of course, in the next episode Hasan obligingly endorses this interpretation by challenging his friend to a public contest of their miraculous abilities which earns him yet another reprimand for his propensity for ego-inflation.⁵⁰ Yet another anecdote included later in the text serves as an illuminating counterpart to this exchange. In it, Rabi'a receives a visitor (identified as a "religious dignitary of Basra") who—probably wishing to impress his hostess—begins "condemning the world." Rabi'a's response?—"You love the world dearly. If you didn't, you wouldn't remember it so much. The buyer's the one who disparages the goods. Were you free of the world, you'd not remember it for good or ill."⁵¹

Rabi'a's arguments with her ascetic friends traditionally have been taken as evidence of her departure from the earlier, ascetic form of Sufism. 'Attar's account does indeed convey a sense of tension and even, sometimes, open rivalry between Rabi'a and Hasan and other famous early Sufi ascetics; in this, existing scholarly interpretations are undoubtedly correct. However, I believe that instead of being plotted along a mysticism/asceticism divide, this disagreement can be more helpfully understood within the context of their shared ascetic identity. What gets consistently challenged in these stories is not asceticism per se but outward or superficial manifestations of asceticism. As the portrayals of Hasan, Sufyan, and Ibrahim make clear, traditional ascetic attitudes and

acts can easily become associated with—and reinforce—conventional configurations of identity. In such a case, however paradoxical it may appear, overturning traditional categories of ascetic piety itself becomes an ultimate ascetic act.⁵²

“A Wise Weak Woman”: Reconfigurations of Gender and Religious Identity in the *Memorial*

The final aspect of the reconfiguration of religious identity in the *Memorial* that I am going to discuss is more specifically related to Rabi'a's gender. It probably is here that the countercultural dimension of her image is most apparent. As I suggested earlier, 'Attar's account intentionally engages—and subverts—a number of normative discourses and conceptions regarding women.⁵³ One such stereotype that is repeatedly targeted in the *Memorial* is that of women's "weakness" and their intellectual and spiritual deficiency. As scholars of women in Islam observe, this condemnatory stance and rhetoric has a long history in the Islamic literary tradition.⁵⁴ Denunciations of women's spiritual abilities can already be found in some of the *hadiths*, including the infamous report of the gender distribution of Hell's inhabitants, or one suggesting that "women are to be described as wanting in intelligence and religion, and the explanation of their lack of religion is their neglect of prayer and fasting due to pride."⁵⁵ Subsequent legal and devotional writings as well as Sufi treatises adopted and creatively elaborated this theme. In Sufi literature, it figures most prominently in the context of deliberations on the disadvantages of the married state and the ensuing desirability of celibacy.⁵⁶

'Attar's *Memorial* both evidences this normative perspective and challenges it in direct and subtle ways. One of the episodes describes a confrontation between Rabi'a and a group of her male visitors. The men goad Rabi'a (or, as 'Attar describes it diplomatically, "put her to the test") by claiming that women cannot claim any of the spiritual achievements of male believers: "All the virtues have been dispersed among men. The crown of nobility has been placed upon the heads of men, and the belt of magnanimity has been tied around their waists. Prophecy has never descended upon any woman. What can you boast of?"⁵⁷ Rabi'a's response

here reveals the same dynamic that marks her arguments with her ascetic friends. Instead of trying to place herself on the same level with her opponents, she radically overturns their proposed criteria. “Everything you said is true,” she says; “but egoism, egotism, self-worship, and ‘I am your highest Lord’ have not welled up in any woman.” Even the greatest spiritual attainments lose their value if they are used to boost one’s reputation and self-image—if, paraphrasing Rabi’a’s criticism of Hasan, they are used as a currency for trading in the “market of this world.” The freedom from self-celebratory and egotistic inclinations which, as the saint claims here in the story, is characteristic of her gender can be more valuable than even “prophecy” or other customary markings of religious standing. In this way, Rabi’a’s statement simultaneously challenges both a conventional definition of religious accomplishment and the traditional valuation of male over female.⁵⁸

