

“The Forgotten of the Obscure *zāwiya*”: Loyalty and Humility in the Supplications of Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī’s *Inshā*’ (ca. 900 AH/1500 AD)

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Abstract

This article is a historical study of the *Inshā*’ (epistolary) collection authored by Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī. Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī was a Malāmatī Sufī who lived in Iran and Central Asia during the late Timurids era (end of the 9th and beginning of the 10th century AH/end of 15th and beginning of 16th century AD). His letters have been copied in a few manuscripts; however, they remain unpublished and little-studied. The oldest known manuscript dates back to the 11th century AH/17th century AD and is the chief source of this study. The letters are addressed to important figures of the time, such as Babur, Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bayqara, Shāh Ismā‘īl, and Naqshbandī Sufī shaikhs. This article used the institutional history approach advocated by Alexandre Papas to study this source. It analyzed the epistolary language used by Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī to increase and maintain a wide geographical and social network and obtain protection from sovereigns or religious leaders. It argued that the Sufī discourse on poverty and humility could be strategically reinvested as rhetorical patterns to acquire protection from powerful figures in troubled times.

Keywords: *Malāmatī* sufis, *Inshā*’ literature, late Timurids, Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī, Naqshbandī, rhetorics

Introduction

In Eastern Iran and Central Asia, the period of the late Timurids (end of the 9th and beginning of the 10th century AH/end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century AD) was characterized by the rise and institutionalization of Sufi networks, the most powerful being the Naqshbandī *ṭarīqa*¹² (also known as *Khwājagān*). One of the first Western-language studies

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1 In the transliteration of Arabic and Persian words, we use the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. In cases where Arabic words appear in a Persian text, we transliterate according to the Persian system. We preserve the Turkish form of Turkish proper names and terms. Toponyms and terms that have entered the English language, such as “dervish,” are given in the more easily recognizable English form, without diacritics.

2 The word *ṭarīqa* literally means a “path.” It refers to the method a specific Sufi master (a shaikh) teaches his disciples for achieving perfection and becoming closer to God. By extension, it refers to the

that focused on the organizational aspects of Sufism was John Spencer Trimingham's *The Sufi Orders in Islam* [Trimingham 1971]. In contrast to an intellectual tradition that narrowed down Sufism to "Islamic mysticism," Trimingham acknowledged the importance of its social dimension. However, he held a declinist view of the growing institutionalization of Sufism in the post-Mongol era, arguing that "this development can be regarded as the beginning of the process whereby the creative freedom of the mystic was to be channeled into an institution" [Trimingham 1971: 11].

Later scholars took a genuine interest in the social and organizational aspects of Central Asian post-Mongol Sufism. In a series of groundbreaking publications, Jürgen Paul investigated the close relationships between the doctrine, the spiritual practices, and the social and economic organization of the Naqshbandiyya in the 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries AD [Paul 1991a, 1991b, 1998, 2007, 2011, 2017]. Paul successfully demonstrated that spiritual practices, such as *rābiṭa* (distance bonding with the shaikh), facilitated the development and extension of a wide network of protection. This network formed the basis of the social and economic power of shaikhs, such as Khwāja 'Ubaidullāh Aḥrār. Building on similar studies, Nile Green recently suggested that Sufism should be conceptualized as a "tradition" rather than "mysticism" [Green 2012: 4–8]. Conceptualizing Sufism as a "tradition" would enable the research to focus on periods and spaces and avoid neglecting the social, material, and political dimensions of Sufism.

However, Alexandre Papas drew attention to a risk inherent to an approach that narrowed down Sufism to a purely social and economic phenomenon and deliberately ignored or minimized its religious and spiritual aspects [Papas 2020a: 11–13]. Two pitfalls were to be avoided by historians. One was studying Sufism solely based on doctrines disconnected from their real social world. The other was writing a history of Sufi survival and success that neglected what Sufis believed, practiced, and valued, thereby failing to fully understand them. Therefore, Papas proposed a "third way," the institutional history approach. Here, "institution" was defined, based on French sociologist Emile Durkheim, cited by Papas, as "all the beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity." Thus, institutional history encompassed religious thoughts and social organizations. None of them was more valuable or determining than the other. They were entangled, and one could not be fully understood without paying attention to the other.

This article aimed to write a piece of institutional history. It discussed the case of Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī, a Malāmātī Sufi who lived in Eastern Iran and Central Asia at the end of the 9th/15th century. Some of his letters, written to important figures of his time, have survived

group or community constituted by this shaikh, his successors, and their followers and associates. There is no satisfactory translation of the word *ṭarīqa*. The words "order," "brotherhood," and "network" have been proposed; however, none is fully satisfactory. This article shall mostly use the word "network" because it is apt for describing the social and organizational aspects of a Sufi group, as highlighted by epistolary sources.

in a collection titled *Inshāʾ*. Little is known about him and there has been no study of this epistolary collection that remains unpublished. Hence, this article purported to connect the institutional history of Sufism with a discussion of the relevance of the *Inshāʾ* literary genre as a historical source.

In the medieval and early modern Islamic world, *Inshāʾ* collections were collections of private or chancellery model letters. They aimed to provide professional secretaries and cultivated men with samples of exemplary epistolary prose that they could imitate. As mentioned, Paul was one of the first to stress the value of *Inshāʾ* collections beyond literary analysis [Paul 1995]. A few studies have used epistolary collections for a better understanding of social organizations and networks. Evrim Binbaş showed that letters were the remains of past informal networks that characterized the first half of the Timurid century [Binbaş 2016: 9–10]. Furthermore, by connecting ‘Alī Shīr Nawāʾī’s literary work with the letters he received from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī and Khwāja Aḥrār, Marc Toutant highlighted the existence of an influential Naqshbandī network in the late Timurid court [Toutant 2015].

This research examined the role of Sufi thoughts and language in a society dominated by patronage and protection systems. Specifically, this article assessed how the Sufi *Malāmatī* discourse on poverty and humility was reused as a rhetorical strategy to declare allegiance and acquire protection from powerful actors in troubled times.

