The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön

Melnick Dyer, Alison

Published by University of Washington Press

Melnick Dyer, Alison.
The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön: A Woman of Power and Privilege.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/102421.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/102421

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3220307
Chapter Three

Multivocal Lives

Although I only had a brief glimpse of her youthful face, it was wondrous and overwhelmingly beautiful. As soon as I gazed upon her, I shed many tears. I went after her, hoping to ask if I could follow her. Thus my faith involuntarily arose.

—Gyurmé Ösel

I have become just like the hunted deer
Before Lord Yama—terror’s face of death.
Back bowed, I drag the weight of endless fear.

—Mingyur Peldrön

At the center of Dispeller sits the relationship that is integral to any hagiography: that between author and subject. Rather than the multi-authored Life of Sönam Peldren or the auto/biography of Sera Khandro, Mingyur Peldrön’s namtar was penned entirely by the monk Gyurmé Ösel, with any suggestions or quotations from Mingyur Peldrön herself remaining wholly managed by the author of the work. Gyurmé Ösel would spend most of his life either in the care of or in service to her, first as her disciple and student, then later transitioning to her amanuensis, before eventually becoming her hagiographer. This trajectory is not unusual; the writing of a hagiography by a spiritual disciple is a commonality that spans Tibetan and non-Tibetan examples of the genre. Literary expressions of the master-disciple relationship are typical in Tibetan namtar, elevating as it does the “master” to the position of enlightened person. While these narratives are often devotional in tone, they can also be multivocal and complex in their representations of the subject and her environment. Hagiography can be a sort of ground for cultural negotiation in which hagiographers posit new ideas, support long established patterns, or argue for the value of either. These texts become sites in which cultural norms and questions are worked
out and reinforced. As such, topics that are in question at the time of com-
position are emphasized in the text, whether they are of concern on a wider
social scale or solely in the mind of the author.

In *Dispeller* Gyurmé Ösel depicts Mingyur Peldrön as someone deeply
concerned with issues of religious education who approached the topic in
a markedly gendered way. Her advice to men and women was notably dis-
tinct from each other, underscoring specific concerns along the normative
eighteenth-century gender bifurcation. Alongside topics related to religious
education, monasticism and a general concern about the future of Mind-
röling are also prominent points of conversation in *Dispeller*. The variety of
opinions presented on these issues result in a sort of dialogue of ideas in the
text. While *Dispeller* purportedly had a single author, perspectives on these
contemporary social issues are introduced and furthered by the multiple
voices in the narrative. These are generally depicted in the form of quota-
tions that Gyurmé Ösel attributed to different people, including Mingyur
Peldrön. He presents multivocal renderings of conversations that he claims
occurred between Mingyur Peldrön and others and, in doing so, portrays
Mingyur Peldrön as a woman with strong opinions on topics as diverse as
access to religious education, the importance of monasticism, and the dan-
gers of alcohol. Tracking these dialogues shows how hagiography as a
multivocal genre can do the work of revealing a society’s cultural tensions.
Broadly speaking, Mingyur Peldrön’s own written works took the form of
instructions directed at anyone who had received the proper empower-
ments, explanatory texts that revolved around her father’s work, and the
occasional prayer. These texts show the depth of her immersion in Mind-
röling’s Great Perfection training system, addressing a range of stages of
progress, from preliminary to higher-level practices. They also show her
wide versatility as a teacher and practitioner (from introductory practice
to secret tantric teachings) and are generally focused on the preservation of
the Great Perfection. She composed her work at the behest of a variety of
people, from her own students, including Gyurmé Ösel and assorted monks
and nuns related to Mindröling; to local royalty, including the central Tibetan
prince Gyurmé Samten Chogdrup; and other Nyingma teachers, such as Tulkhu
Rinpoche Gyurmé Pema Chogdrup, who was himself a teacher of Jigmé
Lingpa, among others.

While Gyurmé Ösel makes no direct references to Mingyur Peldrön act-
ing in a maternal role for him, she had surely witnessed his childhood and
his transition through various stages of life. He basically grew up with her
as his guardian, beginning at the age of eight. It is easy to imagine a maternal role for her and a mother-son bond between the two. However, no such relationship is ever expressed in Dispeller. She is presented as his enlightened, beloved, compassionate religious teacher, but no maternal language is used to reference her. It is important to also keep in mind that there were few women who held positions such as Mingyur Peldrön’s during Gyurmé Ösel’s lifetime. He likely had few other living models for what a female religious teacher would be like, and yet he did not draw on maternal imagery to speak about his beloved teacher. This was in spite of the fact that at Mindröling a precedent for men writing about women in maternal tones had been established more than a half-century before Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography was produced.

In 1701 Lochen Dharmaśrī had published a Life of his mother, Lhadzin Yangchen Drölma. This brief Life is different from Mingyur Peldrön’s longer hagiography in several ways. First, there are no discussions of Yangchen Drölma’s previous lives and no descriptions of her ability as a practitioner. The text focuses on her aristocratic background, her financial management abilities at Dargyé Chöding, and her role as mother to six children. The son’s narrative conveys a deep love and respect for his mother and her role and suggests an expectation that women should be included in Mindröling’s institutional history, even in the absence of any official religious position or authority. In his case a man is elevating a woman by acting as the author of her Life without fully deifying her but while referencing her maternal qualities and her role in the household. Lochen Dharmaśrī’s namtar of his mother set a precedent for men to write reverently about Mindröling women and in maternal terms. Gyurmé Ösel would have surely had access to this work, and yet he did not emulate it in the language he used to reference his teacher.

In thinking about the chronological relationships between these two texts, their authors, and subjects, it is worth mentioning a few points. First, Lochen Dharmaśrī wrote his mother’s namtar when Mingyur Peldrön—the first daughter of the next generation—was two years old. This marks the year that her younger sister Lady Peldzin was born. Lady Peldzin would later be recognized as a reincarnation of her grandmother. Second, it is noteworthy that we have no namtar at all for Mingyur Peldrön’s mother or sisters. It also seems unlikely that any Lives were ever written for these women, as the Festival of Victorious Conquerors does not include them in its comprehensive list of Mindröling Lives. It mentions Mingyur Peldrön’s and
Yangchen Drölma’s namtars as well as another namtar, which was unfortunately lost, that had been written for a son born a few generations after Mingyur Peldrön. This suggests that if life stories had been written for other women, they would have been mentioned here, even if they were later lost. It seems that after Yangchen Drölma’s namtar was written, the next one to be dedicated to a woman’s life was Dispeller, written some sixty-eight years later. Whatever inspired Lochen Dharmaśrī to write about his mother’s life, similar stories were not written by his nieces and nephews about their own mother, nor were namtar recorded for other women in Mingyur Peldrön’s generation. With the exception of this one text, Gyurmé Ösel had no other Lives of Mindröling women to turn to in composing his work.

In thinking about Gyurmé Ösel’s creation of Dispeller, it is useful to question how we balance the amplification of women’s narratives that these hagiographies provide while mitigating the fact that their stories are being conveyed by male interlocutors. Texts like Dispeller give us a sense of how religious women were perceived by their devotees as well as an idea of their lived experience and how they engaged with the world. But when a Life is written by someone other than the main subject, it is necessarily influenced by the author’s own ideas. How, then, can we understand dialogue, dialogic narrative, or multivocality in this type of hagiography?

Scholars of European medieval Lives have considered whether and how we might understand the subject’s identity as being effectively conveyed in hagiographic accounts. Drawing on the theory of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, the European medievalist Gail Ashton has addressed the challenges of liberating women’s voices from a perceived silence in medieval European hagiography. She seeks to locate female saints’ voices in hagiographies that she describes as dominated by the voices of their male hagiographers. She uses modern concepts of gender distinction to dissect the author-saint relationship in the creation of medieval hagiography and works to disrupt what she describes as a univocality of male discourse. Treating the life stories of women that were written by men as ground on which culturally embedded concepts of saintliness are presented, contested, and reinforced, it is useful to consider the challenge of actually locating women’s voices in these texts. Arguably, the voice of the subject is likely to be obscured by that of the author, even if this is not the author’s intention. There is a danger that this could lead to cases of gendered censorship. Thus, one antidote would be to establish the autonomous selfhood of female saints so that their voices and authority are properly acknowledged. In the
context of medieval hagiography, Gail Ashton highlights how the *Lives* of female saints can be considered a field in which gendered voices contend for primacy within the genre (in particular, male voices attempting to forcibly unify views about women). This treatment of the authorial agency in the creation of hagiographic works across gender lines offers a useful line of inquiry, as such texts risk valuing men’s perspectives on women over and above those of the women themselves.

Taking a different approach in the European medievalist context, John Coakley treats the male-female, author-saint relationship as a potentially collaborative and devotional act. Here the model for interpreting hagiographic life writing is focused on social context, gender dynamics, and issues of authority and divinity. Together, author and saint create a text that reflects important information about social and religious engagement in a specific context. In the same field Catherine Mooney addresses gender as a negotiated dynamic and questions how textual dialogues about gender differentiation act to construct and maintain gendered ideals in women’s hagiography reflected in the social-historical moment in which they were written. There is a benefit to considering the work of each of these scholars, insofar as they call on scholars of hagiographic literature to consider the relationship between author and subject in these works and the ways that a hagiography might reflect the social and cultural concerns of the time in which it was written.