Other anecdotes in the collection likewise present a radical reversal of established gender valuations. In an explicit contrast to the *hadith* quoted above, ‘Attar’s account emphasizes Rabi’a’s steadfastness in prayer, fasting, and other aspects of her rigorous ascetic regimen. It also calls attention to the saint’s intelligence and spiritual powers. In fact, as Rabi’a’s interactions with her fellow Sufis demonstrate, in all of these respects she clearly surpasses her male colleagues—a surprising subversion of the standard gender hierarchy summed up in a (male) character’s shocked exclamation: “Amazing! An ignorant man and a wise weak woman!”⁵⁹ This ironic reappropriation of the cultural stereotype is also enacted in other references to Rabi’a as a “weak woman” which typically occur in situations that belie such a characterization.⁶⁰

Besides presenting an alternative vision of the religious capabilities of women, these stories also articulate a reconfiguration of normative gender roles and patterns of relationships. Importantly, Rabi’a is depicted in the text not only as a mystical-ascetic prodigy to be marveled at, but also as a recognized spiritual teacher whose presence and advice are eagerly sought by her contemporaries. Many of the anecdotes in the *Memorial* revolve around visits paid to Rabi’a by various “important people” and their requests for her to elucidate some difficult religious question or an aspect of the “path.”⁶¹ The stories of her confrontations with Hasan, Sufyan, and other “religious dignitaries” that I discussed above likewise

make for effective teaching situations confirming Rabi'a's superiority. Finally, Rabi'a's status as a spiritual leader is affirmed directly by 'Attar's statement in his opening apology that "she was esteemed by the great people of the age and was a decisive proof for those who lived in her time."⁶² He further offers a specific illustration, explaining that Hasan of Basra would never hold a meeting without Rabi'a present, presumably because no other person in the audience could match her powers of comprehension and, even more importantly, of inspiration.⁶³

Several other episodes also featuring Hasan of Basra point to yet another aspect of this relational repatterning articulated in the text. In one of them, Hasan provides the following account of his encounter with Rabi'a:

I was with Rābi'a for one full day and night. We discussed the way and the truth [*tariqat va haqiqat*] in such a way that the thought "I am a man" never crossed my mind, nor did "I am a woman" ever cross hers. In the end when I arose, I considered myself a pauper and her a devotee.⁶⁴

In addition to furnishing yet another example of the reversal of conventional gender hierarchies, this story also explicitly rejects a popular cultural notion that interactions between men and women are necessarily defined in sexual terms. 'Attar's narrative simultaneously acknowledges this normative perspective (Hasan's remark can be read as either surprised or as defensive; at any rate he thinks this situation deserves a comment) and insists on its insufficiency. When it comes to the matters of "the way and the truth," the primary criterion determining one's relational position is spiritual attainment, not gender. This way, the text disrupts the normative conflation between one's gendered identity and religious standing and encourages one to envision an alternative religious identity, constructed according to a different rubric and presupposing different relational arrangements.

A perfect example of this restructuring of social relations offered in the text is Rabi'a's choice of celibacy. One of the most typical ascetic practices, celibacy had an important place in Sufism without, however, ever acquiring the status of a religious requirement. Since in Islam—unlike in Christianity—the practice of sexual renunciation lacked

scriptural authorization, the principal encouragement toward the celibate mode of life stemmed from practical considerations.⁶⁵ Discussions of this practice in the Sufi sources for the most part focus on the problem of the responsibilities incumbent on a *paterfamilias* or on the negative effects of sexual desire. As such, they offer an exclusively male viewpoint on the significance of celibacy as well as, not infrequently, a largely theoretical one.⁶⁶

In this regard, ‘Attar’s account is especially interesting since it suggests some possible rationales and implications of this choice for a female practitioner.⁶⁷ Two episodes in the *Memorial* specifically deal with Rabi’a’s rejection of marriage, voicing the saint’s alleged response to her companions’ inquiries. When questioned as to why she does not want to take a husband, Rabi’a claims that she has more imperative concerns to be “dismayed with”—concerns that leave the saint unable to take upon herself numerous marriage-related cares.⁶⁸ Another episode presents a dialogue between Rabi’a and her usual interlocutor, Hasan. Responding to her friend’s proposal of marriage, Rabi’a states: “The marriage knot can only tie one who exists. Where is existence here? I am not my own—I am His and under His command.”⁶⁹

When taken literally, this statement might suggest Rabi’a’s complete negation of her autonomy. However, approaching it as an expression of the “ascetical dynamic” discussed above allows for a more positive reading. The self that is defined as non-existent is the rejected ordinary self with its configuration of desires and concerns that is opposed to the sought-after new identity as a true “lover” of God.⁷⁰ As Rabi’a’s responses indicate, her categorical rejection of marriage is motivated by her unwillingness to let this new identity be suppressed by any conventional social arrangements. A married woman, she suggests, must be preoccupied with service to her husband and other such cares, whereas her own concern is solely for her Friend.⁷¹