As we know, many Sufis called themselves paupers (*fuqarāʾ*), indicating that they valued spiritual goods more than material ones, and they only needed God. This article suggested that these spiritual categories were reinvested as rhetorical patterns to seek protection and express allegiance. The paper unfolds as follows. The first section describes the chief source utilized in this analysis, a 11th/17th-century manuscript of Qazvīnī’s *Inshāʾ*. The following section details what we know about its author and the troubled political context of the late Timurid era. The article reconstructs the reach of Qazvīnī’s geographical and social networks. The remaining sections are devoted to an analysis of the language of the letters: the typical structure of a letter (Section 4) and the Sufi elements of language that Qazvīnī reinvests as rhetorical patterns to express loyalty and seek protection.

1 The Source

The Storey catalogue of Persian literature mentions five manuscripts of Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī’s *Inshāʾ* collection [Storey 1927, vol. III: 268], to which we can add a 1198/1784 manuscript listed in the online British *Fihrist* catalogue. The oldest manuscript was copied in 1055/1645 and is held in the Pote Collection of King’s College Library in the University of Cambridge (England). A second 17th-century AD manuscript is preserved in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library in Bankipur (India). Three manuscripts containing Qazvīnī’s *Inshāʾ* were kept in the

India Office Library and transferred to the British Library after 1947 AD. They are dated to 1107/1695 (reference: IO 1972), 1144/1732 (IO 1748), and 1198/1784 (IO 3958). Another 18th-century AD manuscript is present in Princeton.

We have multiple manuscripts for Qazvīnī's work; however, reading them requires significant time investment. Therefore, I decided to focus on the oldest available manuscript by assuming it to be the closest to the original text. I read by referring to the very clean 1198/1784 manuscript held in the British Library (IO 3958). However, one should remember that these manuscripts are products of times and places that are not the same wherein Qazvīnī's original work was created.

The chief manuscript that this study utilizes is held in the Pote Collection in Cambridge University Library, under the reference King's Pote 27. According to the identification form provided by the *Fihrist* online catalogue [Mihan n.d.], and to my observations, the codex of King's Pote 27 contains 193 folios (29.3 x 20.3 centimeters), with a written surface of 23.5 x 14 centimeters (16 to 18 lines per page). The cover is in leather, adorned with marbled paper, and bears the number 36, its reference in the Polier/Pote collection (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Front cover of the manuscript containing the *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī*, King's Pote 27, Cambridge University Library.

Source: photograph by Danielle Zwarthoed

The text starts after seven flyleaves. It is written on light, creamy beige, and slightly grainy paper. The sheets are in fairly good condition; however, their damaged edges have been trimmed, and some sheets show signs of later repairs. The paper is dotted with small holes caused by insects. To the weary reader, these holes merge with the dots of Arabic letters. The manuscript is neither foliated nor paginated.

This is a multi-text manuscript that contains three late Timurid *Inshā'* collections written in Persian. Qazvīnī's letters are copied in the first 34 folios, followed by two better-known epistolary collections. One is the *Inshā-yi Bayānī*. Bayānī is the *takhalluṣ* (pen name) of Shihāb al-Dīn 'Abdallāh Marwārīd, and his *Inshā'* is a collection of official correspondence.³ The other is the *Inshā-yi Jāmī*, a collection of private letters by the renowned Sufi poet Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492).⁴ The three texts were likely written by the same person and reflect their interest in bringing together epistolary accomplishments of the late Timurids era.

The layout is clean (Figure 2) and accounts for didactic considerations specific to the *Inshā'* genre. The text is not ruled; however, it is justified on both sides. Letters are written in a pleasant Indian *nasta'liq*. Rubrics enable the reader to see where each letter begins, with the words *ruq'a* (or *riq'a*) *akharī* written in red. Red rubrics signal the beginning of verses. Verses are separated by three red dots. Space is spared without sacrificing readability. Most letters are dotted. Omitted words are signaled by a red dot and added in the margin.

3 Marwārīd's *Inshā'* collection, or *munsha'āt*, was partly translated in German and commented upon by Hans Roemer [Marwārīd and Roemer 1952] and has been recently reedited in Iran [Marwārīd 2019].

4 This collection has been edited several times. The latest edition includes letters from Jāmī researchers found in other collections [Jāmī 2019].

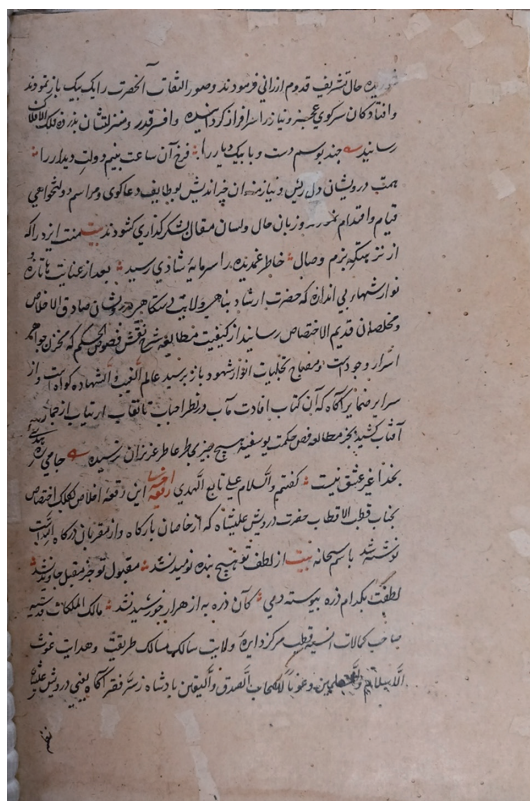


Figure 2. *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī*, f 2b, King's Pote 27, Cambridge University Library.

Source: photograph by Danielle Zwarthoed

The colophon is written upside-down in the right margin of the last page. The margin has been trimmed, and a part of the text of the colophon is missing. The number 12 can be seen on the penultimate line, which suggests that the copy was completed on the 12th of some month. The beginning of the name of the scribe, 'Abd al-Rahīm... ('Abd al-Rahīm or 'Abd al-Rahmān?), can be read on the last line (Figure 3). Edward Granville Browne, who catalogued the manuscripts of the Pote Collection, utilized the year of the copy of another text of the same manuscript (1055/1645) to date this copy of the *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī* [Browne 1922: 21].