The collaborative and multivocal readings of hagiography that these scholars describe are useful for understanding Mingyur Peldrön’s *Life*. In particular, thinking about these dynamics can help us understand *Dispeller* as a locus for dialogue about pressing social and soteriological concerns, presented in the mode of multivoiced conversation, while attending to and questioning the social dynamics behind the voices found therein. This multivocality—whether literary artifice or historical refraction—provides the opportunity for the author to present issues as though they are being navigated in lived experience, not solely in the text. That is, it gives the impression of being a more genuine account of what happened in real time, regardless of whether or not the events ever occurred. In some places these moments of contestation are presented as different views placed one after the next, so that they appear side by side, but not in the format of a conversational dialogue. Where these moments of dialogue or disagreement are not necessarily quarrelsome, their presence in the text still allows for a multiplicity of perspectives to be presented for the reader.
Mikhail Bakhtin first asserted multivocality as a useful concept for understanding the multiplicity of voices in the modern novel. Scholars have found this to be useful far beyond the purview of the novel, as in Sarah Jacoby’s examination of the auto/biographical works of Sera Khandro. Sera Khandro’s many conversations with deities, spirits, and humans are a means for understanding her concerns and, by extension, the vagaries of her twentieth-century sociocultural context. They also reflect a “relational selfhood” in which “the subject was constituted by relationships with others rather than separation from them.”

Jacoby points to the historically and culturally grounded nature of Tibetan life writing and the creativity involved in these texts. She explains: “Auto/biographers like Sera Khandro did not construct a life narrative *ex nihilo*, nor did they simply apply available narrative scripts to formulate their life stories. They creatively engaged, adapted, and resisted elements of their culture repertoire.” Both relational selfhood and multivocality are employed by Gyurma Ösel in his construction of Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography. Whether through depictions of his subject as an incarnation of female deities and semihistorical women or in her conversations with her community, her individual identity is always wrapped up in her relationships to her religious world.

As an author, Gyurma Ösel engaged the social world around him to create a literary depiction of Mingyur Peldrön, and the dialogic narrative found in Mingyur Peldrön’s *Life* navigates contentious conversations about female-ness, monasticism, and the possible futures of Mindröling. While he took full responsibility for composing the text, he also claimed that Mingyur Peldrön had acted as an interlocutor in this process, further expanding the breadth of the creative process and relying on her involvement to further reinforce the validity of his assertions about monasticism, celibacy, abstinence from alcohol, and the importance of religious education for men and women. In so doing, *Dispeller* makes an argument for a set of social concerns of its day that, while perhaps not widely shared, are presented as though they were being discussed widely among Nyingmapas.

The collaboration between Mingyur Peldrön and Gyurma Ösel began when he was only seven years old (eight, according to the Tibetan reckoning) and she was in her twenties. This is attested in *Dispeller* when he recounts their first meeting. The young woman was on a pilgrimage and teaching tour, and her retinue passed by the boy’s home. Although she was only in her twenties, she was already known for her institutional and educational authority:
At that time, they passed by and my grandmother meant to make prostrations to the master teacher, so went out to meet her. This was the first time that I—an eight-year-old—had seen the face of the great master teacher, the Bliss Queen of the Dākinīs herself, and I thought myself very lucky indeed. Although I only had a brief glimpse of her youthful face, it was wondrous and overwhelmingly beautiful. As soon as I gazed upon her, I shed many tears. I went after her, hoping to ask if I could follow her. Thus, my faith involuntarily arose.12

So moved, the little boy reportedly asked to join her group and never looked back, remaining her devoted disciple until her death. Throughout Dispeller Gyurmé Ösel presents himself in self-deprecating terms, as a slow student who always sought to live up to his teacher’s expectations. Likewise, Mingyur Peldrön is described as a compassionate teacher to the clumsy student, admonishing him gently for his mistakes and instructing him on his meditative practice. Their relationship is depicted as positive, and in his anecdotes about their interactions, Mingyur Peldrön is described as an engaged teacher with a sense of humor. The nature of her instructions will be discussed later on, but for now a brief anecdote will serve to show how she is presented as a teacher whose concern for her students and their learning surpasses any preoccupation about conventional etiquette.

In perhaps the most awkward account in the text, Gyurmé Ösel goes so far as to describe a time when he sought guidance from Mingyur Peldrön to discuss a particularly difficult aspect of his practice. While he does not go into detail about the nature of his questions or her guidance, it seems that during their meeting he accidentally passed gas while they were sitting next to one another. He reports, “She chuckled a little and said ‘when I go near you, I smell sweet farts! The boy has given me a gift!’ ‘Precious Lama,’ I said, ‘I am so sorry. I ate some of the nomad’s yogurt and it has made me ill. I didn’t think it would happen.’” He reports that she responded with good humor and that the interaction was followed by a very productive fortnight of instruction and practice. This is all to say that in spite of her notably strict approach to religious practice, she is clearly skilled at putting nervous—and gassy—interlocutors at ease. Gyurmé Ösel’s frankness suggests an honesty in his depictions of himself and that the tenor of their collaboration was generally relaxed and friendly.

Gyurmé Ösel also claimed that Mingyur Peldrön was actively involved in determining what would be included in her namtar. In addition to his
occasional mention of how he received doctrinal instruction particularly focused on the Great Perfection, he reports that he frequently sought out her advice about what to include in *Dispeller* and what to omit. He first asked permission to write about her life in 1742, and she consented. After that his composition of her *Life* occasionally came up as a topic of conversation between them. Mingyur Peldrön offered suggestions and in some cases commands about what Gyurmé Ösel should write. He recounts conversing with her about the writing of the hagiography itself and mentions that she directly commanded him to “include this in the *namtar!*” For example, she considered the account of the miraculous occurrences surrounding her refuge ceremony to be particularly important and made sure to command him to include the story in *Dispeller*, with all of its prophetic underpinnings. However, while she advised him in creating the text, it does not seem that this constituted a direct authorial voice. In these cases, if her voice comes through, it does so only after being filtered through Gyurmé Ösel’s literary decisions. With that said, collaboration is not a necessary factor in Tibetan hagiography, and so it is notable the extent to which he highlights her involvement in the process of creating the text while still identifying himself as the sole author. Mingyur Peldrön’s position with regard to the work is clearly established as subject. But the frequent reminder of the subject’s consent—and sometimes creative input—works in concert with direct dialogue to give the sense of Mingyur Peldrön’s permissive voice in the narrative. The hagiography serves as the ground on which the contested categories of gender and authority are defined and negotiated.

Where Mingyur Peldrön’s statements are quoted in the text, filtered through Gyurmé Ösel, can they be taken at face value as her own words? There is a challenge in interpreting the attributions found in any hagiography, and the reliability of the quotations found in *Dispeller* often cannot be corroborated outside the *namtar* itself. What is perhaps more interesting for our purposes is that it is clear that he attributes phrases to his teacher in ways that contribute to an overall sense of her personality—as he saw it—and an argument he forms about her social and soteriological concerns. The text makes distinctive linguistic and grammatical shifts that denote when she is speaking. These tonal shifts in the narratorial voice reinforce the possibility of a genuinely multivoiced narrative but could also be a surprisingly expert use of linguistic conventions on Gyurmé Ösel’s part. For now it will remain an open question whether these words were actually spoken by her, and we will be content with knowing that Gyurmé Ösel saw it as important.
to attribute them to Mingyur Peldrön. Reading *Dispeller*, we can inquire about his goals in narrating his beloved teacher's life story and the ways that he filters her voice according to his own concerns.

Mingyur Peldrön’s shift to adulthood came during the postwar reconstruction of Nyingma institutions that followed the destruction of non-Geluk sites by Geluk-backed Dzungar forces. Her hagiography presents her as actively concerned with monasticism, suggesting that she advocated for a conservative turn toward monasticism at Mindröling. It also points to her teachings for women, and nuns in particular, and her focus on their religious education and praxis. Likewise, in her writing she perpetuated her father’s treasure revelations as well as Great Perfection practice. It is important to distinguish between her own works and the depictions of her voice in *Dispeller*, as one represents her direct concerns, while the other shows her through the eyes (and pen) of Gyurmé Ösel.

In her own writing Great Perfection praxis takes center stage. Mingyur Peldrön’s educational authority is emphasized insofar as her focus was to propagate those teachings as extensively as possible. But in *Dispeller* she is also portrayed as someone profoundly concerned about the mundane and soteriological welfare of her students and her community. In many sections Mingyur Peldrön is depicted as a fully realized, semidivine being. However, in the same text in which she is depicted as a miraculous person from birth, she is also shown to be capable of experiencing the gamut of human emotions and reacting to them in human ways. This wide array of presentations about her personality remains well within the realm of hagiography while presenting tensions that reinforce the dialogic nature of the text. In effect these give the reader a variety of representations of who she was.