The implications of Rabi’a’s choice of celibacy become even more obvious—and also more complex—when we consider certain practical details of Rabi’a’s lifestyle. Throughout the *Memorial* Rabi’a is depicted as enjoying complete freedom of movement and action: she travels to Mecca frequently (even if only to scoff at the poor Ka’ba); she ventures out into the wilderness or else retires to her meditation cell whenever she

pleases; she roams the city streets of Basra, engaging at will in conversations with people. Moreover, she does not think twice about receiving visitors at her house (according to the text, predominantly men) or—as suggested by the story of Hasan related above—spending her nights in their company. For married Muslim women bound to obedience to their husbands, household duties, and an obligation to uphold their family honor such actions would have been entirely unthinkable or condemnable. In Rabi'a's case, however, they only serve to enhance her reputation. Thus, Rabi'a's lifestyle as a celibate ascetic implies a radical redefinition of her social identity, according her the possibility of autonomy otherwise impossible for women in her culture.⁷²

As I have argued throughout this essay, 'Attar's portrayal of Rabi'a challenges the dominant cultural perspective on many levels. His image of Rabi'a the celibate, the poor recluse, and the venerable teacher rejects or redefines conventional conceptions of piety, religious accomplishments, and women's spiritual standing. One final example with which I will conclude this discussion effectively brings all of these issues together since it invokes a standard signifier of Islamic female piety—the veil.

Historians of Islam suggest that by Rabi'a's time (the second century of the Islamic era) veiling had already been established as customary for a respectable Muslim woman.⁷³ Rabi'a herself, as a freed woman, would be entitled—and expected—to conform to this dress code. 'Attar's *Memorial* allows us to circumstantially infer that this, indeed, was the case, by offering a humorous account of the attempted theft of Rabi'a's *chadur*. Having broken into the saint's cell while she, exhausted from her vigil, was asleep, the hapless thief repeatedly tries to snatch Rabi'a's covering, but every time he is thwarted by a miraculously inflicted loss of vision and, ultimately, by God's announcement that his "friend" is under his protection.⁷⁴ Other mentions of "veiling" in the text employ this term in its traditional Sufi sense as something separating one from God.⁷⁵ The only place, then, where Rabi'a is pointedly described as veiled is in the opening sentence of her *Memorial* where 'Attar introduces this new figure to his readers:

Veiled with a special veil, veiled with the veil of sincerity, burned
up in love and longing, enamored of proximity and immolation,

lost in love-union, deputy of Maryam the pure, accepted among men, Rabi'a 'Adawīya—the mercy of God Most High upon her.⁷⁶

By referencing the “veil,” ‘Attar evokes a traditional image of a “pious woman” as a “veiled woman”—except, of course, that Rabi'a is veiled here with “a special veil.” It is her attitude of “sincerity” that grants Rabi'a' God's protection and the remarkable audacity characterizing her relationships with others, human and divine.⁷⁷ In this way, by invoking Rabi'a's veil, but at the same time designating it as “the veil of sincerity,” the author once again transforms a standard image of religious piety. True piety, ‘Attar suggests here as elsewhere in the text, is defined by one's spiritual state, not by devotion to ritual observances or a position in a religious or social hierarchy—or, in this case, by a prescribed piece of cloth. And if that is the case, this female saint unquestionably can—and must—be entered into the ranks of the “Friends of God,” even if—perhaps especially if—this may jar some conventional sensibilities.

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END NOTES

1. In particular, in his opening discussion ‘Attar appeals to the example of ‘A'isha, the wife of the prophet Muhammad, and Maryam, the mother of Jesus. Farīd d-Dīn ‘Attār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā* [*Memorial of the Friends of God*], trans. Michael Sells as “Rabi'a: Her Words and Life in ‘Attar's *Memorial of the Friends of God*,” in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, ed. Michael Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 155. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to ‘Attar's *Memorial* will be to this edition.

2. “In unity, how can your existence or mine remain, much less ‘man’ or ‘woman’?” Ibid.