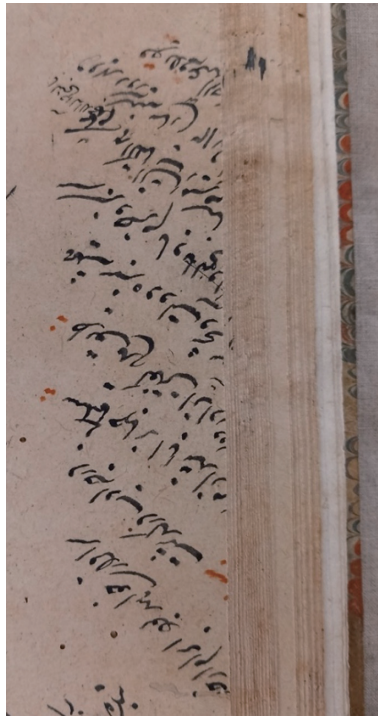


Figure 3. Colophon on *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī*, f 34b, King’s Pote 27, Cambridge University Library. Source: photograph by Danielle Zwarthoed

This manuscript, devoted to the Persianate epistolary literature, was acquired between 1758 and 1788 by Antoine-Louis Polier (1741–1795). Polier was a Swiss-born military engineer and administrator who served in the English East India Company for 30 years, except for a seven-year interlude where he offered his talents to various Mughal princes. Polier adopted the Indo-Persian lifestyle and developed a passion for the heritage of pre-colonial India [Veyrassat 2022]. He acquired and had copied for him a huge collection (over 500 volumes) of manuscripts. Much of this collection was purchased in India by Edward Ephraïm Pote and sent to England in 1790, in a shipment of eight chests. The chests were divided between King’s College in Cambridge and Eton College in Windsor, as donations to the institutions where Pote had received his education [Mihan 2021].

2 Troubled Times

Little is known about Qazvīnī. His *nisba* indicates that he or his family originated from the city of Qazvin in Northwestern Iran. The main source describing his life is short, late, and presumably biased. It is a notice in a *tazkira*, a biographical anthology of poets, titled *Tuhfah-i Sāmī*, written by Sām Mīrzā, a Safavid prince, around 957/1550, and reedited in 2005 in Iran

by Humāyūn Farrukh. This notice refers to a poet named Khwāja Mīram Siyāh [Sām Mīrzā 2005: 237], who lived in Herat under the reign of Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bayqara (874–911/1470–1506).

Besides his letters, Qazvīnī composed at least two *Dīwān*, one of them containing facetious and ribald poems [Storey 1927, vol. III: 266]. The *Tuḥfah-i Sāmī* reported that he was a drunkard and a debauchee, and moved to Transoxiana in search of easier conditions for a depraved life. He was likely inclined toward licentiousness; however, Sām Mīrzā might have manipulated the narrative to render it consistent with the Safavid intellectual and religious program, which had no space left for a Sunni Malāmātī. Thus, whatever the true motives, Qazvīnī’s relocation to Uzbek-dominated Transoxiana may have occurred after the Safavid takeover of Herat in 916/1510 and the anti-Sunni persecutions that culminated with the burning of Jāmī’s grave.

Qazvīnī was, by his own admission, a Malāmātī Sufi. The Malāmātiyya was a Sufi movement that emerged in Khorasan at the end of the 3rd/9th century. The Malāmātī sought to draw closer to God by annihilating their egos. They regularly reminded themselves of how blameworthy they were and avoided any ostentatious display of piety that might elicit praise [De Jong et al.: 2012]. These views are reflected in Qazvīnī’s behavior and self-descriptions.

In addition to the occasional use of the *takhalluṣ* “Pīr,” Mīram Siyāh repeatedly claimed in his letters the nicknames *Siyāh* (black) and *tīra* (“dark”) that evoked dust and ignorance. The most common account of the seven stages of the Sufi path associates the black color with the sixth and penultimate stage of the disciple’s progression. This stage of purification is distinguished by the appearance of a black light, the light of the seventh and last stage being colorless [Trimingham 1971: 153–155]. Additionally, Henri Corbin’s research on colors in Sufism showed that, in the cosmology of ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī, an Iranian mystic of the 8th/14th century, black was associated with Jesus [Corbin 1974; Fagot 2000]. In Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī’s view, acknowledging his blackness, dustiness, dirtiness, filthiness, and blameworthiness were likely signs of remarkable progress on the Sufi path.

Qazvīnī lived in troubled times. He was affected by the crises of the last two decades of the Timurid era [Papās and Toutant 2022: 43–44; Szuppe 2023: 48–49]. Two major Sufi leaders, Khwāja ‘Ubaidullāh Aḥrār in Transoxiana and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī in Herat, passed away in 895/1490 and 897/1492, respectively. They enjoyed important religious, moral, and intellectual authority, and commanded a wide social network that stretched across Iran and Central Asia to the Ottoman and Indian sultanates. Their capacity to act as mediators and peacekeepers between princes disappeared with them.

In the absence of pre-established inheritance rules, Timurid princes struggled for supremacy after the death of each sovereign. The remnants of the Timurid empire were divided into Transoxiana and Khorasan after the death of Sulṭān Abū Sa‘īd in 873/1469. Transoxiana

was further fragmented after the death of Sultān Aḥmad Mīrzā in 899/1494. The Ferghana Valley, one of its territories, was inherited by his nephew, the 11 or 12-year-old Ṣaḥīr al-Dīn Babur. After three unsuccessful attempts to conquer Samarkand, Babur flew to Kabul, from where he set out to conquer the sultanate of Delhi in 930/1524.

In Herat, the Timurid sovereign of Khorasan, Sultān Ḥusayn Bayqara, faced the revolt of his son, Badī‘ al-Zamān Mīrzā. This rebellion was supported by powerful *amīrs*, such as the Arghun family. Badī‘ al-Zamān and his brother Muẓaffar Ḥusayn succeeded their father in 911/1506; however, they did not stay in power for long. Led by Muḥammad Shaybānī, the Uzbeks swept across the steppes of Central Asia into Transoxiana, took over Samarkand in 907/1500, crossed the Amu-Darya and seized Herat in spring 912/1507. However, they did not hold Herat for long. A new adolescent player, Ismā‘īl Ṣafavī, grandmaster of a Shī‘ī Sufi order created in Ardabil, defeated the Turkish Aq Qoyunlu dynasty in Iran and was crowned *shāh* (king) in 906/1501 in Tabriz, creating the Safavid dynasty. Herat fell to the Safavids in 916/1510, leading to religious persecutions. Hence, in the last decade of the 9th/15th and first decade of the 10th/16th century, the dissolution of the Aq Qoyunlu and Timurid rule in Iran and Central Asia led to a restructuring of Sufi and Naqshbandī networks.

