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Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Contemporary
Iranian Photography

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In recent years audiences have become increasingly aware of Middle Eastern cultures through museums, galleries, and other institutions. Iran, in particular, has contributed to the contemporary international arts scene. For example, in 2004-05 commercial galleries in the Middle East expanded exhibits of Iranian art. Later on many Iranian works were introduced by London, Paris, and New York galleries to viewers outside of Iran.¹ In 2009 the Saatchi Gallery in London displayed the exhibit, Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East. It included the work of twenty-one artists who originated from the Middle East, although more than half of them lived in American and European cities such as New York or Paris.² This statistic shows how artists with Iranian ties are a part of a global arts environment. Exhibitions like these can aid viewers to shed their misconceptions about the arts and societies of the Middle East and in particular, Iran. Frequent assumptions are made which result in the stereotyped ideas about the clothing, technology, and cultural values of Iranian society. These misconceptions are exacerbated by biased media headlines that pit Iranian and Western societies in opposition to each other. What is excluded from such media are the frequent exchanges of artistic and social contact that point to the diversity of experience in Iran.

This paper explores the works of contemporary Iranian photographers: Bahman Jalali, Shadi Ghadirian, and Shirin Aliabadi to show how their art represents ideas about identity, in particular, perceptions of identity in Iranian and Western societies. Their photographs ask viewers to examine their assumptions about the relationship between modernity and identity. The artists’ choice of medium, depiction of veiling practices, and implications of Westernization in relation to consumerism that critique both Amero-European and Iranian ideas concerning progress will be focused on in this paper. The works navigate through stereotypes of an East and West divide to reveal complex relationships between these cultures that emphasize misconceptions about modernity which falsely suggest that certain styles of dress and ways of life are superior to another. Each of these themes supports how the photographers use their art to reveal the limitations of using cultural assumptions to characterize identity.

**Methodology**

Considering that the current assumptions about Middle Eastern identity stem from the colonial era it is appropriate to analyze these ideas using an aspect of Postcolonial studies to examine the photographs. Postcolonial studies can be described as a theory that looks at the structure of cultures that have been under colonial rule.³ This experience influences the economic systems of the country as well as social aspects such as identity. As stated by Robert Young, “The postcolonial has always been concerned with interrogating the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice, with addressing the fact that, and the reasons why, millions of people in this world still live without things that most of those in the West take for granted.” ⁴ This assessment demonstrates how post-colonized cultures have been saddled with the after effects of colonialism’s negative impact. A concept associated with the postcolonial approach, hybrid identity, will be a key strategy to interpret the works.

A common misconception about cultural identity is that it is singular instead of influenced by a variety of sources. Conversely, hybrid identity is the outcome when local and global societies mix together. As a result, people have identities that incorporate the characteristics of a multitude of societies.⁵ That is to suggest that someone can have the traditions from their regional culture engrained in them but also have aspects that come from many other cultures. The artists discussed in this essay explore themes of identity in their works. I will use the concept of hybrid identity to examine how the photographs raise inquiries about the relationship between Iranian
and Amero-European perceptions of identity. These photographers challenge the stereotypes about religion, gender, and other defining by presenting situations that simultaneously show and defy what viewers might expect of Iranian subjects. In each case, the artists confront the viewer with stereotypes of the Middle East, and in particular Iran, in ways that ask us to re-assess expectations about Iran and modernity. The decision to explore these issues with photography seems appropriate given that this medium has been integral to spreading the stereotypes and to dismantling them.

**Photography as Medium**

Often photography can be misconstrued as non-manipulated reality. While sometimes photographs can appear candid, images are constructed to convey the photographer’s message or point of view. As the scholar Geoffrey Batchen has said of early modern photography, “photography revealed deep tensions within the hierarchical structures of bourgeois society, and raised questions, both epistemological and ideological, as to how the world should be viewed and comprehended.” This statement is a perfect summary of how colonial photography used Iranian subjects in order to present Iranian identity as aligned with many European attitudes of the nineteenth century. European photography of Persian subjects was employed for tourists, expositions, as well as to accompany reports by foreign governments. These photographs recorded information as well as provided a glimpse of people of the Middle East. The images of Iranian people created for European audiences were stereotypical by emphasizing them as exotic and “primitive.” This complex connection between history, photography, and hierarchy is often critiqued in the work of contemporary Iranian artists. Often, these contemporary artists use their work to reference the Qajar Dynasty because this was an integral time period for Iran’s connection with photography.