3. Ibid. Several other hagiographical treatises present a comparable assessment of Rabi'a's reputation in the Sufi tradition. See Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān as-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta'abbidāt as-Sūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 74-80. For a detailed discussion of these portrayals of Rabi'a, see Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), republished as *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of*

Rabī'a and Other Women Mystics in Islam (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001). Helpful overviews are also available in Barbara Lois Helms, "Rabī'ah as Mystic, Muslim and Woman," in *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, vol. 3, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), and Maria Dakake, "'Guest of the Inmost Heart': Conceptions of the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no.1 (2007): 72-97.

4. For expert analyses of issues related to the construction of religious identity in various late ancient religious traditions, see *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Michael L. Satlow, and Steven Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), and *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Robert Frakes and Elizabeth Digeres (Toronto: Edgar Kent Publishers, 2006), including the essay by Thomas Sizgorich on the Islamic tradition, "'The Sword Scrapes Away Sin': Ascetic Praxis and Communal Boundaries in Late Antique Islam," 192-227.

5. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 95-99, and "Early Islam and the Position of Women," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 59-73; Helms, "Rabī'ah as Mystic, Muslim and Woman," especially 38-45; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, chap. 12; and Shahzad Basir, "Islamic Tradition and Celibacy," in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133-50.

6. According to the verdict of its scholarly interpreters, 'Attar's *Memorial* does not provide direct access to the "historical Rabī'a." Not only does 'Attar's depiction contain a number of details of questionable historical veracity, it also employs many standard hagiographical *topoi*. See, for example, discussions in Helms, "Rabī'ah as Mystic, Muslim, and Woman," 12-14; Julian Baldwick, "The Legend of Rabica [*sic*] of Basra: Christian Antecedents, Muslim Counterparts," *Religion* 20, no. 3 (1990): 233-47; Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 151-52. Yet, scholars also suggest that this in no way diminishes this account's significance. As Leila Ahmed points out in her work, the legendary nature of these stories in fact gives them a greater weight as exemplars of Sufi thought in that "they are not merely records of happenings but rather narrative structures deliberately devised to express thoughts." Ahmed, "Early Islam and the Position of Women," 66-67. A discussion of the textual representation of women by Elizabeth Clark, a renowned feminist historian of late

antiquity, is instructive in this regard. Although she cautions that depictions of women are often more revelatory of their male biographers' agendas than of those women's actual situations and that we "should take care not to overlook the obvious: that we deal, always, with representation," she also argues that these textual representations "are engaged in contests, contests constituted in and through language, but also by events and interests within the broader discursive and social field." Thus, even if the sources at our disposal do not let us hear with certainty the voices of "real" women, the examination of how they are constructed in the text can be exceptionally revealing of the cultural and social forces at work. Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67, no.1 (1998): 1-31, 31. Helpful discussions of these historiographical and methodological issues can also be found in Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart," 73-74, and Laury Silvers, "'God Loves Me': The Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 30 (2010): 33-59.

7. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 38.

8. Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics and Studies In Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (London: Sheldon Press, 1931). In her discussion Smith consistently distinguishes between "ascetic" Sufis (associated with the early stage of Sufi history) and those demonstrating a "tendency towards a definitely mystical doctrine." It is precisely in this context that Rabi'a is treated as a key figure: she is presented as one of the first "to teach the doctrine of disinterested love of God, a new conception to many of her fellow-Sufis who for the most part served God . . . in fear of eternal punishment." *Muslim Women Mystics*, 121.

9. Peter Awn, "Sufism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan, 2005), 13:8809-25; Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921; repr. 1967); Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Tor Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Birgitta Sharpe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

10. Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 51-70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595736>.

11. *Ibid.*, 61.

12. *Ibid.*, 52. Melchert is primarily relying on Max Weber's definitions and analysis of "mysticism" and "asceticism" for these descriptions; for specific examples of his application of these definitions in his analysis see his following discussion of early Sufi figures. For comparable understandings of asceticism, see also Reynold A. Nicholson, "Asceticism (Muslim)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908-1927), 2:100, and especially Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*. Despite Andrae's insightful treatment of the early Sufi material, his discussion frequently betrays an antiascetic bias, both personal and historiographical. Thus, not only does Andrae openly confess his inability to fully appreciate "a form of religion so sternly ascetical" (33), he also plots his account of early Sufi history (750-900 CE) as an evolutionary progression from the lower (ascetic) to the higher (mystical) form described respectively as "ascetic piety with its gloomy eschatology, its contempt for this world and its rigid discipline" and the "mysticism of living, burning love of God" (124).