**A Song of Loss and Fear**

Mingyur Peldrön is rarely portrayed as an effusive emotional being in *Dispeller*. However, Gyurmé Ösel attributes quotations to her that reveal her susceptibility to human emotion. This is most apparent in her poetic verse, which Gyurmé Ösel connects with a pivotal moment in her transition to a leadership role for Mindröling. The song appears in *Dispeller*, and he attributes it to her, claiming that she spontaneously composed it in a moment of deep suffering. This piece is written in a Tibetan poetic style of metered verse called *gur* that was made famous by the songs of Milarepa and has been translated variously as “songs of realization,” “poetical songs,” “meditative
songs,” “enigmatic spiritual songs,” and “songs of experience.” In Tibet gur developed over the earlier and later diffusions of Buddhism as part of a larger movement toward poetic form influenced by classical Indian poetry such as dohā and caryāgīti, which Buddhist studies scholar Janet Gyatso describes as “coded metaphorical songs about esoteric yogic experience from late Indian tantric Buddhism.” Caryāgīti were spiritual songs meant to convey spiritual truths in a commonly intelligible manner. By the Renaissance period, these verses came to refer to specifically religious experience and included accounts of realization as well as instructions for the hearer. In general gur are known for providing accessibility to spiritual truths through song and came to be associated with an “experience” of spiritual realization that was often highly personal in nature.

The gur that Gyurmé Ösel attributes to Mingyur Peldrön consists of thirty-two lines of seven-syllable metered verse, which was a popular format in the seventeenth century. The presentation of gur as a spontaneous production that was often the result of an emotional upheaval (either positive or negative) adds to the mystique and veracity of the author’s role as realized spiritual practitioner. While traditional narratives will argue that one requires no training to produce spontaneous gur and while it is also possible that Gyurmé Ösel composed the gur and attributed it to Mingyur Peldrön, there are several indicators that suggest that she was in fact the author of this song. Born into a period of literary efflorescence in Ü, she was trained and raised by those who participated in the flourishing literary aesthetic movement of the time. Alongside the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Desi Sangyê Gyatso, Lochen Dharmaśrī wrote a treatise on traditional Indian poetic meter. Terdak Lingpa wrote in gur verse, even composing letters to the Fifth Dalai Lama in this style. While many people around Mingyur Peldrön were writing gur, it is almost certain that she knew of the genre, even though she was not trained in it herself. Taken together with the fact that Mingyur Peldrön was an author of multiple works and that the literary style of the gur matches her work more closely than that of Gyurmé Ösel’s, it is quite likely that she actually did compose this song. Its style and composition is notably different from the rest of Dispeller. The tone and use of emotive words go above and beyond the rest of Gyurmé Ösel’s writing, and the poetic style differs completely from his somewhat terse grammatical tendencies. While we have no other evidence of his work (Dispeller is the only text for which he is attributed authorship), we do have Mingyur Peldrön’s own writing, and her style mirrors the song in its literary sophistication.
As described earlier, Mingyur Peldrön’s journey to exile in Sikkim was precipitated by the arrival of Dzungar soldiers at Mindröling in the winter of 1717–18 and the harassment of her sisters. It became clear that the family’s lives were in danger, and the decision was made that she should flee. Thus, the harrowing task of traveling was overlaid with the fear of being caught by this army and concern for the lives of her community. As a brief reminder, during this period the inmates of Mindröling were scattered to different regions, for their protection and to preserve for posterity the teachings they carried. Many people were killed or otherwise harmed, and fear was all around. Gyurmé Ösel describes her departure and journey as filled with hardship. She nearly becomes lost in the wilderness at one point, and she has a close shave in which the army nearly discovers her and her entourage hiding among a collection of boulders. This traumatic experience is compounded by the fact that she and the rest of her family are in mortal danger. One can imagine the combination of fear and unknowing and concern for those closest to her as she made this journey. At the nadir of the story she receives word that Mindröling has been destroyed and her uncle and brother have been executed in Lhasa. In learning this, she is overcome by grief and breaks into a song of woeful prayer. She directs her lament to her most important teacher and root guru, who also happens to be her deceased father:

Je Namo Guru!
To you—my only steadfast refuge vast—
With heart so kind atop your Lotus Throne,
My only father—Dharma King so high—
To you Terdak Lingpa, I pray alone!
Supposedly compassionate supreme
(And yet compassion without action’s but a thought),
I wander here alone and pray you look
To Mingyur Peldrön, lost and overwrought!
The King of Oddiyana’s Treasure fine,
Your Secret Great Instructions reigned most high,
Shone brilliant like the sun and moon above,
But now dark clouds obstruct them in the sky.
The living line of masters once grew strong.
Instructions wise, to these they once gave life.
Spring flowers bloomed, and likewise teachings grew
But now they’re choked as autumn’s frost spreads rife.
Delightful home! Celestial garden sweet, 
I gave it up—cast off like oozing rag—
To wander fearsome forest all alone,
Through canyon of despair and dreadful crag.
This worldly form is nothing but a lie!
No “youthful flower”—naught but fantasy.
I’ve run from army and samsara’s hold
And yet from terror I could not break free.
True mind—I can’t embrace it on my own.
I have become just like the hunted deer
Before Lord Yama—terror’s face of death.
Back bowed, I drag the weight of endless fear.
Oh Terdak Lingpa, you I beg alone:
My foes approach! Please tame them—don’t you see?
Without your refuge how will I escape?
Look there as now the army comes for me!\(^5\)

Rather than a beatific practitioner effortlessly transcending pain, in this moment Mingyur Peldrön is consumed by human emotions, her experience likened to wandering in a frightening wilderness. Her song conveys the experience of mere mortals when we witness the destruction of the people and places we love best, the loss of home and family. It sends the message that at her core she was just as human as everyone else and that all beings—even privileged and educated women—face suffering and adversity. Even as she escapes, she remains imprisoned in her fear, akin to the hunted deer. The song points out her combined religious and familial connections; for her, religious and biological family were one and the same. In Mingyur Peldrön’s own words, we see her here at her most vulnerable, her least assured. In this moment she does what any ideal practitioner would do: she calls upon her root guru for guidance and protection. She also does what any child would do: she calls upon her parent for help. At the end of her lamentation, her anguish is dispelled by reassuring visions of her father (here simultaneously presented as Padmasambhava) and Yeshé Tsogyel, who appear before her in the sky:

Thus, by singing this sad song she called from afar. As a result, she saw clearly in the sky before her an image of the mother and father of Oddiyana and the excellent highest lama in an expanse of rainbow light. As a result, her torment was cleared away.\(^6\)
This vision is said to lighten her heart, and she is able to bravely continue her journey. The inspirational message is simple and clear: praying to her apotheosized father results in a vision of supportive deities. In this moment the reader is reminded of Mingyur Peldrön’s combined familial and religious connections, which are well ensconced in gendered assumptions of the contemporary Nyingma world. Here they take the emblematic forms of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogel. The human experience of a young woman fleeing danger and worrying for her family is the at the center of the song, rather than more positive experiences of enlightenment that one might expect from verses of spiritual realization. If the reader imagines Mingyur Peldrön’s situation, the spiritual realization found here might be a realization of the suffering of human experience as acutely portrayed in her own moment of abject terror. The despairing tone of her song need not be viewed as contradictory to Gyurmé Ösel’s emphatic representation of his master as fully enlightened. While it does not convey the elated experience of realization found in other “songs of experience,” it imparts a sudden recognition of being hunted, pursued by murderous soldiers. Here the concept of realization becomes something akin to but different from the soteriological experience of nirvana. She has an experience of complete awareness of her situation, and in doing so she becomes aware of the nature of suffering in samsara. In a simultaneously conventional way, she is also describing the high alert of being chased by an army set to destroy her.

Mingyur Peldrön’s song can be read as a description of the human experience of traumatic separation or as a model for the path to enlightenment. It does the double work of conveying mundane and spiritual concerns of the fear of bodily harm and a longing for release from the suffering of cyclic existence. Speaking simultaneously of escape from physical danger and release from the suffering of samsara, both escapes are equally necessary for her. The poem alludes to the painful human experiences of a woman on the Buddhist path, pursuing a way to high spiritual realization. The terrifying wilderness represents the world of suffering, the guidance she seeks that of liberation. As the story goes, from the moment of this vision, Mingyur Peldrön cultivated disgust for worldly things. With her guru the message is clear: strive to work for the teachings; do not be daunted by terrible destruction; and if you call upon them for help, powerful deities will guide you. The song also holds an important position in her hagiography as a literary work. It acts as a pivot in her narrative. At the outset she is a student of the great teachers of Mindröling, training to assume a role in religious leadership. At
the end of her lamentation, she carries on, having been elevated to a fully participating member of the institution. In one profound moment of intense sadness and fear, she goes from disciple to teacher, from child to adult.