The Qajar Dynasty lasted from the 18th to early 20th century in Persia, present day Iran. This time period saw plenty of interaction between Persia and Europe. Naser al-Din Shah, who ruled from 1848-96, was particularly important to the history of Iranian photography. During his reign, the technological changes associated with the West became more prevalent in Iran. The Shah took and collected photographs as well as encouraged his servants to do the same. Clearly there was local interest in photography as a way of depicting life in Persia. Photography was a political tool as well. The Shah used this medium to construct images that presented him in the way that he wanted to be seen by the community. Public appearance, as now, was an integral part in an authority figure’s presence. The Shah often appeared in photographs wearing European style clothing. In the 19th century studio portraits of Iranian subjects became common. The photographers of these images based their background sets and subjects on earlier Orientalist paintings and European style portraits. This prevalent imagery based on European concepts of Iranian identity largely influenced the assumptions about Iranian society.

This brief history of photography in relation to Iran reveals one aspect of the interaction between Europe and Persia. The combination of some aspects of Iranian culture with European concepts of Iranian society has blurred the line between the actuality of everyday local life and the exaggeration of it. Several of the Iranian photographers examined in this essay have worked with subjects generated from this historical framework to create new messages about local identity. Their use of historical references and elements of global identities causes a transnational dialogue to occur within these images that alters common views of Iranian and European cultures. This type of mixing is prevalent in the works by Bahman Jalali and Shadi Ghadirian.

Bahman Jalali, (1944-2010), was a photographer who during the 1970s and 80s focused on the landscape and cities of post-Revolutionary Iran. Jalali’s later photographs such as his *Image of Imagination* series uses photographs from the Qajar Dynasty. The series combines photographic images together in photomontages that incorporate images of Iranian subjects from different cultural perspectives. This process and his choice of subject matter both contribute to ideas of hybrid identity.

One of Jalali’s more striking images from the *Image of Imagination* series is an untitled work (fig. 1) that blends the image of Iranian wrestlers and a female figure. The photograph of the female is in black and white and one of the men is sepia toned. The woman’s left arm comes up to her chin which is cradled in her palm. She leans forward on a ledge with her breasts covered by her right arm that rests on the same ledge. These poses create a sense of different moods between the males and the female. Her gaze is directed to the side creating a sense that she is daydreaming. The men look straight at the viewers and appear stern. There is a distinction between passivity and assertion existing within the figures’ stances and gazes. Jalali’s creation creates an intriguing blend of images to make one photograph; however, there are still elements that remind the viewers that there are two different environments existing within the work.

A frosty white background is behind the woman. The butterfly’s wings make her look like a cherub one might see in *The Sistine Madonna* (fig. 2) by Raphael in 1512. The woman in Jalali’s image looks quite similar because she has the same posture as one of the cherubs. The position of the female’s body and the body of one of the cherubs are parallel to each other. Her facial expression is also rather similar to the cherub’s. It creates a figure that is simultaneously part of Iranian culture but also has associations with European culture. The wings cause the woman to be connected to European image making.

In contrast to European conventions used with the female figure, the Pahlavani wrestlers are more representative of Iranian culture. They would have practiced in the zurkhaneh (gym) which was a place that represented chivalry, fair play, and generosity. By extension the wrestlers were expected to have the same values. The choice of using this image of men is another reminder of how Iran’s past is deeply entwined with photography. Originally, the image of the men would have been directed towards Iranian viewers while the image of the female was for European viewers. Besides cultural differences, there are definite gender differences. The men exude confidence and strength, which is, so often associated...
with masculinity in a plethora of cultures. They are the antithesis of the female who already seemed passive but appears even more so when placed near the wrestlers. This juxtaposition creates a transition that brings up the tension of gender-based expectations. This photomontage also brings forth the history of photography throughout the last 150 years. The artist is reminding us of this photographic transition by using the old images but with the incorporation of contemporary photomontage techniques. Jalali’s re-use of antique images has a connection to the Persian past, but to recall the Qajar Dynasty with new photography is another path to address questions of the relationship between local and global identities.