13. For a representative collection of revisionary interpretations of asceticism by scholars from a variety of fields, see the proceedings of the International Conference on Asceticism in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). This volume also contains a brief but helpful overview of negative perspectives on asceticism in the western philosophical and historical tradition (see "Introduction" and 589-93).

14. Some of the most influential formulations of this revisionary perspective on asceticism are offered in the works of historians of Late Antiquity Averil Cameron and Peter Brown, literary theorist Geoffrey Harpham, religious historians and theologians Margaret Miles and Timothy Ware, and religious philosopher and ethicist Edith Wyschogrod. See, for example, Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/300008>, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 1-23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928382>, and *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Geoffrey Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and "Old Water in New Bottles: The Contemporary Prospects for the Study of Asceticism," *Semeia* 58 (1992): 135-48; Margaret Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press,

1981); Timothy Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?," in Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 3-15; Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

15. Valantasis presents various aspects of his theory in "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (1995): 775-821, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465468>; "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism," in Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 544-52; "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical? Revisiting an Old Problem with a New Theory," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1999): 55-81; and "Nag Hammadi and Asceticism: Theory and Practice," *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 172-90. See also Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*; Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*; and Peter Van Ness, "Asceticism in Philosophical and Critical-Cultural Perspective," in Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 592.

16. As far as I am aware, none of the existing studies of Rabi'a and early Sufi tradition makes sustained use of these new analytical models. Sizgorich's "Sword Scrapes Away Sin" offers an insightful treatment of some of the sociocultural functions of early Islamic asceticism, but it does so in a different context. Other studies that are concerned specifically with early Sufism and Rabi'a (see n. 5 above) offer no systematic analysis of Rabi'a's identity as an ascetic. Even though these studies point to the countercultural aspects of Rabi'a's image and discuss certain ascetic practices ascribed to her (in particular, her celibacy), in general they privilege her identity as a "mystic" and tend to position Rabi'a against "ascetic" Sufis.

17. See discussion below and Melchert's explanation of his classificatory decision regarding Rabi'a in "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism."

18. *Memorial*, 168.

19. On Malik ibn Dinar's ascetic attitudes and teachings see, for example, Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, and Melchert, "Basran Origins of Classical Sufism," *Der Islam* 82, no. 2 (2005): 221-40. doi:10.1515/islam.2005.82.2.221.

20. *Memorial*, 166-67.

21. For a comprehensive list of typical ascetic practices and behaviors, see Walter Kaelber, "Asceticism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 1: 526-30, and Nicholson, "Asceticism (Muslim)." For a detailed overview of Rabi'a's way of life, see Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 40-51.

22. *Memorial*, 160, 161, 164-68.

23. *Ibid.*, 159-60, 165, 169.

24. See, for example, as-Sulami's descriptions of Maryam of Basra

(Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 84), Mu'adhā bint 'Abdallāh al-'Adawiyya (88), 'Āfiyya the Infatuated (98), Hafsa bint Sirīn (122), 'Ajrada the Blind (130), etc. For other examples and an illuminating discussion of this practice, see Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart." As Dakake points out in her analysis, "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" (85), a feature that, Dakake argues, is reflective of these women's sociocultural reality.

25. *Memorial*, 156-57.

26. *Ibid.*, 165; see also 157-59.

27. Valantasis, "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical," 65. Also see pp. 5-6 above.

28. Valantasis, "Constructions of Power," 787-97, 811-14; "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical," 61-74; "Competing Ascetic Subjectivities," 215-25.

29. As many historians of Islam suggest, the ascetic movements of the eighth and ninth centuries CE emerged as a response to social, political, and religious changes in Islamic society of that time. Protesting against a growing worldliness, superficial religiosity, and laxity of morals characterizing the lifestyle of the Umayyad elites, members of these movements advocated a return to a simple life and rigorous spiritual practice that they associated with the figure of the Prophet and other spiritual ancestors of their tradition. For a perceptive discussion of Umayyad society's "cultivated discipline of the externals of living" and of early Sufism's response, see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), esp. 238-39, 248-49, 392-403. Discussions of the countercultural aspects of ascetic lifestyle associated with the early Sufis are available in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, chap. 2; Melchert, "Basran Origins"; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 23-41; Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 18-26; and Awn, "Sufism," 8809-15.