3 The Networks of Qazvīnī

The examination of the addressees of his 47 letters revealed the magnitude of his social and geographical reach. This examination enabled us to complete the skeletal biography of Qazvīnī to get a better understanding of the function of his letters.

Table 1. Qazvīnī’s network, as revealed by his *Inshā’* collection

Sufis and religious leaders (19 letters)	The Timurid court of Herat (17 letters)
Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Ghafūr	Sultans and princes
Darwīsh ‘Alī Shāh (3 letters)	Sultān Ḥusain Bayqara (2)
Darwīsh Mūnis	Sikandar, nephew of Sultān Ḥusayn
Darwīsh Ṣāfi	Badī‘ al-Zamān (2)
Shaikh ‘Imād al-Dīn	Muḥammad Zamān (2)
Mawlānā Muḥammad Gīlānī	An unnamed prisoner sultan
Mawlānā Muḥammad Rūmī	Amīrs (the military elite)
Mawlānā Ra‘īs	Zūn al-Nūn Arghun
Mawlānā Mas‘ūd Shīrwānī	Mīr Shāh Beg, son of Mīr Zūn al-Nūn Arghun
An unnamed <i>shaykh al-islām</i> ⁵	Muḥammad, son of Walī Beg Mīr
Mīr Muḥammad Yūsuf	Mīr Ḥusain ‘Alī Jalāyir
Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Naqīb, descendent of ‘Alī	Bureaucrats
Ḥaẓrat Sultān, descendent of ‘Alī	Amīr Nizām al-Dīn ‘Alī Shīr
Mawlānā Muḥammad Ṭālib	Khwāja Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad Aṣif
Sayyidī Khwāja	Khwāja ‘Abdallah Marwārīd
Khwāja Shamsī Najjārī	Ḥaẓrat Zain, a <i>ṣadr</i> ⁶
Khwāja Abū al-Qāsim Jāmī	Other
	‘Alī Darbān, man of letters and brave man of the capital city of Badī‘ al-Zamān

5 The highest clerical office in a region, or a supervisor of religious endowments (*waqf*) [Ando 1994].

6 The religious official in the *dīrwān* (administration), who exercises financial control over other religious endowments, and employees’ salaries and recruitment in these endowments.

The Safavid court (3 letters)	The Timurid court of Babur (8 letters)
Shāh Ismā‘īl An unnamed <i>muqarrab</i> ⁷ of Shāh Ismā‘īl Mīr Haidar Darwīsh Beg	Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh Babur (2) Humāyun Sultan Muẓaffar Laṭīf Khān, son of Kāmrān Sulṭān An unnamed amīr of Babur Darwīsh Muḥammad Sārbān, a <i>muqarrab</i> Khawāja Kulān ‘Azīm, a <i>muqarrab</i> Mīr Yūnus ‘Alī, <i>amīr</i> ⁸

Source: *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī*, King’s Pote 27, Cambridge University Library; table compiled by Danielle Zwarthoed

Qazvīnī’s epistolary network stretched across a geographical area, ranging from Tabriz to Kabul, and from Andijan (Ferghana Valley) to the Helmand (present-day Afghanistan). The main cities where the recipients lived or ruled were Tabriz, Qazvin, Herat, Balkh, Kandahar, Andijan, and Kabul. Such a broad network was possible, thanks to a common *lingua franca*, Persian, and an efficient network of roads peppered with post stations where messengers could sleep, eat, and exchange their animals for fresher ones.

Qazvīnī’s epistolary network revealed the breadth of his social connections and the variety of his allegiances. Table 1 classified his addressees into four networks. It was not always easy to pin down some of the addressees within this classification, given that, despite their verbosity, Qazvīnī’s letters delivered very sketchy information.

Qazvīnī appears to have been in regular contact with an important Sufi network, the Naqshbandiyya, specifically, the Naqshbandī circles in Qazvin and in Khorasan. One of his addressees was called ‘Alī Shāh, who most likely was the Sufi leader identified by Hamid Algar and Dina Le Gall as Shāh ‘Alī Qazvīnī [Algar, 2003: 21–23; Le Gall 2005: 25–27]. They discovered that a Naqshbandī *ṭarīqa* was active in Qazvin after the Safavids seized power in Iran (906/1501), despite sporadic anti-Sunni persecutions (in 50 years, the Naqshbandiyya was eliminated from Safavid Persia).

Shāh ‘Alī Qazvīnī belonged to this Naqshbandī branch of Qazvin. He was from Qazvin and was a Malāmatī [Algar 2003: 21–23], just like Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī. Therefore, there were plausible reasons to believe that ‘Alī Shāh and Shāh ‘Alī Qazvīnī were the same person, and that Mīram Siyāh Qazvīnī was one of his followers. As a member of an endangered Naqshbandī community, he might have sought shelter in Herat after 906/1501.

The evidence of Qazvīnī’s connections with the Naqshbandī circle of Herat came from the first letter of the collection. It was addressed to Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Ghafūr and alluded to the death of the renowned Naqshbandī Sufi and poet, ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī. ‘Abd al-Ghafūr Lārī was one of the disciples and biographers of Jāmī [Lārī 1964]. Since Jāmī passed away

⁷ Intimate of the sovereign, who has easy access to him.

⁸ High-ranking military commander.

in 898/1492 and ‘Abd al-Ghafūr in 912/1506, this first letter was most likely written within this time span. Although Qazvīnī described Jāmī as a model to follow, none of these letters were addressed to him. Therefore, his letters and his sojourn in Herat were after 898/1492. If we accepted the hypothesis that, as a Sunni Malāmātī, he moved to Transoxiana after the Safavid seizure of Herat (at the latest), the composition of his letters could be situated between 898/1492 and 916/1510.

Furthermore, Qazvīnī was keen to cultivate relationships with Timurid princes. Princely patronage was one of the impulses behind the so-called Timurid “Renaissance.” Timurid courts provided the conditions required to produce poetry. Moreover, Naqshbandī Sufi had access to Timurid sultans through intermediaries, such as ‘Alī Shīr Nawā’ī [Aḥrār 2002; Paul 1991b; Toutant: 2015]. Dervishes associated to the Naqshbandiyya could count on the protection of Timurid princes. In contrast, the small number of letters (three) addressed to the Safavid court was an indication that neither literary patronage nor protection for a Naqshbandī Malāmātī was available there.