Exemplary lives and gur have been closely connected since at least the twelfth century CE. Over time in Tibet this poetic style became associated with the wisdom of yogins, who were in turn associated with the tantric practitioners of India. However, gur were also composed by monastics and laypeople, and these compositions symbolized much more than literary prowess. The ability to spontaneously produce versified song was considered a sign of soteriological achievement and drew an implicit connection between spontaneous gur and advanced realization. Frequently, gur show up in literary works when a protagonist experiences a sudden insight and breaks into song. It is hard not to think of these narratives in terms of the Broadway musical or the European operatic tradition, wherein actors express the greatest emotion (and the more mundane story progression) through song. Gur are meant to reflect the spiritual insights of the singer and can be thematic or temporal, abstract or narrative, but generally convey their personal experience. To write gur was to exemplify enlightenment. The topic of realization is often present in analogical form in gur, which frequently connect contemplative practice, imagery, and understanding with mundane activities. The mood of gur can vary widely: some are celebratory, others melancholy or mournful, but they are generally considered to represent a moment of soteriological insight or realization. In some cases—including that of Mingyur Peldrön's gur—the song conveys an experience of sadness or dejection that is relieved by calling to the guru or a deity for help. In this moment in *Dispeller*, the reader is drawn closer to Mingyur Peldrön through her own voice. She is portrayed as one who experienced suffering herself. By illustrating her humanity, Gyurmé Ösel's choice to include this gur also contributes to the sense of multivocality in the text.

**Mingyur Peldrön the Author**

A brief look at the reception of Mingyur Peldrön’s texts and their inclusion in larger Nyingma collections reveals the importance of her work in the continuation of Dzogchen praxis into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and her combined roles as an educational and institutional authority. Her instruction manuals are included in collections found at Katok and Lelung and in the collected works of scholars such as Jamgön Kongtrul. The writing of
several well-known Nyingma practitioners from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries reveals that Mingyur Peldrön was an important transmitter of the lineages associated with Terdak Lingpa’s treasures, especially those related to the Great Perfection. Dudjom Rinpoche describes her as “a brilliant teacher” who “authored several important meditation manuals.” The inclusion of her instruction manuals in these collections, such as Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé’s (1813–99) well-known collection the Great Collection of Precious Treasure (Rinchen Terdzö), suggests that they were considered to be of abiding importance, while their proliferation across multiple Nyingma communities indicates that they were in use to at least some extent. It is clear that her writing was considered important by and transmitted to people beyond Mindröl in.

Mingyur Peldrön’s corpus reflects particular doctrinal and educational concerns, most notably a strong focus on Dzogchen and Terdak Lingpa’s own treasure revelations. Soteriologically, they portray her as a strong proponent of Dzogchen practice over other systems. Interestingly, they tell us little about her focus on monasticism or women’s education, both of which are prominent as Gyurmé Ösel’s focus in Dispeller. There is almost no discussion of abstention from alcohol, prioritizing monastic life over non-monastic practice, or the importance of women’s learning. Rather, the focus is on proper meditative approach, exposition on Terdak Lingpa’s treasure texts, and other guides for initiated disciples. This creates a sense of disjuncture from Dispeller, in which Gyurmé Ösel forwards these concerns, portraying her as a teacher predominantly interested in monastic life, offering highly gendered themes in her lectures to students. However, there is one place in which she does address such things.

The informal Ambrosial Feast of Questions and Answers is a document written in question-and-answer format in which Mingyur Peldrön responds to assorted questions on a variety of topics directed at a general, uninitiated audience. A few quotations from The Ambrosial Feast give a sense of some of the advice she offered. These include direction on proper meditation technique, the correct use of mantras, methods for optimal visualization practice, and introductions to preliminary practices for the Great Perfection. But the Ambrosial Feast also includes some life advice. For example, Mingyur Peldrön was asked whether a layman who has committed an egregious action should be allowed to become a monastic. This is one of the few unusual places where Mingyur Peldrön gives direct moral advice in her own writing and discusses the liberatory potential of the monastic life. She writes:
At the time when a layman commits a grave moral wrongdoing, and so feeling remorse shaves his head and turns to [monastic] life, having conceived the urge to escape, [he'll do this] just as [money] is quickly earned and then [quickly] spent. During that time, something like a weak awareness will have arisen and he'll have [gained] some capacity. In the future, either he'll [continue to act] like a householder, or if he has really taken profound caution [and] deeply focuses on his wrongdoing, he will be completely different from before and condemn [his earlier actions.] And what of [one who maintains] a bad disposition? He will taste that bad karma.34

Here we get a sense of Mingyur Peldrön's perspective on the ethical and karmic implications of bad actions and the role of monasticism in the rehabilitation of character. She pragmatically points out that the layman's feelings of remorse may very well subside as quickly as they arose. But if remorse and desire for change does take root, then he will be able to successfully change his behavior. The implication is that he should not be hasty in taking monastic vows as an escape from his own actions, since he will not have changed himself enough at that point and the impulse to renounce may quickly fade. The desire to take up the monk's life is perhaps a momentary response and not something to be too quickly chosen, although it does have the potential to be of benefit. She then responds to the question of how one should react if a man has already left his household and taken vows under suspicious circumstances, such as to avoid unwanted responsibilities at home. For this she advises:

To determine whether or not he is casting off obligations:

He should again honestly state his activities before his good wife, and then later if he gives over all his wages [to her] he can [go forth]. Moreover, there's no need to protect [him] in any negotiations that arise. I [assess] how he speaks to me, and whether or not the good wife [says] “give me an income.” If [the exchange] appears bitter, discipline should be exacted [on him]. But again, if the request for aid comes from the gentleman [himself], he will not be disgraced, [and] the vows will come forth from him wondrously. In the advice of Siddha Yolmowa on liberation in a single life he says: “In a bowl of beer, there are many muck experts.”35 As this quote indeed indicates, to have the experience of taking vows, your dedication should be fully born. Firmly reaching
sublime non-existence, we will long remain, thinking of the present and the future. Or, if one’s dedication is incomplete, one will enter the endless knot of the mind.\textsuperscript{36}

In order to assess the earnestness and motives behind a wayward layman’s intention to suddenly take vows and become a monk, Mingyur Peldrön suggests going to his wife and observing their interactions with one another. She cautions against shielding him in the course of the exchange but instead indicates that the observer should rely on the wife’s response to the situation to determine whether or not he is genuinely ready to take up the monastic life. This is an interesting moment, as it calls for the reader to rely on the wife to determine what is best for her husband and the household. Rather than trusting the “muck expert” swimming in his bowl of beer,\textsuperscript{37} she suggests looking to his wife to assess whether the layman is ready for monastic life. It also points to the reality that some chose the monastic life to evade the unwanted responsibilities in the householder realm. In turn this would have a significant impact on the rest of the family, should one member leave to become a monk. Her caution here is interesting given that she was generally a strong proponent of monastic life. It is clear that her pro-monasticism also contains nuance, a concern for the families of monastics, and a suggestion that wives should be looked to in determining the futures of their husbands. Prospective monks should first be vetted before they are accepted, for their own sake and that of their families, and each individual case should be considered in its own context. Significantly, that vetting process should include a careful observation of the female head of the house, to determine how his renunciation would impact her and the family. Likewise, this was considered ultimately beneficial for the husband as well. No one wants to end up stuck in the “endless knot of the mind,”\textsuperscript{38} apparently a distinct possibility should he take up vows of renunciation before he is ready. Mingyur Peldrön’s stance here is in keeping with her more general concerns about men, women, monasticism, and life well lived, all of which were conveyed by Gyurmé Ösel in Dispeller.

**Admonitions and Advice**

Mingyur Peldrön’s identity as a religious master and teacher is reiterated throughout Dispeller in lengthy and brief references to her engagement with students, in which Gyurmé Ösel quotes her directly or relates the topics on
which she lectured. He mentions a variety of students, including members of the aristocracy, laypeople, and former disciples of her father. For example, the entirety of *Dispeller’s* account for the year 1732 is focused on a discussion of Mingyur Peldrön’s teaching activities, particularly those dedicated to former disciples of Terdak Lingpa and their families. Here Gyurmé Ösel highlights her relationship with these old students, who requested that she continue her educational activities in a variety of ways:

At that time the wife and daughter of her father’s student Serzang Drupchen Gyurmé Longdröl went together from Tö to the monastery to meet [Mingyur Peldrön]. She bestowed on them the profound instructions of [Terdak Lingpa’s] *New Treasures*. In the Male Water Bird year (1732)—her thirty-fourth—her father’s disciples came from Latö. The renunciate practitioner Wangchuk Gyurmé Nangdrol, Gyurmé Tharchin, and many renunciates from Latö offered many worthy things, and had an audience [with her]. At that time, she taught about [Terdak Lingpa’s] *Shauk Treasures*. Her father’s disciple Depa Gyurmé Samten Chogdrup of Yangdrong requested the *Secret Wisdom Dākinī* instruction manual. With respect to that, she drafted an illuminating lamp of instruction, and accordingly granted instruction to the renunciates in Tö. Later she bestowed abundant advice on them. And so for three years she kept the three doors engaged, without growing weary.  

A few significant things are combined in this passage. Here the central Tibetan prince Gyurmé Samten Chogdrup asks Mingyur Peldrön to write what is here referred to as the *Secret Wisdom Dākinī Instruction Manual*. This brief historical account gave basic information even as it reminded the reader that Mingyur Peldrön was both a teacher who was sought out by local aristocracy and an author besides. It is noteworthy that she also took time to meet with and teach a variety of people, including the women of Serzang Drupchen Gyurmé’s family. Their presence here shows that Mingyur Peldrön’s educational role was not solely focused on one particular group. She taught nuns, monks, laywomen, and laymen.

Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a teacher of important Nyingma practitioners can also be traced in texts beyond *Dispeller*. Katok Rigdzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755) visited Mindröling in 1737 while on pilgrimage in central Tibet. The famous Katok master and emissary apparently stopped at Mindröling before heading to Lhasa. While there, he made offerings and received empowerments and instruction on multiple aspects of Dzogchen training from both
Rinchen Namgyel and Mingyur Peldrön. He also visited the statues and other sites at the monastery, relating that he found the architecture to be quite beautiful.\textsuperscript{43} Signs of Mingyur Peldrön’s importance are found elsewhere, as her name is included in lineage lists and supplication prayers found in collections by scholars such as Jamyang Kheyntse Wangpo,\textsuperscript{44} Jamgön Kongtrul, Tsewang Norbu, Dudjom Lingpa (b. 1835), and Chökyi Wangchuk (1775–1837). She is named in two of Jamgön Kongtrul’s treasuries. In his monumental \textit{Great Collection of Precious Treasure}—a collection of terma and related materials—she is mentioned in no fewer than nine transmission lineages or lineage prayers, all of which include other Mindröling or Sikkimese Dzogchen lineage holders. One of her instruction manuals for Terdak Lingpa’s treasures is also referenced, while two of her own texts are included in the collection.\textsuperscript{45} These mentions suggest a continued importance in the transmission of Mingyur Peldrön’s teachings and an abiding perception of her historical and institutional significance. She is usually listed alongside other Mindröling figures, most often Terdak Lingpa and Rinchen Namgyel. Notably, she is frequently the only woman in each list, with the exception that sometimes Trinlé Chödrön (born a few generations later at Mindröling) is also included. However, the most interesting references to Mingyur Peldrön’s teaching are found within \textit{Dispeller}, in which Gyurmé Ösel paints a very specific picture of her pedagogical concerns. Compared to her instruction manuals, the accounts of her teachings in \textit{Dispeller} are more anecdotal, with individually attuned advice directed at the specific needs of her interlocutors.

Mingyur Peldrön began teaching in earnest after she arrived in Sikkim in 1718.\textsuperscript{46} Histories of Sikkim corroborate her role as a teacher during her time there, explaining that while she and her mother and sisters spent five years there as the guests of the king and the abbot of Pemayangtsé, the young woman gave extensive teachings.\textsuperscript{47} In addition to written instructions and prayers, she influenced Mindröling through the teachings that she gave to individual disciples and to large crowds. At events she gave strings of initiations. Gyurmé Ösel claims that at various points in her life she regularly gave teachings to groups of religious practitioners (often monks and nuns but also non-monastics), frequently ranging from two hundred to four hundred people.\textsuperscript{48} These claims are supported by a narrative currently circulating at Pemayangtsé Monastery in Sikkim, where she is remembered as someone who taught large groups. Her throne there was reportedly erected for her to give mass teachings during the few years when she was living in the area.\textsuperscript{49}
In *Dispeller* Gyurmé Ösel quotes Mingyur Peldrön’s instruction to him and others that suggest she was predominantly concerned with the role of monasticism in spiritual development and directing her students according to their gendered positionality. Her advice to women differed from her advice to men. This kind of gendered bifurcation in advice to men and women is common in Tibetan literary historical contexts and was often wrapped up with the trope of the lesser female birth. For example, in Nyan-gral Nyima Ozer’s hagiography of Padmasambhava, the saint is depicted as advising nuns in spite of the fact that “because of your low rebirth due to bad actions, it is inconceivable that you will become learned.” In these cases women were considered unable to achieve the same heights of scholastic or soteriological development as men but should still practice insofar as they are able. However, in the case of Mingyur Peldrön, the implications and goals of her advice were quite different.

Mingyur Peldrön’s advice in *Dispeller* not only focused on monasticism; it was segregated by gender in the way that she—or at least Gyurmé Ösel—spoke directly to perceived social challenges within the community. They suggest that one or both of them thought that women in general were underutilized and not well enough respected as teachers of the dharma and that men were not upholding their vows effectively. Both of them were highly aware of the impact of gender on practitioners’ experiences with religious life. Gyurmé Ösel mentions her statements about how monks, nuns, non-monastic male practitioners, and laypeople should work toward enlightenment. The gendered dimension in Mingyur Peldrön’s advice to these groups presents her position as a revolutionary proponent of women’s education and leadership while also asserting the primacy of the monastic life over non-monastic paths.

One particular quotation will serve as the most robust example in the hagiography. In 1766, after lecturing on one of Terdak Lingpa’s revealed treasure cycles to an assembly of about two hundred people, a small group of fifteen monks and nuns stayed on to meet with Mingyur Peldrön afterward. She first advised the monks in the group to practice diligently and cultivate faith in their lama. She reminded them of the danger of rebirth in the lower realms (especially the hells), calling upon them to examine their past deeds and attend to their karmic loads. She likened the illusory nature of the world to that of drunkenness, explaining to her disciples that “one who has drunk much beer thinks their innate realization is elevated and their speech impressive, when in reality their speech is slurred, their brain
Even worse, if one fails to practice with diligence, they will swiftly receive punishment from the ḍākinīs and end up in a bad rebirth. The suggestion here is that the monks, although ordained, are in danger of falling off the path. Threats of punishing ḍākinīs and hellish rebirths are the order of the day. Mingyur Peldrön then turns to the nuns and addresses them in a completely different tone:

You nuns! Taking care of oneself independently, acting in definite accordance with the dharma: working beyond these things to teach and propagate the dharma is difficult. However, you are great and powerful nuns! Your self-interest having fallen away, you must perform your ability to teach and propagate [it]. Previously there are some who said “I am a niece of so-and-so.” There are several [nuns] like this, we all know. But now if you are wondering whether practicing the righteous dharma will leave you materially poor, do nothing to contradict the vows and precepts, and be devoted to your lama. If you cultivate unceasing confidence in these instructions and endeavor [to work hard] at them, then the obscurations of previous actions will be purified, and subsequently the karma that arises in the beguiling desire realm [will also be purified]. In particular, the Great Tertön himself has said, “If one exerts effort in my revealed teachings, there will be no need to worry about the concerns of livelihood. And so, keeping in mind that each person’s livelihood is attuned to the result of their capacities, one should offer jewels and endeavor to donate to the poor.” All of you should keep death in mind. Being certain in the truth of the explanation about the worldly suffering of the three lower realms, which are found in the Kangyur, Tengyur, and the oral teachings, you have to bear this in mind diligently.

Here Mingyur Peldrön is urging the nuns to expand their influence by going out and teaching. She points to their strength and independence, their ability to care for themselves and to reliably act in accordance with the dharma. Citing their advanced capacity, she calls on them to think of the soteriological concerns of others. She argues that they should turn their worries away from whether or not they will have enough to eat. She seems to be suggesting that if they practice and teach, they will always have enough to survive, even if they forgo the comforts to which they are accustomed. This even includes those privileged women from highborn families who, she argues, should not fret over their social status as nuns. They should care for
themselves minimally, focusing their attention instead on the education of others. The implication here is the importance of sacrificing one's own comfort for the sake of the more challenging role of helping sentient beings toward enlightenment. This moment forwards the material concerns that women face when they become nuns. This perennial problem of whether and how women could attain material support in monastic life was also an issue for the nuns she taught. Here she attempts to assuage their worries, although she falls short of promising that they will be cared for by the larger institution of Mindrölting. Rather, she points to their ability to act as model practitioners and as teachers as a means for exhorting them to take up the role of educating others.

This exhortation speaks to the concerns of her immediate audience and also the concerns of other women at different moments throughout history and the barriers that they faced. Economic and physical security and status were clearly issues for nuns in Mingyur Peldrön’s world, and preaching seems to have been considered an unlikely path. She was aware of these challenges, in spite of her generally privileged status. Her statement here suggests that at least some of the women she spoke with came from well-to-do homes and were concerned about the hardships that a life of teaching might entail. It is assumed that they have already taken a monastic path and that now is the time for them to turn their attention toward active teaching in the community. As a woman who lived this life herself, Mingyur Peldrön acts as a model for the nuns. In speaking about women’s engaged religious practice while simultaneously modeling this life, her own legitimated experience as a female practitioner serves as an unspoken aspect of her argument in favor of female monastics becoming teachers of religion. Here she is also engaging her role as an educational and institutional authority, urging these women to follow in her footsteps.

In this moment Mingyur Peldrön expresses concern about women’s roles in the religious world. She argues that women rather than men should be relied on more to preach the dharma and gives her female disciples compassionate encouragement along these lines. In doing so, Mingyur Peldrön is counteracting gendered marginality in this advice to nuns. Her instructions are calls to action, exhorting nuns to use their training and education to become dharma teachers themselves. She urges these women to move past any fear or reservations and rise up and become leaders in the tradition. By calling on these women to teach, she is drawing them in from the margins of the monastic community, inciting them to take on a new role even
as she asserts their centrality in the tradition. This encouragement is not the only form of socially significant and gendered advice that she gives. There are a few accounts in Dispeller that emphasize her concerns about the monastic community’s ability to maintain celibacy and her worries about male practitioners using their practice space to get drunk and carouse.