30. *Memorial*, 155, 158, 162, 163-64, 169; also see 'Attar's description of Rabi'a quoted in full on p. 23. Several expert overviews of the Sufi notion of "extinction" (*fanā*) are readily available; see for example Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 141-44.

31. *Memorial*, 162-63, 165, 169. Cf. as-Sulamī's report: "Rabi'a was asked: 'How is your love for the Prophet (may God bless and preserve him)?' To which she replied, 'Verily, I love him. But love for the Creator has turned me away from love for created things.'" *Early Sufi Women*, 78.

32. *Memorial*, 165.
33. Here I am employing a definition of “the self” offered by David Brakke, *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, 1.
34. Dakake, “Guest of the Inmost Heart,” 79.
35. *Ibid.*, 75.
36. *Ibid.*, 74-75.
37. For overviews of this early Sufi figure see Awn, “Sufism,” 8811; Sizgorich, “The Sword Scrapes Away Sin,” 196-202; and Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, chap. 2.
38. *Memorial*, 158.
39. *Ibid.*, 157-58.
40. Other biographical and hagiographical accounts of Rabi’a likewise link her with Sufyan, putting her in the position of superiority; see, for example, as-Sulamī’s chapter on Rabi’a in *Early Sufi Women*, 74-76.
41. *Memorial*, 167.
42. Cf. Sufyan’s advice to his fellow renunciant: “Incumbent on you is withdrawal and mixing little with people. . . . [W]e think salvation is to be found in leaving them.” Quoted in Melchert, “Basran Origins,” 226.
43. *Memorial*, 167.
44. For scholarly discussions of Hasan al-Basri’s life and teachings, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 30-31, and Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*. The latter also touches on the issue of the historical (im)possibility of Rabi’a’s association with Hasan (215n5); also see Suleiman Mourad, *Early Islam Between Myth and History: Hasan al-Basri* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2006).
45. *Memorial*, 160, 162.
46. To quote Schimmel’s representative statement, “Hasan al-Basri was deeply steeped in the sadness and fear so typical of ascetics of all religions.” *Mystical Dimensions*, 30. Cf. characterizations of Hasan in Awn, “Sufism,” and Nicholson, “Asceticism (Muslim).”
47. *Memorial*, 162.
48. *Ibid.*, 160.
49. “These words were hard for Hasan to take, but he said nothing. One day he saw Rabi’a on the banks of the Euphrates. Hasan threw his prayer rug on the water and said, ‘Rabi’a, come here! Let’s perform two *rak’as* of prayer.’ Rabi’a said, ‘Master, if you’re going to display the goods of the afterworld in the market of this world, you must do what others of your species are incapable of doing.’ Then Rabi’a threw her prayer rug into the air and said, ‘Hasan, come here, where you will be hidden from the people’s gaze.’

Then she wished to win him over again. She said, ‘Master, what you did, a fish can do, and what I did, a fly can do. The real business is beyond both.’” *Memorial*, 160–61.

50. *Ibid.*, 168.

51. See also Valantasis, “Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical,” especially 61–63.

52. For some interesting parallels, see as-Sulami’s presentation of early Sufi women which, as Rkia Cornell suggests in her introductory discussion, likewise testifies to the author’s “concern with disproving Muslim stereotypes about woman’s supposed lack of religion and intellect.” Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 46.

53. An insightful analysis of the origin and the sociopolitical context of the “tradition of misogyny” is offered by Fatima Mernissi in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1991), especially chaps. 2–4. For other examples and discussions of misogyny in early and medieval Islamic literature, see Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 142–64; and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

54. These two *hadiths* are quoted in Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 161–62.

55. A helpful overview of these discussions as well as of the controversy over and apologies for celibacy is available in Shahzad Basir, “Islamic Tradition and Celibacy,” in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133–50, and Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, 41–50; see also Schimmel, “Women in Mystical Islam,” in *Women and Islam*, ed. Azizah al-Hibri (New York: Pergamon, 1982).

56. *Memorial*, 166.

57. *Ibid.* Also see Ahmed, “Early Islam and the Position of Women,” 65–68.

58. *Memorial*, 164.

59. *Ibid.*, 158, 166. A brief but informative terminological and textual analysis of this issue is available in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 152–53.

60. See, for example, sections 12, 15–17, 19, 21–29, 40–42, 45–50. Cf. as-Sulami’s introduction to his chapter on Rabi’a: “Sufyan ath-Thawri (may God have mercy upon him) sought her advice on legal matters and referred such issues to her. He also sought her spiritual advice and supplications.” *Early Sufi Women*, 74.