An interesting finding was that Qazvīnī seemed more eager to develop connections with the military than with the bureaucratic elite. This is curious because the bureaucratic elite consisted of “men of the pen” who should have been keener to offer protection to a fellow poet. A possible explanation might be the growing importance of the unruly military elite at the end of life and following the death of Ḥusayn Bayqara. For instance, Amīr Zūn al-Nūn Arghun, governor and *de facto* ruler of Kandahar and of present-day southern Afghanistan, in 902/1497, supported prince Badī‘ al-Zamān’s rebellion against his father [Khawāndamīr 1954, vol. 4: 211–212]. Qazvīnī addressed him and his son, as if they were the sultans of an independent kingdom: *salāṭīn-i mulk-i Nīmrūz* [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 14b]. Thus, he seemingly bet on the Arghun’s capacity to subjugate the Timurid dynasty or, at least, establish an independent dynasty in Kandahar.

Evidently, Qazvīnī did not rub shoulders only with the elites. His *Inshā’* collection highlights these elite connections because its purpose was to preserve a record of letters sent to important figures of the time. According to the preface that follows the *basmala*, this was a collection of letters:

whose interlocutors and correspondents (include) certain nobles and great Friends of God (awliyā’), certain fortunate sultans with exalted authority, and certain famous scholars (fuṣalā’), powerful people. [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 1a]

It is worth mentioning that these were not “fan letters” without response. Some of them were *jawāb* (replies), suggesting that the religious, political, and military elites wrote back to this obscure dervish. Hence, Qazvīnī was probably more than the marginal poet described by

Sām Mīrzā. He was associated with powerful Naqshbandī and courtly circles, and was taken seriously enough by them for an epistolary exchange to take place.

4 Writing Letters in the Late Timurid Empire: A Standardized Model

The *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī* was a compilation of private letters, that is, letters that Qazvīnī wrote in his name and not in the name of an institution, such as the State. Although the collection was titled *Inshā'*, the word *Inshā'* actually referred to the art of composition and letter-writing, rather than to the letters themselves. The correct title would have been *munsha'āt* (singular: *munsha'a*), the addition of the m- (م) prefix transforming the word *inshā'* (composition) into a participle used as a noun (“what is composed”, that is, “compositions”).

Like several *munsha'āt* collections, this was a *mélange*, without any apparent principle for classifying the letters. The letters were short; average 300 or 400 words. They belonged to the *ruq'a* genre. *Ruq'a* (or *riq'a*) were short letters written to princes or high-ranking figures.

The Hungarian paleographer Lajos Fekete, noticing the similarity between the structures of Latin and Persian chancellery letters, outlined their typical format [Fekete 1977: 60]. This study used this outline to analyze Qazvīnī's letters and verify whether their structure was influenced by the Persianate chancellery culture.

Typical chancellery letters would start with an *invocatio* (Latin) or *da'wat* (Persian), that is, a devotional formula. Qazvīnī's letters contained such a formula, although it was not necessarily placed at the very beginning of the letter. For example, Letter 2 starts with the following:

این رقعة اخلاص بکلک اختصاص بجناب قطب الاقطاب حضرت درویش علیشاه که از خاصان بارگاه و از
مقربان درگاه الله است نوشته شد با اسم سبحانه

This ruq'a was written with the reed-pen of distinction to the Pole of the Poles, Ḥaẓrat Dervish 'Alī Shāh, who is part of the nobles of the audience and the intimates of the court of God, in the name of God. [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 2b]

We see the formula, “in the name of God” (با اسم سبحانه), at the end of the sentence, which serves as an *invocatio*. The next part of the letters was the *intitulatio*, or *tughrā*, which identified the name of the addressee. All the letters, except four, bore the name of the addressee, and all the addressees were individuals.

Then came the *inscriptio*, or *ilqāb*, that is, the titles of the addressee. The example cited above shows an interesting mixture of temporal and spiritual titles. In this world, as far as social

rank matters, ‘Alī Shāh was only a dervish. However, the title of “Pole of the Poles” (قطب الاقطاب) indicated that he was a spiritual guide for other dervishes as well. In the hereafter, he was among the nobles and the closest members (*muqarrabān*) of the Lord’s court. Qazvīnī showed a propensity to minimize the earthly social rank of dervishes, while inflating and exaggerating the position of the members of the temporal elites: the Arghun governors of Kandahar were titled *salāqīn-i mulk-i Nīmrūz*, “sultans of the kingdom of Nimruz.”

The next part of the letter was the *salutatio* or *du‘ā*, whereby the author expressed his greeting. In Persianate epistolary writings, especially in private correspondence, this part was often accompanied by or replaced with sentences expressing the joy and eagerness the author felt at the prospect of an upcoming encounter. More often, prose gave way to verses heavily laden with references to the classics of Persian literature. Qazvīnī offered ‘Alī Shāh this quatrain:

از لطف تو هیچ بنده نومید نشد
مقبول تو جز مقبل جاوید نشد
لطفت بکدام ذره پیوسته دمی
کان ذره به از هزار خورشید نشد

No slave has ever become desperate of your grace

No beauty has ever equaled yours, except for eternal favor.

One breath, that your grace adjoins to whatever miserable

How shall that miserable not become better than a thousand suns? [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 2b]

It is a typical *rubā‘ī*, in which the first line rhymes with lines two and four (readers who do not know Persian can detect that the shape of the words at the end of lines 1, 2, and 4 is the same). This *rubā‘ī* was not Qazvīnī’s creation. It was quatrain no. 525 from the famous *Dīwān-i Shams*, authored by the 7th/13th-century Sufi poet Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Balkhī, better known as Mawlānā or Mawlawī (in the Persian-speaking world), or Rūmī (in the West) [Rūmī 1997: 1359]. Qazvīnī utilized Mawlānā’s words to express his feelings of love, admiration, and need to his Naqshbandī guide.

In chancellery documents, the *salutatio* was followed at this point by the preamble (*arenga* in Latin), which justified the decision based on religious, moral, and legal considerations. In private letters, such as Qazvīnī’s, this part could be replaced by a praise of the addressee. The eulogy acted as a justification for the good relationship between the sender and the recipient. In Letter 2, ‘Alī Shāh was granted qualifiers, such as “Master of Perfections” (صاحب کمالات), “The Sincere and Certain Pādishāh” (الصدق و الیقینی پادشاه), and “Aware of the Secret of Poverty” (ز سرّ فقر آگاه) [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 3a]. Qazvīnī stressed that ‘Alī Shāh was so advanced on the Sufi path

9 ب is written پ. This is a frequent occurrence in medieval and early modern Persian manuscripts.

that he was in the spiritual realm equivalent to a great king in the political realm. Hence, the secret of “poverty” of the ascetic life of the dervish had been revealed to ‘Alī Shāh. This was followed by blessings and prayers, in verse and prose.