After looking at the image as separate parts, it is fitting to now consider it as a whole. Together the two photographs used become the epitome of hybrid identity. At once viewers become aware of the relationship between gender, nationality, and culture. Jalali creates a juxtaposition that addresses ideas about identity. Frequently, European and Iranian ideas or displays of what is expected of Iranian identity would be separated, but the artist makes us contemplate both at the same time by placing the different types of photographs in close proximity to each other. This mix of European and Iranian elements is a method used in other contemporary Iranian artist’s compositions.

Shadi Ghadirian is a prominent Iranian photographer. As a female artist in Tehran she often runs into challenges because of her gender and such issues are reflected in her work. Ghadirian was influenced by Jalali and also uses Qajar Dynasty photography as inspiration for her work. However, instead of using old imagery in a new context, she creates new photographs that are similar to historical Qajar images. As in the works of Jalali, these images explore Iran’s connections with history, photography and ideas of modernity. Her Qajar Series (1998-2001) exhibits images of elaborate 19th century style studio settings with painted backgrounds and patterned carpets on the floor. Each image shows a woman wearing an outfit common to the Qajar era. The photographs are similar in format to the images taken by Europeans and Persians during the Qajar Dynasty. Ghadirian has also incorporated elements of contemporary life such as a boom box, a vacuum, or sunglasses. In Qajar # 19 (fig. 3), a woman sits in a studio setting dressed in elaborate garments. A black headscarf covers her head and is pinned closed underneath her chin. Her arms are covered by a jacket and her legs are covered by a skirt and baggy pants. She sits between two objects: on her right is an early, bulky wooden camera that is nearly the same height as her and on the other side is a small, convenient black modern camera. The composition of this image is quite powerful. The woman literally sits between the Qajar past and Iranian present. She places a hand on each of the cameras, connecting her with the tools of both eras. This reinforces Iran’s past with the medium of photography while simultaneously reminding the viewer of contemporary Iranian life. The clothing was also a way of revealing ideas about Iranian identity. As the scholar Jananne Al-Ani discusses, contemporary Iranian viewers would understand the setting and garments as theatrical and historical reference to the past. In contrast, viewers less familiar with modern Iran could assume that the clothing is still prevalent today and that the props considered to be contemporary were the elements out of place. This is because assumptions about Iranian lifestyles are still heavily influenced by images of the Qajar period. Ghadirian addresses the misconceptions about Iranian identity but in such a way that re-appropriates this Qajar appearance to reveal the fact that Iranian culture like any other society, balances between its history and its present.

The medium of photography used in both examples is extremely significant because the assumptions of Iranian and Western identity as well as the past and the present are emphasized. It is through this medium that the Iranian identity has become a blend of local and Western traits. While the final photographs are different in appearance, both works are a result of imagery made by and for Europeans versus imagery by and for Iranians. This discussion reveals that many ideas about Iran have been shaped by the past, in particular the Qajar Dynasty. Similar to photography, the practice of veiling has many misconceptions attached to it.

Veiling

Today veiling is seen as one of the most striking symbols of Islam and is often politicized. For example, in France in 2011, a ban was put in place that prohibited wearing anything that covered the face because according to President Nicholas Sarkozy, “the burqa is not welcome in France because it is contrary to our values and contrary to the ideals we have of a woman’s dignity.” The burqa is a garment that covers most of the body, head and face with a mesh over the eyes so the wearer can see. Sarkozy’s statement indicates the ban was put in place to eliminate anything that wasn’t Western, and in particular French. His focus on values and dignity suggests that those who practice this form of veiling do not have dignity or independence. Clearly, he did not understand the practice of veiling within an Islamic context but instead decided to judge it based on the context of his society. While the ban targeted the burqa in particular, this sense of intimidation and fear can extend to other types of veils.