61. *Memorial*, 155.

62. Ibid. The story included in the *Memorial's* chapter on Hasan provides a context for this comment attributed to Hasan in the chapter on Rabi'a: "Whenever he [Hasan] ascended the pulpit and found that Rabi'a was not present, he came back down. Once he was asked, 'So many important and honored people are present, so what if an old woman's not here?' 'How can the drink that we have prepared for elephants be poured out for mice?' he replied. Whenever the meeting heated up, when hearts were afire and eyes were swimming in tears, he would turn to Rabi'a and say, 'O noble lady, this is from the embers of your heart.'" Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 345-46. Cf. as-Sulami's account of Rabi'a's male contemporaries' regard for her: "Sufyan ath-Thawri took [Ja'far ibn Sulaymān] by the hand and said about Rabi'a: 'Take me to the mentor. For when I am apart from her, I can find no solace.'" *Early Sufi Women*, 76.

63. *Memorial*, 161.

64. For a comprehensive discussion of the status and practice of temporary and permanent sexual renunciation within Islamic tradition, see Basir, "Islamic Tradition and Celibacy." Some interesting reflections on the influence of Christian ascetic ideology and praxis on early Sufi tradition can be found in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, chaps. 1 and 2.

65. Ibid., 137-41. As Andrae points out, there are very few famous (male) Sufis who are definitely known to have been celibate. *In the Garden of Myrtles*, 46-47.

66. Some interesting glimpses of female perspectives on the issues of celibacy and married life are also afforded by as-Sulami's descriptions. See, for example, *Early Sufi Women*, 92, 128, as well as Cornell's introduction to the treatise and Dakake's discussion in "Guest of the Inmost Heart," 75-79.

67. *Memorial*, 162.

68. Ibid., 161-62. Different editions and translations of the *Memorial* present slightly variant wordings of this situation, either as Hasan asking Rabi'a to marry him, or as a more general inquiry regarding her interest in marriage.

69. Ibid., 155. Maria Dakake's discussion of this anecdote and of other comparable accounts of early Sufi women provides an interesting gloss on this issue by pointing to these accounts' gendered aspect. As she suggests, these formulations appeal to traditional Islamic images and features of an ideal masculine beloved (protection, closeness, jealousy, etc.) to represent these women mystics' relationship with God. Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost

Heart,” esp. 75-79; for an extension and modification of Dakake’s argument, see Silvers, “God Loves Me.” I think this can be seen as yet another interesting example of the countercultural dynamics of these representations of Sufi women where traditional conceptions of gender relationships are used in ways that overturn actual relational structures; e.g., Rabi’a’s deference to her divine Beloved is used here to articulate her rejection of traditional marriage.

70. *Memorial*, 155, 161-62.

71. Similar conclusions regarding the social and practical significance of celibacy for women in the context of Islamic societies are articulated in Ahmed, “Early Islam and the Position of Women,” 67-68, and Basir, “Islamic Tradition and Celibacy”; the latter piece also refers to some more recent examples. See also Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, chap. 2, and Helms, “Rabi’ah,” 40-43. For more examples of such Sufi women and their countercultural or “antinomial” behaviors, see Dakake, “Guest of Inmost Heart,” and Jamal Elias, “The Female and the Feminine in Islamic Mysticism,” *Muslim World* 78, no. 3-4 (1988): 209-24. For enlightening parallels to the situation of late ancient Christian ascetic women, see Elizabeth Clark, “Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity,” *Anglican Theological Review* 63, no. 3 (1981): 240-57; Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

72. For an overview of the history and politics of veiling in early Islam, see Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, especially chaps. 5-7 and 10; chap. 5 also offers a discussion of the etymology and variant applications of *hijab* and other terms related to veiling. Also see Ahmed, *Women in Islam*.

73. *Memorial*, 159-60. Some insightful observations regarding this common depiction of their divine Beloved as a “protector” in female Sufi mystics’ sayings can be found in Dakake, “Guest of the Inmost Heart,” 75-76.

74. *Memorial*, 151, 158.

75. *Ibid.*, 155.

76. For a discussion of “sincerity,” both as an important Sufi notion and as characteristic of Rabi’a’s life and sayings, see Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 154; Helms, “Rabi’ah,” 16-21; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 38-40.