

**Amanda Caterina Leong**  
**University of California Merced**  
**Abstract**

**Female Acrobats and Equestrians:  
Recovering Female *Javānmardī* in the Premodern Persianate world**

*Javanmardi* (young-manliness) is an ethical concept of human perfection and is translated from Persian into English as ‘chivalry’. It is used in the Persianate world to describe a person who possesses manly virtues ranging from courage, integrity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, piety, self-sacrifice, wisdom, fortitude, and beauty. Unfortunately, due to the scholarly consensus that *javanmardi* pertains to the male sexed body only, women’s relationship to *javanmardi* remains overlooked. In the realm of *javanmardi*, the *luti* (hooligan) stands out as a prominent icon. Additionally, equestrian skills are another significant facet of the *javanmardi* tradition.

Due to their daring, strength, and beauty, male acrobats are often associated with the *luti* archetype and are recognized as emblematic figures of *javanmardi*. However, visual sources from the early nineteenth-century Qajar Iranian contexts have shown the presence of not just male, but also female acrobats engaging in feats that rival and, in some cases, surpass those of their male counterparts. Moreover, visual and textual sources from the early modern Mughal and Safavid contexts have shown how it was not just men, but also Persianate women who were celebrated for being expert equestrians.

This paper aims to understand from a visual-textual perspective how women from various social classes in Safavid, Mughal, and Qajar contexts associated themselves with *javanmardi* to showcase their power. They did so not merely through their acrobatic and equestrian prowess, but also through adorning themselves with various kinds of makeup and costumes in their performances. By looking at the different symbolic meanings behind their acts and adornments, I seek to further showcase how women fashioned their identities as *javanmards* (manly youths). By also looking at how these female acrobats and female equestrians were understood and used by male monarchs in the realms of diplomacy, I seek to better understand how female *javanmardi* can provide a new understanding of the broader political landscape of their times. \

**Keywords: Female acrobats, chivalry, javanmardi, female equestrian**