The practice of veiling has many different associations which are often misunderstood by non-Muslims in contemporary society. For example, several centuries ago it was associated with high social status. There is a common misconception that there is one particular type of veil and that is has been consistently worn by Muslim women. In reality, there are several kinds of coverings. For example, the niqab covers the entire face except for the eyes. The hijab looks more like a scarf. It covers the hairline, wraps under the chin, and lays on the shoulders and upper chest. The chador is most frequently associated with Iran. It is a large piece of fabric that covers the woman from head to toe and is held together under the chin by the wearer, leaving the entire face visible. While this is a brief description of various veils, it is enough to show that veiling appears in several styles. Like these styles, attitudes about veiling vary as well. Therefore, the idea that all veils carry the same connotations is a misconception. In the 20th and 21st centuries the chador has been both legal and illegal in Iran. It was banned by the political leader, Reza Shah, from 1936-1941 and later became acceptable, but after the 1979 Revolution it became 

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The artist Shadi Ghadirian emphasizes the chador in her series from 2000 called *Like Every Day*. The series includes a number of images, each one focused on a single figure standing in the middle of the photograph in front of a white background. There are few elements that make the figures stand out. The subjects are covered by a chador-like covering. The coverings differ from the traditional black version because of the use of bright colored patterned cloth. These elements in addition to items such as brooms, cups, and irons add to the comedy of the setting by covering the faces of the figures. The website for the Saatchi Gallery comments on the humorous quality in the works since the placement of the domestic items creates an unusual face. This produces a satirical series of photographs that comment on the absurd, stereotypical identities placed on Iranian women and women in general. For example, in *Like Every Day* #1 (fig. 4), the figure wears a chador type covering made of white material with a black flower pattern. A red teacup sits on a white saucer and is placed where the subject’s face would usually be seen. Noticeably, all the items represent domesticity and by extension, the roles that have historically been associated with women. Ghadirian has said of this series, “Marriage showed me how a large segment of women in our society are bound by these objects; I wanted to know how Iranian women go through life with these items, and how things are different in appearance. This series portrays how the blending of gender and culture can create a particular identity. Ghadirian uses humor to show us the limitations of that identity because it is possible for women to have hybrid identities. The practice of veiling is considered again in another of Ghadirian’s series, but it doesn’t evoke such a comical mood.

Ghadirian’s later series, *West by East* from 2004 also critiques Amero-European assumptions about the practice of veiling from local and global contexts. In this series the setting looks like one seen in a magazine. As with the *Like Every Day* series, the background is white so that attention is focused on the female subjects. Like in a fashion magazine, the women are positioned either standing or sitting in ways that show off the garment that is meant to be sold. However, what would have been the merchandise, in this case clothing, is obscured. A technique called hatching covers the majority of the figures’ bodies. In preparing the photographs, Ghadirian places the models behind a pane of glass and marks it with black paint. In most of the images fragments of the models’ clothing and body parts can be seen. One image in particular that deviates from a fashion magazine layout is *West by East # 10* (fig. 5) because the figure is almost entirely covered by hatching. Only the model’s eyes can be seen. She stands with her right hand on her hip, a pose that in a regular catalogue would effectively show off the clothes. The hatching alludes to the appearance of the chador and even the niqab in that it completely covers her body and most of her face. However, the figure isn’t completely disguised. The hatching follows the contours of the body. That fact that the body is displayed this way critiques how censorship functions in Iran.

Iran has been subject to numerous periods of censorship since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. At various times in Iran, Western publications that came into the country were censored in a way quite similar to the models in the image. As with the models, the figures in these Western publications had to be inked out. Anything that would be considered offensive, particularly parts of the body, had to be covered up. Censorship is about control. The censored Western publications were a way of exerting control over what influenced Iranian society. The veil causes issues of power for those who don’t veil as well. For instance, in the 19th century French general Thomas-Robert Bugeaud articulated his dislike of the veil by claiming that the concealment of the women was how Middle Eastern society eluded the European and American societies. This discomfort towards the veil still occurs in contemporary society. Many people have trouble processing the meanings of veiling which is why the veil is considered a controversial subject. The concerns about the veil aren’t solely about the object but all the possible implications it has such as religious affiliations. In the *West by East* images Ghadirian is showing how the Iranian government attempts to block out elements that could be understood as spreading westernization. There appears to be a clear divide between what is considered Islamic and non-Islamic. The title, *West by East*, alludes to this disconnect. Yet, the images show women who are in a sense both in contemporary clothing and still covered in black evoking the chador or other veils. Therefore, what we see are women who are a part of fashion trends that are assumed to be Western yet, the women are also part of Islamic tradition.