After these lengthy beginnings, Qazvīnī moved on to his request. He started with standardized sentences that led to the subject matter of the *ruq‘a*. Among these standardized transitions, we find formulae, such as *ba ‘arż mīrasānad, iltimās ānka, mulṭāmas ānka...* (“the petition is,” “the request is,” “it is requested that”). These are ubiquitous in the chancery literature. In Letter 2, the transition formula is *tawaqqu‘ ānka* (the expectation is).

In most of the requests Qazvīnī hoped that the hidden things may appear in full splendor, asked for guidance to this end, requested the recipient not to forget him and his dervishes, asked for the honor to kiss the ground of the addressee’s threshold, or his yoke, asked to become a *mulāzim*, an attendant of the addressee, and asked for protection. Nowhere did he directly request concrete or material advantages. It was up to the protector to decide which benefits he would bestow upon his dervish. Letter 2 was a perfect illustration of how allusive Qazvīnī’s requests were. He asked for the following:

توقع آنکه رنجوران بیحضور و فراموش ز مهجور را گاهگاهی در اوقات حضور یاد آرند و از گوشه ضمیر
منیر آفتاب تأثیر فرو بگذارند

The expectation is that these afflicted and forgotten poor souls will sometimes be brought back to memory and land in the corner of the luminous consciousness of the influential sun. [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 3a]

In chancellery documents, a description of the circumstances of the case (*narratio* or *fiqra-i hikāya*) usually followed. In personal letters, such as Qazvīnī’s, this narrative part was replaced with a reiteration of how desperate the sender’s situation was, how much he needed the addressee, and how loyal he was to the addressee.

The letter may end with a reiteration of the request and apologies for being too wordy (concision was a rule of *adab*, of courtesy). It ended with a prayer, as chancellery documents produced in the name of the prince ended with a prayer request. In other words, the powerful provided material benefits to the powerless, who prayed for the longevity of their rule and eternal life. Letter 2 adapted the prayers to the aspirations of a Sufi leader, such as ‘Alī Shāh:

این سیاه روز بر ایشان روزگار را حضور دل جمعیت خاطر بیشتر از بیشتر دست دهد و فنای فنا که عدم
تعلق است بما سوی الله بر وجه احسن صورت بندد

May this dark day for those who suffered at that time increasingly receive the presence of a tranquil heart, and may annihilation, which is the absence of attachment (we are in God), take shape in the most beautiful way. [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 3b]

Lines of poetry were peppered in all the letters and often repeated the themes of the preceding prose. They were introduced by abbreviations of the words *shi‘r* (poem), *naẓm* (verse), *bayt* (distich), and *miṣrā‘* (hemistich). Note that the 1198/1784 British Library manuscript labelled the poetry genre more accurately and specified whether the poem was a *rubā‘ī* (quatrain), a *ghazal* (lyric poetry), or a *qaṣīda* (panegyric).

As this description of a typical letter makes apparent, the descriptive and factual content of Qazvīnī’s epistolary writings was poor. This was a feature of the highly codified *Inshā‘* genre wherein prayers, blessings, praises, poetry, and the elegance of language and the rhythmic were of utmost importance, to the extent that the benefits at stake occupied little space in these writings. However, other well-known *munsha‘āt* that displayed stylistic concerns, such as the recently reedited letters of Jāmī [Jāmī 2019], provided more informational content and described the material needs or benefits at stake.

Hence, Qazvīnī’s letters were selected and copied for their literary qualities, to serve as models for future letters, and not as sources of information. Scribes likely reduced as much as possible, or even cut off, the informational content of the letters they copied to save time and paper. Furthermore, the standardized structure of these letters is a source of information. It reveals that Qazvīnī was fully aware of courtly culture and conventions and mastered the codes of chancery and epistolary writing. He must have been closely connected with the world of administrators and scribes and was evidently more than an alcoholic poet.

5 From Sufi Poverty to the Language of Supplication: Reinvesting Rhetorical Patterns

Having discussed the standardized structure of Qazvīnī’s letters, this section establishes the Sufi filiation of Qazvīnī’s epistolary language. It argues that the Sufi discourse on poverty and humility was strategically reinvested as rhetorical patterns to express loyalty and submission and acquire protection from the powerful figures outlined in Section 3.

5.1 *Niyāz, Iftiqār, ‘Ajz, Inkisār*

The first set of words belongs to the lexical field of poverty. Below is the list of such words in Persian, with their transliteration and a sample of available translations propounded by referencing Persian-English dictionaries [Hayyim 1934; Steingass et al. 1892]

نیاز (*niyāz*): need, necessity, poverty, indigence

افتقار (*iftiqār*): becoming poor, poverty, indigence, want

عجز (*‘ajz*): powerlessness, weakness, incapacity, inability, infirmity, impotence, helplessness

انکسار (*inkisār*): discouragement, brokenness, humility, abjection, spiritless, contrition

The word *faqīr*, from which *iftiqār* is derived, is employed in al-Ghazzālī's *Book of Poverty and Asceticism*. This book was widely read and used in the Muslim medieval world [al-Ghazzālī 1990; Sabra 2000]. Poverty was defined by Ghazzālī as “the absence of what is needed.” Used in conjunction with *niyāz*, ‘*ajz*, and *inkisār*, *faqīr* emphasized the absolute deprivation of the poor, and the fact that he was fully dependent on God.

The word *inkisār* appeared in several instances in a treatise by the Herati Sufi master ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) titled *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiya* (Generations of Sufis) and edited in Kabul more than 60 years ago. Anṣārī wrote, for instance, that the heart:

به زبان انکسار به صفت افتقار همی گوید

always speaks [to God] with the tongue of brokenness (inkisār) and the quality of poverty (iftiqār) [Anṣārī al-Harawī 1961: part 76]

Anṣārī's compilation of biographical notices and judgments about Sufi predecessors inspired the *Nafahāt al-uns* by Jāmī [de Beaurecueil 1982], whom Qazvīnī admired. It is worth mentioning that the Timurid politics of patronage of shrines included the promotion of the cult of Anṣārī. Timurid sultan Shāhrukh had a shrine of Anṣārī in Gazurgah (in the northeastern suburbs of Herat) rebuilt in 830/1427 [Manz 2007: 219]. Hence, the use of *inkisār* in letters addressed to Timurid princes might be a subtle homage to their efforts for the dissemination of Sufi teachings and practices.