There are many other places in Dispeller in which Mingyur Peldrön is portrayed as concerned about nuns’ welfare. For example, Gyurmé Ösel includes an account of her meeting with a nun named Kunzang Drönma, who was doing practice at Shauk Taggo (the site of one of Terdak Lingpa’s treasure revelations). Upon their meeting, Mingyur Peldrön is most concerned with whether or not Kunzang Drönma has enough resources to stay fed and housed and whether she needs additional financial support. Kunzang Drönma reports that all of her needs are being met. When she writes Mingyur Peldrön again, using a local dialect and neglecting the honorific register (“She made the request in the Mon dialect, without using any honorific language”), Mingyur Peldrön merely chuckles at the nuns’ lack of etiquette and agrees to meet with her. When they meet, she gives the nun support, making sure to write her instructions in a form that she can read, without mentioning that the earlier letter was not up to the usual standards. In choosing this account, Gyurmé Ösel portrays Mingyur Peldrön as an approachable teacher who is not concerned with formality so much as she is compassionately worried about her disciples’ practice and dedication. When a practitioner is doing her best, Mingyur Peldrön does not worry about proper social etiquette.

There are several times in Dispeller when Mingyur Peldrön chastises male practitioners for ill behavior. These accounts are often connected to a critique of the Fifth Lelung, Jedrung Losang Trinlé, who acts as a foil throughout the namtar, representing an approach that is at odds with her monastic conservatism and moralistic approach to praxis. This dynamic is established early on in the story when, in 1726, she is invited to visit his community while traveling on pilgrimage with her mother and sisters:

Then, a few days from the Olkha hot springs, they received an invitation from Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche, Losang Trinlé—he who at that time was becoming so well-known for actually understanding Padmasambhava’s famous Mother-Father Union [practice], and had raised hope among the Tibetan people and all sentient beings without remainder—that same Lelung invited them to visit for a few days. [When they arrived], he said
“Today is the time when wisdom ḍākinīs gather, you must have some ‘ambrosia!’” So saying, he pressed beer upon them. From an excess of “offering nectar,” his group had all become violently drunk. Then Jedrung led the singing. Monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, all of them sang incomprehensibly and danced indiscriminately together, creating a wondrous spectacle. The great lama herself took not one mouthful of the “nectar,” saying “I’ll have a beer substitute.” She insisted on a great ladleful of tea, dispensed with a copper dipper.54

Among accounts of Mingyur Peldrön’s visits to wayward practice communities, her report of the visit to the Fifth Lelung’s place is the most scathing. The inebriation of the group is depicted as both humorous and horrifying, while Lelung’s attempts to get the new arrivals drunk is shameful yet funny. After briefly observing the community members drinking, singing, dancing, and carrying on, Mingyur Peldrön suggests a nonalcoholic option—tea instead of beer—which she offers to a few monks. Unable to refuse her, they accept and, according to Gyurmé Ösel, all their bad karma is cleared away as a result.55 Seeing this, some of the drunkards come before her, seeking help. She declares “What’s the use of leading [them] from this place of promiscuity?”56 To which the monks respond with “We were too intent on the great Jedrung Rinpoche. Also, today do we not celebrate the gathering of a cloud of wisdom ḍākinīs? If we didn’t drink the ‘nectar,’ we would go to a bad rebirth.” In response to their excuse, she curtly replies, “Oh well, I guess you had to drink it then.” With the exception of her companions and a few others who had been convinced, everyone else gets drunk. The next day she leaves with her entourage.57

It seems that Mingyur Peldrön departed abruptly after recognizing that Lelung’s followers would not be swayed by her conservative approach to alcohol. It is clear that she thought the dialogue closed at that point. Attempting to convince his disciples that their teacher was wrong might also have been considered bad form. And so, rather than arguing with them or working to convince them, she simply left. Gyurmé Ösel claims that Mingyur Peldrön reported the story to him herself and laughed while she was recalling it. In hindsight she found the episode to be amusing, and it acts as the somewhat humorous introduction to her teetotalist approach to consort practice that is revisited again later in Dispeller. The moment represents the fall of Lelung in her estimation. She had thought it a good idea to go to his center, but what she and her companions found there is presented as a shocking abomination,
far from what they had expected. We might also read the opening phrases indicating Lelung’s great reputation as potentially sarcastic. Regardless, she clearly decided that the pilgrims should visit the well-known teacher and were dismayed by what they found. After learning the truth about his behavior, she had no interest in sticking around, but tried to “save” as many people as possible before departing.

In Lelung’s literary role as a foil, he represents a non-monastic practice community gone wrong, sullied by excessive drinking and carousing. The one who the community perceived as accomplished in tantric practice is in the best case one who has been led astray by the demon of drink. In the worst case he is a charlatan. Lelung was in fact a controversial figure, and people other than Mingyur Peldrön have noted his love of alcohol and women. It is quite possible that this representation of Lelung stands for nothing more than a simple recollection of the man, not some grand symbol of all that is wrong in strayed non-monastic communities. From another perspective this could also be understood as an incident of one teacher poaching students from another, of whose methods she disapproves. Interpreted differently, the narrative could easily read as her having descended upon a lively religious community engaged in practice, disrupted them, and either scared and/or threatened the practitioners into dispersing. Beer was and is used in some rituals and in literary contexts as a symbol of divine nectar (Skt. amrta; Tib. bdud rtsi) that represents profound teachings and soteriological experience. However, here it becomes a means of depicting her position as staunchly anti-booze and immune to pressure from the famous man, who in her hagiography serves as an absurd foil and representative of all that could go wrong in religious communities.

Other accounts of wayward male disciples dot the narrative landscape of the namtar. In 1751 she is called in to redirect the activities of the men at the Drepu retreat center. The head of the community had died in 1749, and without direction the community had abandoned their practice for more worldly activities.

In the iron sheep year [1751] many harlots and men were singing together throughout the day and night—more than they ever had before. Sometimes they would fight, which created a great clamor. At this point, some earnest people requested [Mingyur Peldrön’s help]. She said: “The ‘elders,’ have not manifested realization of the wonderful dharmatā. Their knowledge—which is not imbued with renunciation—is overcome with doubt.”
Then, she told the great practitioner Tobgyé to go to the Terchen’s [Terdak Lingpa’s] holy spot at Shauk [Taggo], and meditate earnestly. Because they [the drunkards] were very learned, they returned to [work as] the heads of school [meaning unclear]. After that, anyone with a connection to the laywomen no longer acted in conflict with the lama’s command.

Mingyur Peldrön suggests that the men have not attained a higher level of practice because they have not sought renunciation. She recommends earnest meditation, and they listen to her, cutting their ties with a group of women who are alternately referred to as “harlots” (**bud med smad tshong ma**) and “laywomen” (**nag mo**). The conflation of one with the other is telling here; consorting with non-monastic women is dangerous as it can lead directly to sex. The quotation says nothing about monastic women, so we cannot extend assumptions in that direction. Here the onus is specifically placed on the men to attend to their behavior; the women are not to blame. In fact, it is a woman who corrects their path and leads them in the right direction. In the end the men are able to pull it together and, abandoning their relations with unseemly women, return to their spiritual responsibilities. Due to their previous high education, they are able to become leaders of the retreat center.

The implication is that serious practice is possible for anyone, but for these men it would be easier with renunciation. Bad habits can always be abandoned. In addition to questioning the sincerity of their dedication to practice, she is recommending that they become monks if they really want to refocus their efforts. Moreover, teaching or leading an institution is a sign of success that Mingyur Peldrön holds in high esteem. It is especially notable that this account takes place at the site of Shauk Taggo, where Terdak Lingpa revealed one of his terma. Geographically positioning a withering critique of non-monastic practice at a place where non-celibate consort practice would have been crucial, such as the very site of terma revelation, signals a strong argument for celibacy even in the face of her family’s past acceptance of consort practice. At the same time, Mingyur Peldrön herself passed on terma through her own teachings and benefited directly from this tradition by dint of her own education and doctrinal and familial connections to her father, who was himself a non-celibate practitioner who engaged in consort relationships.

In other moments the focus on teetotalism manifests as genuine concern about her students’ alcohol consumption. Another notable case occurs when, nearing her death, Mingyur Peldrön takes the time to chastise Gyurmé
Ösel about drinking. At one point they are discussing his alcohol consumption, and in his defense he claims that he only drank alcohol because he was parched and beer was all that was available. He reports:

> When I was making the water offerings I was parched with thirst, and so drank some beer. . . . I was later scolded by Her Holiness, who said, “Today when you made water offerings you drank beer, you didn’t use good reasoning. If you do this in the future, your students will go the way of bad behavior. So from this time forward, do not do it again!”

Gyurmé Ösel’s decision to drink beer during a water offering is ritually problematic, as the consumption of meat, alcohol, and even strong-tasting foods such as garlic are thought to offend the water nāga spirits to whom the offerings are made. Mingyur Peldrön questions his reasoning, suggesting that because he was not thinking clearly, nothing terrible will come of the mistake this time. However, now that he knows better, if he does it again, he will experience severe repercussions. Another time she asserts:

> I may be of inferior form [that is, a woman], but nowadays there are those who pretend to be realized. They drink a lot of beer, and their innate realization seems elevated, and they seem happy, but these [perceptions] are only lies. Drinking a lot of beer makes one unable to reason, and one becomes as lazy and slothful as a Mongol. One also naturally gives way to loose speech.