Both of Ghadirian’s examples, although different in appearance, draw on ideas of female identity. The veil is a center piece for hybrid identity in each example. In both cases, what is represented is a figure that is tied to traditional ideas. The images are specific to Islam to an extent, however, any woman can place herself in a similar situation of being torn between gender and culture based expectations. Veiling is an interesting practice in relation to hybrid identity because of the way it is perceived. Often the sight of a veiled woman leads to assumptions about otherness. Ghadirian’s series discussed in this section effectively uses the veil in a way that not only critiques her local society, but the experiences of and stereotypes about women that are prevalent in many other cultures.

**Westernization**

Westernization has many associations with nationality, consumerism, and materialism.
Westernization, as described by scholar Joseph Heath, is the influence of the emulation of the West. Due to the various outcomes of Westernization, attitudes towards it are quite broad. The process of Westernization doesn't just entail certain business practices in another country. The traditions associated with the West get transferred as well. This creates a tension between local and non-local traits. In a world steadily being more influenced by Western values, consumerism is another strong factor in the creation of identity. Consumerism is a very noticeable aspect of Westernization. Especially in the contemporary world, consumerism seems to be more of a global phenomenon rather than being part of a particular culture.

Consumerism is considered to be a global occurrence because it mainly stems from advertising which doesn't clearly reflect a particular value system. Regardless of what product is being advertised, the underlying reasons for consumers to buy certain items are similar. According to some, consumerism brings with it individualism. This association is based on the concept that people define and create an identity for themselves through material objects. This is true to an extent, but the idea is still problematic. It is possible that consumers who purchase the same items could end up with similar identities therefore contradicting ideas of individualism. Ideas about Iran, Islam, consumerism, and individualism are all complex interrelated concepts to explore. Some Iranian photographers have used their work to examine how consumerism and Westernization has influenced societies from positive and negative perspectives.

Shirin Aliabadi critiques Iranian and American society by using her work to portray ideas of Westernization and consumerism. Aliabadi was born in Iran, spent a large portion of her childhood in Paris, and currently resides in Tehran. This multicultural background influences her Miss Hybrid series from 2007. The series includes images of various women in studio settings that look similar to portraits. In each image a woman wears bright clothes, vibrant scarves, and blonde wigs and has blue eyes. Their appearance resembles ideas of an idealized Amero-European woman. For example, Miss Hybrid #3 (fig. 6) shows a woman wearing a light blue jean jacket. Her headscarf has blue and white stripes that coordinate with her outfit which is vibrant against the black background of the image. Her mouth is obscured by the large pink bubble she has blown with her chewing gum making her seem child-like and stereotypically feminine. The title of the series blatantly addresses the issue of the blended contemporary identity in a world dominated by globalization. The hybrid subject in the image is an amalgam of popular styles and personas made possible by global consumerism.

Aliabadi’s images seem to restrict individuality. The representation of the subjects exposes the blend of the East and West due to consumerism. The scarfs the subjects wear reference Muslim practices, but everything else such as the clothing and accessories suggest American and European fashion traits. In combination, the viewer is presented with a young woman who is active in practices of several cultures. The images also reveal ideas about beauty. The artist highlights how beauty is homogenized. In the series, there isn’t much difference between the subjects. They all represent the same idea of what an attractive woman should look like according to popular media. The artist makes us take notice of the stereotype of the blue-eyed, blonde-haired woman with perfect features. It is unsettling to imagine how strongly an oppressive identity such as this can be absorbed into the collective mindset of women all over the world. Ultimately, certain body types and outward appearances are still dominant. Aliabadi’s series shows that ideal type displayed before us. The empty background makes the viewer focus more on the actual subject and question the appearance they have. The subjects mirror the ideas of current society and by doing so cause us to question what we value and why.

Shirin Aliabadi and Farhad Moshiri look at the relationship between perceptions about the consumption of items and western projections of identity in their Operation Supermarket series completed in 2006. Each photograph presents a still life with objects such as cleaning products or cereal boxes. However, instead of their regular labels, they are replaced with new ones that create different meanings, such as commentary on westernization and politics. Her photograph, We are all Americans (fig. 7) depicts four common cleaning products placed in a row in front of a white background. From left to right the bottles are blue, yellow, white, and pink and vary in shape. Each container has a label with a single word. The first bottle says, “We,” and the rest continue in this pattern to spell out the complete phrase: “We are all Americans.”