As mentioned, Qazvīnī admired Jāmī. A search in the text of Jāmī's *Haft awrang*, an imitation and recreation of Nizāmī's *Khāmsa*, revealed 28 occurrences of ‘*ajz*. It appeared thrice in the opening of the third book titled *Tuhfat al-aḥrār* (Gift for Free Men), a didactic, moral, and religious book:

آنکه نه دم می زند از عجز کیست
غایت این کار بجز عجز چیست
عجز به از هر دل دانا که هست
بر در آن حی توانا که هست

Who does not breathe out of helplessness (‘ajz), who is it?

The limit of work, if not helplessness, what is it?

Helplessness is better than every learned heart

In this living being, however powerful it is. [Jāmī 1999: book 3, part. 3]

Jāmī valued the helplessness of the dervish who was aware of his need for God. However,

when these words were employed by Qazvīnī, they stressed the absolute dependency of the dervish on his (human) protector, not God. The conjunction of these four words appeared thrice in Qazvīnī’s letters. For instance, in Letter 12 [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 10b] to Babur, the dervish wrote:

بعد از اداء دعاء نامتناهی و ثناء بی انتهای خلافت پناهی نیاز و افتقار و عجز و انکسار موقف عرض
رسانیده

After the expression of prayers and praises for the refuge of the Califate, need, poverty, powerlessness and discouragement were transmitted to the place of audience.

Qazvīnī expressed the wish that he could kiss the yoke of the young prince. Thus, a classical theme of the spiritual and moral Islamic literature was used to express allegiance and submission to a worldly prince. However, this was not a novelty.

According to the Persian dictionary *Dehkhodā* [1931], the word *niyāz* has at least 10 different though related meanings that can roughly be translated as follows: need, poverty, demand, trouble, goal, necessity, wish, friend, gift, and needy. The equivalence between *niyāz* and “demand” or “request” (*iltimās*) is relevant to the analysis of Qazvīnī’s writings. *Dehkhodā* cites, among others, quotes of the classical Persian poet and writer Sa’dī (d. ca. 690/1291), who was associated with Sufi circles. One referred to the *zamīn-i niyāz*, the “ground of need,” on which the needy’s head rested in the audience of the sovereign’s mansion. Another alluded to the threshold of this audience with the formula *āstān-i niyāz* (“threshold of need”), while associating *niyāz* with the lover (*‘āshiq*), a *topos* in classical Persian poetry. Another quote of Sa’dī, under the entry *iftiqār*, evoked a king who was amazed at the poverty of a dervish. This brief analysis suggested that Qazvīnī’s association of poverty, need, and request to the prince drew from a world of meaning his addressees were familiar with. The selection and reinvestment of familiar rhetorical patterns depended on intensive knowledge acquired through repeated reading and copying of texts. This knowledge acted as credentials to be introduced to courts as a man of letters and good manners.

5.2 *Khāksār*

خاکسار (*khāksār*): earth-like, dirty, covered with dust; by extension, “humble, abject, base.”

This term originated from *khāk* (dust) and *sar* (head). It gave its name to the Shi’i Sufi order of the Khāksāriyya, studied by Papas [Papas 2020b]. The Khāksāriyya appeared in Iran during the Qajar period; hence it would be anachronistic to identify Qazvīnī as one of its members.

However, the repeated use of *khāksār* signaled the importance of the language of

humility and self-deprecation for Sufis.

Dehkhodā cites occurrences of *khāksār* in the work of Khāqānī, Nizāmī, Sa‘dī, and Ḥāfiz, among others. The earlier uses seem more literal. For example, in the *Haft Paykar* by Nizāmī (d. 1209 AD), *khāksār* appeared in the story told by the sixth of the seven brides of Prince Bahrām Gūr, the daughter of the emperor of China, whose color was like “sandalwood.” This was the penultimate story of the book, and was sometimes associated to the penultimate stage of the Sufi path, the stage Qazvīnī identified himself with. The story was about two travelers, one named “Good” and the other “Evil.” After a few days, Good becomes thirsty and asks Evil to give him some water. Evil agrees but demands that Good give him his eyes, which he tears out in exchange for a little water before abandoning Good in the desert. Good is saved and cured by a shepherd’s daughter. She is the one who uses the word *khāksār* to describe the poor Good:

گفت و یحک چه کس توانی بود؟
این چنین خاکسار و خون آلود؟

Ah, unfortunate, she said, who are you,

Covered in dust (khāksār) and stained with blood? [Nizāmī 1936: 275]

Here, *khāksār* is used literally: Good is lying in the desert dust when the young girl discovers him. However, this story has multiple layers. In the metaphorical sense, the good is portrayed negatively (“covered in dust”) by bad people. Good people temporarily turn a blind eye to worldly possessions. The Malāmatī drew the following lesson from this story: humiliation, degradation, and suffering were a necessary step toward redemption and the fulfillment of the Sufi quest.

Letter 16 of Qazvīnī’s collection [Qazvīnī 1645: fols 12b–13b] reinvested the word *khāksār* to describe Sufis. It was addressed to *shāhzādah* (prince) Sikandar, the favorite nephew of Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bayqara. Qazvīnī reported in this letter that he was waiting for the *khāksārān*, who prayed and expressed gratitude for the prince, who abided by the rules of humility (*khāksārī*) and servitude (*bandagī*) to cross “the corner of his luminous mind.” Qazvīnī humiliated himself, thereby creating an obligation for the prince to pay attention and protect him.

5.3 *Bīkhānamān, Sargardān*

بیخانمان (*bīkhānamān*): homeless, roving, vagabonds

سرگردان (*sargardān*): wanderers, wandering, vagrants, errant, astray, disoriented, confounded, perplexed

The wandering dervish is a well-known figure. It echoes Majnūn, who lost his senses

due to his impossible love for Layla and wandered disoriented in the Arabic desert. Other famous spiritual wanderers in classical Persian literature were the birds of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. ca. 618/1221) in his renowned *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*. There were 15 occurrences of *sargardān* in this long poem or *masnawī*. This was the story of birds who undertook a long and difficult journey to reach Sīmurgh, their sovereign. This symbolic tale depicted the journey of a Sufi in search of God. Before leaving, the hoopoe answered the birds’ questions about the journey and told them the story of Shaikh Ṣan‘ān, a saintly shaikh who had 400 disciples. Following a dream, he travelled to the land of Rum and fell madly in love with a Christian girl, to the point of renouncing Islam. The word *sargardān* described the state of mind of his disciples, lost without the guidance of their shaikh, and of the shaikh, who lost his faith and went mad with carnal love.