Continuing the theme of the downfalls of alcohol consumption, here the charlatan is likened to the drinker of beer, as self-deluded as one who, having become drunk, experiences false elation. The implication is that just as alcohol makes one lazy and incapable of reason, likewise the practitioner who falsifies their realization is similarly devoid of truth. There are several layers of meaning here. First, to be a woman is not nearly as bad as being a male practitioner who falsifies his enlightenment. Likewise, even “lowly” women can identify such pretenders and see them for what they are: empty husks of practitioners. Also, drinking is bad because it leads to self-delusion and a false sense of happiness. Most important, charlatans are no better than drunks in this regard and should be viewed as such. There is also subtext here that Mingyur Peldrön understands her position as a woman to be considered inferior to men. However, she is more interested in whether one
is a legitimate and serious practitioner, rather than whether the person is a woman or a man. Her phrasing borders on the sarcastic in this moment. She might be “inferior” in form (dman gzugs pa), but even she can understand how foolish a charlatan looks. This word choice subtly suggests that at least some of her audience was concerned about her role as a woman.

Gyurmé Ösel goes on to claim that in this moment she continued her teaching without thought of fatigue, explaining:

If one does not meditate, and instead relaxes freely, having previously entered into the religious life, after a short time this will result in punishment from the ḍākinis, and one risks falling into the three infernal hells. . . . Moreover, evil and impure deeds will be decreased through unswerving faith and a good lama. . . . Practice with great diligence!

Here she is particularly concerned about those who have taken monastic vows. Monks and nuns seem to have been her primary audience during these speeches. She also gives them positive advice, directing their behavior in terms of what they should do, rather than just what they should avoid:

Thoroughly examine your deeds. Supplicate the lama with unshakable devotion and in the end, one’s own heart will be as one with the lama’s.

These quotations speak to a concern about the role and nature of non-monastic practice communities and their association with Mindröling. In Mingyur Peldrön’s instructions to her disciples, she is falling back on teachings about basic karmic causation, Buddhist cosmology, and reminders about socially embedded morality. She uses them to urge a monastic lifestyle for all of her devotees and finds non-celibate communities abhorrent in spite of their acceptance in the greater Mindröling institutional structure. For Mingyur Peldrön any alcohol consumption would likely lead directly to carousing, wasting one’s life, and a rebirth in one of the hells.

Looking at the difference between Mingyur Peldrön’s advice to men and women, it seems that her concerns for each group are a response to their relative positions of privilege. The monks, living comfortably in their monastic life, risk falling off the path and into alcohol-fueled debauchery. The nuns, living at the margins, continue to worry about having enough sustenance, although they are educated enough to be teachers themselves. In the exchanges that Dispeller presents between Mingyur Peldrön and her disciples,
she is speaking from a position of authority that is tinted with her own positional awareness, that of being a female teacher in a male-dominated world. There is a notable gender binary between Mingyur Peldrön’s advice to women and to men, regardless of their monastic status. Like the nuns, her male disciples are made aware that they should cultivate devotion in the lama and heed reminders that they could easily be reborn in one of the three lower realms. But her concern for her male disciples is different from her advice for women in the very foundations of theme and tone, regardless of whether they are celibate monks or non-celibate nakpas. In comparing the ways she addresses men and women, her advice and admonitions suggest an eighteenth-century religious institution struggling to keep its monastics on the right path.

Gyurmé Ösel is intent on presenting her as furthering women’s education and men’s restraint. There is a gendered dimension to her advice to these different groups, which suggests that she was a proponent of educating women to be religious leaders. Her views on gender and monasticism echo the inclusive tenor of the previous generation’s goals for Mindrölön, even as they suggest significant sociopolitical challenges to the wider Nyingma community of the time. Through Gyurmé Ösel’s hagiography, Mingyur Peldrön speaks to her disciples in terms of their positional relationship to their practice, the institution, and herself. The disciples’ positionality is furthered by the nature of the instructions they receive, while Mingyur Peldrön’s is reflected in her concerns for them. With the men Mingyur Peldrön is concerned about them losing their way with sex and alcohol. They require a more severe reminder of what awaits them in the hells. It is assumed that if they avoid drinking and dallying with harlots and laywomen, they can easily retain leadership roles within the institution. The non-celibate practitioners are a disgrace, while the monks lack focus. In effect, the men need more in the way of reprimand. Meanwhile, the nuns have the very basic challenges of overcoming stigma and dealing with worries about getting enough to eat. With them she is concerned that they are not asserting their authority as they might be, that they are perhaps unsure of themselves and their capabilities and are preoccupied with status. They require less severe reminders of the influence of karma and need no reining in. Rather, the nuns need to be reminded that it is possible for women to be institutional leaders, as was Mingyur Peldrön herself.

Mingyur Peldrön claimed that she would be born a man in her next life, although she had been a woman in many previous lives. When she was
nearing the end of her life, she explained to Gyurmé Ösel and a few other disciples that although she had had female lives in the past, the pattern would be interrupted in her next birth, when she would be born in a male body and adopt a monastic life:

She remained silent for a moment, then said: “From the Dargyé Chöding lineage, none has lived longer than me. I am the oldest, a very old nun. Previously, in India and Tibet, it was necessary that I take up female births. For a short while, this will be interrupted; and so in the next life I will be born as a monk. Moreover, because in a previous life I had the benefit of meeting a spiritual guide, I have the imprint that will allow me to keep working for the lineage of the most essential and secret teachings.”

In this statement Mingyur Peldrön’s incarnation lineage is simultaneously designated as primarily female, even as it is asserted that her next birth will be male. Both the designation of the line as female and the insistence upon a future male interruption are interesting. The statement suggests a gender continuity across births, at least in Mingyur Peldrön’s estimation, as well as some level of flexibility within the system. In the statement she also aligns herself with Mindröling’s more protected traditions, which intimates a high level of importance, simultaneously wrapped up with the female form. It seems it was not necessary, at least from Mingyur Peldrön’s perspective, for one’s future lives to be single gendered.

Taken alone, this claim might reflect the frequent declaration said to have been made by women on the path to enlightenment, bemoaning their birth as a woman and yearning for a future birth as a man. It is possible that Mingyur Peldrön is adhering here to the common Buddhist literary trope of the inferior female birth, wherein a woman laments her form and expresses a desire to be reborn in the “better” body of a man. However, given that these laments are often very overt, it is more likely that Gyurmé Ösel is making an argument for her future birth as a boy at Mindröling. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, at the time when he finally finished Dispeller, Mingyur Peldrön’s grand-nephew Gyurmé Pema Wangyel had recently been born, and Gyurmé Ösel cites the baby’s birth as a reason for finishing the work. It might be that he hoped that this new baby was in fact his teacher incarnate. Ultimately, the boy would be identified as the reincarnation of Terdak Lingpa, not Mingyur Peldrön. It is notable that in her remark Mingyur Peldrön presents her future male birth as a mere interruption in a
primarily female incarnation lineage and explains that future births will once more be female. She suggests that for her next birth, the male body would be more expedient, although she does not describe the reasons behind this belief. The dedication to a future female lineage reduces the implication that a male life would be generally preferable, but she still adheres to a normative gender bifurcation in which women are generally reborn as women, men as men, with only occasional exceptions to this rule. There is also the possibility that Mingyur Peldrön wished to take rebirth as a man in the future and that this desire is being glossed over by Gyurmé Ösel, who is concerned with emphasizing his teacher's authority in her present embodiment as a woman.

Elsewhere in the narrative, Mingyur Peldrön addresses her female disciples and expresses an understanding of their position as women and as nuns. While she engages the common trope of the lesser female birth, Gyurmé Ösel downplays this in favor of an emphasis on her role as teacher and enlightened being, drawing on the contemporary literary cachet of female identity to support his presentation of a charismatic leader. His focus on her previous lives in the early sections of Dispeller suggests that he viewed gender as a delimiting factor of reincarnation. This brings up the larger questions of who (or what) reincarnates when rebirth occurs, and the male- or femaleness of karmic proclivities. Gyurmé Ösel portrays Mingyur Peldrön as the ur-woman, the embodiment of all those enlightened women known in his context. Between his female-positive and androgynous references, on one hand, and her suggestions of a future male birth and discussion of women's hardships, on the other, a contemporaneous discussion emerges about what it means to be born a woman.

Mingyur Peldrön's status as a woman and the complexities associated with this position are fundamental aspects of her identity in Dispeller but are not the focal point of most of her own written works. The hagiography addresses the complications associated with her position and how this affects her public identity. Her position as a Nyingma teacher and author takes on a particular tenor when we consider both her own writing as well as the representations of her in her hagiography. Her own work prioritized instruction in Dzogchen practice and a continued engagement with her father's treasure corpus. Considering her role in the revival and continued existence of Mindröling into the postwar era, it is unsurprising that her work would center the teachings that were unique to Mindröling. The reach of several of her texts suggests her significant influence, appearing as they do
in the annals of Nyingma institutions in other regions of the Tibetan cultural world. While these works are geared toward a general audience—albeit an audience with all the proper initiations and empowerments—in Dispeller she is presented as a teacher concerned with her disciples’ personal welfare.

