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The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali
Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies

A Letter of Recommendation for Ms. Fateme Montazeri

I am delighted to recommend to you Ms. Fateme Montazeri, a holder of a PhD in Persian Literature from the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Montazeri filed her dissertation, *The Reception of Hāfiz: Cultural History of a Persianate Controversy*, in May 2022. I've known Ms. Montazeri for twelve years in three capacities: as her instructor in an undergraduate seminar at the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley in the fall of 2012 (which she took for graduate credit while an MA student at the Graduate Theological Union), as her external examiner for Qualifying Exams in the fall semester of 2016, and as the external member of her dissertation committee.

I'd like to highlight first aspects of Dr. Montazeri's scholarly interests that surpass the dissertation and showcase her commitment to other topics. Although primarily a scholar of texts written by men, Dr. Montazeri's is attentive to the representation of women and visual culture in her exploration of historical questions. The paper she wrote for my class exemplifies this twin thread in her scholarship. Dr. Montazeri chose to work on a miniature from the fourteenth-century manuscript known as the "Mongol *Shahnama* (Book of Kings)," currently in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. The illumination depicts the hero Iskandar's dead body mourned by women. Ms. Montazeri argued convincingly, in my estimation, that the unusual inclusion of women among the mourners in this miniature reflected the socio-ideological context of the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty in Tabriz, where the manuscript was produced. She saw in it at once reflected and legitimated the contemporary status of the court women as well as the suitability of Iskandar (Alexander) as a model for the Mongol rulers of Persia.

Since her class with me, her art historical research deepened. Ms. Montazeri has co-presented on the Fakhr al-Ashraf's Lithographed Quran and its Calligraphy Treatise at the Associations for the Historians of Islamic art. Dr. Montazeri's research on topics focused on gender has likewise deepened and become more sophisticated. Here, I'd like to mention her article on gender ambiguity in Persian poetry, "Who Says Only Men Have a Beard? Revisiting the Question of Gender Ambiguity in Persian Poetry," published in *Anthropology of the Middle East* (2021) as well as her work on the love poem by Nizami about the lovers Layla and Majnun.

My perspective in evaluating Dr. Montazeri's dissertation is that of a non-specialist, albeit one who, like her, seeks to recover royal claims to authority via, among others, religious invocations,

art and the built environment, but in a different premodern context. I am therefore familiar with the methodological challenges in that type of research, including loss of evidence, the linguistic complexity of the extant primary and secondary sources, the multiple competencies required to conduct research, and the dispersed nature of the primary sources (in her case, mss of Hāfiz's *Dīvān*, the collected volume of his writings).

What I see as a non-specialist in Dr. Montazeri's dissertation is an ambitious argument, clearly argued via a careful literary analysis as well as a skillful marshaling of a mosaic of relevant primary sources, including epigraphic, material, visual and architectural. The study illuminates the dynamic reception of the poetry of Hāfiz during the Safavid era in Persia (1501-1723). In five chapters, Montazeri demonstrates how Hāfiz's poetry was selectively deployed and even occasionally changed to resonate and thus legitimate the political claims and religious allegiances of the ruling house. From a Sufi poet recognized for the mystical power of his work in the early 1500s, Hāfiz became an emblem of Shiite ideology by the end of Shah 'Abbās's reign (r. 1588-1629). The dissertation thus offers an impressive, long view, analysis of Hāfiz's reception. Yet it is as much a literary study as it is a study of Persian court culture, and the ways in which the Safavid Persian kings deployed Hāfiz's work for personal gain. I learned much from the dissertation and see in it the foundation of a far-reaching and erudite book.

Since finishing the dissertation, Ms. Montazeri has received two grants that recognize her outstanding abilities as instructor (she taught Persian language and literature at UC Berkeley). She likewise received a Bahari Visiting Fellowship in the Persian Arts of the Book at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford. That prestigious fellowship enabled her to study manuscripts of Hāfiz's *Dīvān* at the Bodleian Libraries. Her work on those manuscripts yielded exciting new insights on the *qasidas*, poetry of praise that prefaces Hāfiz's poetry. These have been traditionally dismissed as unimportant, yet she thinks they played a critical role in "staging" Hāfiz's poetry.

In the next stage of her research, she plans to expand her study of Hāfiz's *Dīvān* to its reception in the Persianate World, including Mughal India and the Ottoman Court. The work she plans to undertake at the next stage of her career is to write a "cultural history of the Persianate world," one that uses the dynamic reception of Hāfiz's poetry as its lens.

In my humble opinion, Ms. Montazeri's deserves your serious consideration. She is an original boundary-pushing scholar, a brilliant instructor, and a wonderful human being. She would fit right in with any team. I highly recommend her.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Dilia Angelova". The ink is dark and the script is fluid, with a large, stylized 'A' and 'D'.

Dilia Angelova

Associate Professor
Departments of History of Art and History