Being *sargardān* was not just being a traveling dervish. It was the state of the discombobulated dervish who appeared to be in grave need of spiritual direction. In Qazvīnī’s letters, *sargardān* appeared six times and *bīkhānamān* once. For instance, *sargardān* appeared in a letter written to the *shaykh al-islam*, the highest clerical officer, of an unnamed city [Qazvīnī 1645: fols 17b–18b]. Qazvīnī referred to him as the protector of the religious law and a guide for the ‘*ulamā*, the religious scholars. He explained that he had mistakenly stayed away from becoming a *mulāzim* of the *shaykh al-islam*. Therefore, he was disoriented, *sargardān*. Qazvīnī evoked the desert of errance that the dervish in need of spiritual guidance must cross, and added that he was reaching out, extending his hand, to obtain security and tranquility. He went so far as to compare the threshold he hoped to kiss to the Ka‘ba. Thereby, the Sufi quest was amalgamated with the quest for the protection of a powerful religious and judicial officer.

5.4 *Farāmūshān-i zāwiya-yi khumūl/Gūsha nishīnān-i bayt al-aḥzān*

فراموشان زاویه خمول (*farāmūshān-i zāwiya-yi khumūl*): the forgotten of the obscure (or despicable) *zāwiya*

گوشه نشینان بیت الاحزان (*gūsha nishīnān-i bayt al-aḥzān*): the hermits of the House of Sorrows

A *zāwiya* (literally, a corner) refers to the retreat of a Sufi, usually a small place, in contrast to the *khānqa*, which is an important building for collective gathering.

Gūsha (corner) is the Persian equivalent for *zāwiya*. *Gūsha nishīnān* (“those who sit in the corner”) is a well-known term to describe hermits who retire from the world. The *bayt al-aḥzān* (the “house of sorrows”) refers to the place where Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, went to lament the death of her father. This term was used in Persian adaptations of the Biblical story of Yūsuf and Zulaikhā (Joseph and Potiphar’s wife) as well, to describe the place where Ya‘qūb, the father of Yūsuf, retired to weep over the separation from his son [de Bruijn and Flemming 2012].

The query فراموشان زاویه خمول in the search engine of *Ganjoor*, an online open-access collection of thousands of works of classical Persian literature [Ganjoor n.d.], did not yield any results. For more than half a century, scholars stressed that Timurid literature was an extension of classical Persian literature, which it purported to imitate [Bertel's 1948; Yarshater 1965]. Toutant highlighted the diversity of imitation practices [Toutant 2016: 245–314]. Qazvīnī's epistolary writings embodied some of these imitation practices. However, the phrase “the forgotten of the obscure *zāwiya*” was likely a personal creation.

Timurid literary debates tackled, among other subjects, the relevance of renewing traditional literary forms [Erkinov 1999]. Qazvīnī may have felt the need to express a personal sentiment without resorting to a standardized formula. This expression of personal emotion prefigured the autobiographical accounts that would soon flourish in the Persianate world, Babur's being the most famous [Babur 2006], one of Qazvīnī's correspondents.

Both phrases appeared in Letter 31 [Qazvīnī 1645: fol. 22a–b] addressed to Marwārīd. Qazvīnī wrote:

توقع آنکه من بعد فراموشان زاویه خمول را تیشیر نفات¹⁰ مراسلات شریف یاد دارند و بگوشه نشینان بیت
الاحزان اقول را با رسال مکاتبات لطیف سر فراز سارند

The expectation is that soon the good news of noble letters will remember the forgotten of the obscure zāwiya and that the recluses of the bayt al-ḥazān will be honored with the dispatch of gracious letters.

Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Abdallāh Marwārīd, known under the *takhalluṣ* Bayānī and the *nisba* Kirmānī, held various positions in the Timurid administration and succeeded ‘Alī Shīr Nawā’ī as keeper of the seal. We saw that he authored a *munsha’āt* included in King's Pote 27. By requesting letters and replies from Marwārīd, Qazvīnī hoped for a spiritual exchange and went as far as expressing his emotions in a novel way. He must have felt obscure in comparison with the much-applauded Marwārīd. However, he was probably expecting livelihood, since Marwārīd's *Inshā’* collection includes document that bestowed employment. For example, a *nishān* (letter signed by the prince) conferred the office of *bukāwallī* (cook) in the *khānqa* attached to the madrasa of Sulṭān Ḥusayn in Herat to a certain Amīr Ḥājji Pīr [Marwārīd 2019: 58–60]. Qazvīnī and his fellow Malāmatī could have contemplated similar benefits.

Conclusion

¹⁰ We read this word as نفات or نفحات, meaning “breezes” or “blower.” The 1784 British Library manuscript reads instead نقاب, that is, *niqāb* (we see that the pointing has been rearranged at some point) [Qazvīnī 1784: fol. 22b]. The theme of the veil seems slightly unusual in this section of the letter. However, note that the Steingass dictionary mentions “meeting unexpectedly” among possible translations of *niqāb*.

This study of one of the older manuscripts of the *Inshā-yi Qazvīnī* investigated how the Sufi language of poverty and humility was reinvested as rhetorical patterns to express loyalty and request protection from powerful actors in troubled times. A careful analysis showed that the Malāmatī Sufi Qazvīnī was closely associated with important Naqshbandī circles in Qazvin and Herat, and the Timurid courts in Herat, Balkh, and Kabul. The fact that his letters were preserved and copied several times in the Persianate world proved that he had a command of the conventions of epistolary writings. He was more than a marginal dervish, yet he presented himself in this fashion. Hence, he made a rhetorical link between the dervish’s need for closeness to God and the need for the (material) benefits bestowed by the prince. The dervish would present himself as poor and disoriented and express how much he needed help from his powerful addressee, creating a moral obligation to protect him and his associates. Overall, this study strengthened Papas’ idea that it was worth studying Sufi “institutions,” including Sufi spiritual thoughts and material organizations.

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