Dispeller attributes quotations to Mingyur Peldrön that create for her a humane and deeply concerned personality. In contradistinction to her divine identities, her gur expresses the depth of despair felt when one woman loses her home and family. Through this expression she is made more relatable to the average human reader (or hearer) of the song, and she simultaneously exemplifies proper conduct during such a moment of distress. The subtext is that if one prays to one's root and lineage lamas for guidance, moments of deepest despair will be mitigated and one can always find a way through. The song brings out a more human side of Mingyur Peldrön while retaining her divine status through the vision she experiences once she has finished singing. More broadly, the reader is presented with Mingyur Peldrön’s own struggles regarding monastic education in her time.

Whether a community-wide shift or a personal propensity, according to her hagiography Mingyur Peldrön recommended a monastic turn within the broader Nyingma community during the postwar reconstruction. This reflects her position as a Nyingma teacher in a period marked by Geluk dominance, which for her meant an emphasis on a monasticism that resonated with the dominant group of this time. The focus on monasticism becomes apparent when we examine the moments in Dispeller in which she is quoted. Representations of her encounter with Lelung depict her as far from a meek or acquiescing woman. Rather, she disagreed openly with other Nyingma teachers regarding their methods and refused to deviate from her ideal of celibacy and abstention from intoxicants. It is unclear whether Ü was, in the mid-eighteenth century, rife with drunken and debauched monks. However, Mingyur Peldrön apparently had her share of run-ins with monks behaving badly and wayward nonmonastic laymen. Through accounts of these interactions, we get a sense of what she was like as a teacher and also as a human being. These moments strongly suggest that Mingyur Peldrön was herself aligned with the Geluk culture that was dominant at the time.

Examining both Mingyur Peldrön’s corpus and her hagiographic representation, it is easy to understand how she would be depicted as an authoritative woman in her time. Her apparent concern for both proper conduct
and sincere practice and her dedication to teachings unique to Mindrölimg further reinforce her significant contribution to the institution’s survival. Gyurmé Ösel’s decision to include direct quotations attributed to her and to mention her occasional insistence upon their inclusion gives the narrative qualities of multivocality. However, her voice continues to be mediated by his literary decisions throughout *Dispeller*. He reinforces these decisions with accounts of their interactions. Whether historical fact or imagined exchange, he uses these voices to establish a narrative of dialogic engagement between himself and Mingyur Peldrön that drives underlying arguments in the text. He uses multivocality to suggest that there were discussions happening in the late eighteenth century at Mindrölimg about issues of monasticism and women’s involvement in religious education. Whether or not these were happening beyond Gyurmé Ösel’s own mind is unclear.

The dialogic maneuver of multivocality here raises questions about whether and how privilege and status can overcome the trials of being a woman, and also if feminine-gendered identity can in fact be a boon itself. Hagiography is a ground upon which writer, text, and audience all participate in religious actions that define and reinforce culturally embedded concepts of saintliness. As such, it acts as a context where multiple interlocutors present contemporaneous notions of individual identity and religious authority. Mingyur Peldrön’s *Life* becomes a space for the discussion of gender and religious authority in eighteenth-century Tibet, and in doing so, it also exemplifies the dialogic nature of hagiography as it is found across multiple religious communities. If we can understand the dialogue taking place within a hagiography, the text will yield information far beyond the (often miraculous and supramundane) details of a saintly *Life*. It makes sense to read *Dispeller* as a work authored by Gyurmé Ösel but created in cooperative dialogue with his beloved master, including her influence (and her words) as a means for further elevating her.

Dialogic hagiography offers space for complexity and nuance without necessarily disagreeing directly with the status quo. As with any record, it is certainly possible that Gyurmé Ösel was using Mingyur Peldrön as a mouthpiece for his own agenda. Whether or not he was aware of this himself or was merely emphasizing the aspects of her story that were significant to him remains unclear. What is clear is the resonance between her own written works, which were focused on Dzogchen practice, with a few occasional discussions of monasticism, and his reflections on her life, which were
focused on practice, monasticism, and her advice to women and men, with frequent mentions of Dzogchen interspersed throughout. However, there is also a multiplicity of approaches taken to challenges faced by the community. In composing the *Life*, he also sought to memorialize his beloved teacher. In claiming to draw her in to participate in the creation of *Dispeller*, he encouraged others to read the hagiography as containing a record that accorded with her own views about the life she had lived while simultaneously elevating her. The emphases on monasticism and women’s education suggest concerns that were likely shared by both author and subject, supported as they are with direct quotations attributed to her. Her identity is presented in a multiplicity of perspectives as a result of their dialogic collaboration. Through the diverse images of her that we find in the hagiography—as enlightened feminine divinity, as revered teacher, and as outspoken proponent of monasticism—the dialogical interactions between her and others create a rich tapestry of who she was and the challenges her community faced.

In considering the relationship between Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön as negotiated on the page, there are multiple assertions regarding her relationship with her gender. Is this merely a case of self-effacement on the part of the subject and elevation on the part of the starry-eyed disciple? The relationship is complicated by their gender difference, age difference, and the fact that, regardless of when the hagiography was started, it was finished long after she died. Regardless of her input, he had the last say—more than a decade after her death—about how she and her life would be presented.

Gail Ashton argues that when a male hagiographer presents an idealized female saint, whether intentionally or not, he inherently imposes his own, male-centered representation of *woman* and divine femininity. In so doing, his writing acts to silence the saint’s own voice (at least in part). Gendered censorship interrupts the autonomous selfhood of female saints so that their voices and authority are not properly acknowledged. The medieval hagiography of female saints is thus a field in which gendered voices contend for primacy within the genre (in particular, male voices attempting to forcibly unify views about women).

Gyurmé Ösel did not necessarily intentionally seek to speak over Mingyur Peldrön. However, the idea of contending perspectives existing within one hagiography calls upon the reader to question whether and how female voice might be superseded by the goals of male authors, the result being a female voice that is difficult to perceive.
through the interference of authorial intent. Arguably, this concern would be relevant regardless of the genders of the author and subject, but in the particular context of a social and literary situation in which men’s voices are dominant, it raises the potential for a more problematic erasure. The question then arises as to how Gyurmé Ösel’s editorial decisions impacted Mingyur Peldrön in the Tibetan context, and the nature of the texts’ contesting multivocalities complicates it further. Even the most positive of representations cannot substitute for the authentic voice of the woman in question.

There are many more of Gyurmé Ösel’s words in the hagiography than Mingyur Peldrön’s. Here the previous point is salient: his views have supremacy over hers, no matter how assertively her quotations are highlighted. According to him, she was a compassionate and caring teacher, and he clearly adored her. The nature of their relationship resembles a beloved teacher and beloved disciple. She treated him with kindness, compassion, and humor. He in turn followed her advice and showed his dedication through his persistent elevation of her. Regardless, he and his words are still the gatekeeper for hers. Hagiography creation—whether collaborative or univocal or somewhere in between—is always an act of the creation of a public persona. In this case that public persona is engaging the sociohistorical moment and grappling with issues of gender valuation and the various soteriological tracks available in the Nyingma community. With that said, it is clear that Gyurmé Ösel sought to present his teacher’s views and opinions, as well as her voice itself, in Dispeller.

The complexities of the author-saint relationship are not just important in terms of understanding some very specific gendered dimensions but also in terms of the development of different types of authority, issues of reverence and control, and the literary process. Various cultural issues are at play in the author-saint relationship and can interpret those through what we read in the hagiography itself. In the context of Dispeller, Mingyur Peldrön’s voice is presented as focusing on the problems she perceives among her students and other practitioners. On the other hand, his purported focus is on Mingyur Peldrön as a divine being and an excellent teacher. While hagiographers act as intermediaries for female saints, there is an important collaborative aspect to be considered alongside other questions of power dynamics and devotional acts.

Most notably, Mingyur Peldrön’s highly privileged position made space for her gender to sometimes be leveraged as a benefit, rather than presenting womanhood as the mere result of bad karma. The subject of her gender—and
how to value it as a good or a bad thing—becomes especially complex when considering her heightened position as a trained practitioner and teacher at Mindröling. It is possible that Gyurmé Ösel was responding to suspicion about her status as a prominent teacher who was also a woman. The different perspectives on her gender make up part of the dialogic narrative found in the text, presented as they are in contradistinction to one another. There are several voices that can be parsed in the dialogue about her gender, including direct quotations attributed to Mingyur Peldrön, Terdak Lingpa, Lochen Dharmaśrī, Phuntsok Peldzöm, and others. Gyurmé Ösel recollects details of her life that he claims she and others relayed to him and presents opposing views on issues that are not necessarily attached to specific voices. It remains unclear how her gender and authority were bound together in these moments and whether or not this reflected wider concerns about the future of Mindröling. Multiple socioreligious tensions are written into the narrative landscape of the hagiography as words placed in the mouths of author, subject, and others. In the cases depicted here, Mingyur Peldrön herself did not acknowledge any difficulty on her own part with regard to accessing authority as a woman. However, her admonitions to men and women suggest that she perceived gender-specific problems within the community. For men the trouble was staying on the path, and for women it was attaining the ability to dedicate themselves to teaching the dharma.