On two of the bottles there is Arabic text. This shows how Western identity can be disposable. The word “operation” in the title is often associated with military missions. However, this series may not be referring to a military attack so much as the attack through the consumer market. The title suggests the influence of non-local economies in Iranian society. The artists are playing with the idea that commodities can bring change by way of consumerism. So often, the public is made to believe that their life will improve if they buy the right items. Objects become more than just things but are part of a lifestyle. The values of Islam and consumerism are seen as contradictory. Therefore, products are integral to the operation of spreading consumerism and Western ideology throughout Iran. The title of this particular image can be attributed to a fascination with Western culture. American products have become a large part of life in other cultures which affects the behaviors of those societies. Ultimately, having American items heavily involved in the Iranian consumer market places a combination of the aspirations of Iranian culture and American idealizations on Iranian identity.

Both of Aliabadi’s series examine the influence of Westernization and consumerism on culture. They ask viewers to question the impact of the types of identities and products that have become prevalent on a local and global scale. Both examples present viewers with appearances and items that aren’t necessarily expected of Iranian culture. Furthermore, the examples lead to the critique of social and cultural values. While these two series examine consumerism in different ways, they both provide viewers with a critique of the kinds of values that are prevalent in various societies.
This essay has focused on how Iranian photographers have used their work to comment on ideas about identity. The themes of photography as a medium, the practice of veiling, and the influence of westernization in relation to consumerism have been integral to the discussion of hybrid identity in relation to each image. The artists used the medium of photography to highlight that the type of technology isn't strictly Western, but has been a part of Iranian culture for a long period of time. Additionally, it allowed the artists to re-appropriate old stereotypes to reveal that there is more to Iranian identities than European fantasies common to colonialist photography. Veiling is used to critique local and Western ideas about the associations of this practice. The images question how censorship functions, particularly in Iranian society, and how this form of censorship can potentially limit female identity. Veiling was also helpful in breaking down Western stereotypes by using subjects that, albeit veiled, are still a part of contemporary trends and experience gender issues similar to women from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. Westernization and consumerism are used in order to examine how the sociocultural values associated with these concepts have influenced Iranian society by aiding in the creation of hybrid identities. This leads viewers to question the idealization of Western values and consumer trends. While the particular styles of each artist vary, they all use these motifs to raise questions about hybrid identities and engage in a variety of critiques. The photographs don't claim one society to be superior to another, but reveal the shortcomings of the assumptions about modernity, gender, censorship, westernization, and identity.
List of Referenced Images

Fig. 1. Bahman Jalali, *Untitled*, Image of Imagination Series, C-Print, 31 in x 30 in, 2003, Private Collection, Tehran.

Fig. 2. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, oil on canvas, 104 in x 70 in, 1512, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery), Dresden, Saxony, Germany.

Fig. 3. Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar #19*, Qajar Series, silver bromide print, 23 in x 35 in, 1998, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

Fig. 4. Shadi Ghadirian, *Like Every Day #1*, Like Every Day series, C-Print, 19 in x 19 in, 2000, Private Collection, London, England.

Fig. 5. Shadi Ghadirian, *West by East #10*, West by East series, C-Print, 23 in x 35 in, 2004.

Fig. 6. Shirin Aliabadi, *Miss Hybrid #3*, Miss Hybrid Series, 2007, C-Print, 59 in x 47 in, Private Collection, Geneva.

Fig. 7. Shirin Aliabadi, *We are all Americans*, Operation Supermarket series, 2006, Inkjet print, 39 in x 29 in, Private Collection, Tehran.
Notes


16. Al-Ani, 94.


23. Mohammad A. Qadeer, “Silence of the burqa: Immigrant Muslim communities shy away from debating whether traditional dress is appropriate in Canada” The Gazette 1999, ProQuest (433520146).


30. Eigner, 166.


34. Heath, 670.


38. Eigner, 131.


40. Godazgar, 390.

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