

The *Haft Paykar* : Love, Color, and the Universe

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March 2010

فروردین ۱۳۸۹

Introduction

Our story begins with a colorful description of a King and his opulent court. In raiments of red and yellow (*surkhī* and *zardī*, the colors of good health) the King would receive any visitor who appeared before him with lavish banquets, fine entertainment, and excellent hospitality. In return, he would demand of his visitor a tale, be it good tidings or ill, through which he could, in his imagination, visit the lands outside his realm. “In such wise the king spent his days / lifelong, and never changed his ways.”¹ Then one day, the King abruptly set out on a journey, abandoning his court and kingdom and leaving no indication of where he had gone. For some time, affairs remained in abeyance and no news of him could be heard, until, just as suddenly, the King returned, dressed in black from head to toe. Although his rule from then on was marked by wisdom (*tīz-bush*) and prosperity (*bī-muṣībat*), it was forever conducted in a state of mourning: “He dwelt in blackness, like the Stream / of Life” (*dar siyāhī chu āb-i ḥayvān zīst*).² No-one could fathom how such a hearty fellow could have undergone such a dramatic change, and the secret remained hidden until, finally, the King’s most trusted hand-maiden pressed him one night into telling her his story. He was in mourning, she learned, because he had been snatched out of the heavenly gardens of Iram, and as the details of his story took shape, she was so affected by his loss that she, too, donned black robes of lamentation; thus the King and his slave were united in a kind of fellowship that would have normally been impossible for two individuals of such unequal rank.

Another story begins, instead, with a paradise on earth, a garden that was so beautiful, its owner, a pious, handsome youth, built four high walls around it to keep it safe from thieves and the evil eye. One day, returning from Friday prayers, he was startled to find his own garden locked from the inside; forcing his way in, he discovered that a group of women had stolen in and were now feasting, singing, and bathing in his pristine pools. If he had any objection to such an intrusion, it was quickly stilled by a sudden, searing desire for one of the ladies in particular, a lute player whose charms “a thousand hearts had lured / whoever saw her quick expired.”³ With the help of the two women who had been standing guard, the

¹Nizāmī Ganjavī, *The Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, trans. by Julie Scott Meisami (Oxford University Press, 1995), l. 35, p. 107.

²Ibid., ll. 39-40, p. 107 and ‘Alī Qulī Maḥmūdī Bakhtiyārī, *Haft nigār dar baft tālār: guzārishī az Haft Paykar-i Nizāmī*, (Tihārān: Intishārāt-i ‘Aḩā’ī, 1376 [1997]), 132. The “Stream of Life” is a reference to the Water of Life for which Moses/Khidr and Alexander searched in the realm of darkness (*zūlmāt*).

³Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, l. 132, p. 223.

youth made his feelings known to her, and the two agreed to rendezvous at a secret place in the garden. No matter where they met, however, things just did not seem to work out—first the pavilion upon which they lay collapsed, then they were surprised by an angry tom-cat, then a field-mouse chewed apart a string which sent a line of gourds tumbling down upon them; it was as if all of God’s creation was conspiring to keep them apart. Finally the youth, cowed into reflection, realized that the only way his efforts could bear fruit would be through the lawful path of marriage. When the arrangements were made and the ceremony carried out, the two lovers were finally able to retire together and enjoy their love as it was meant to be: pure, unsoiled, and white.

There are many other stories to tell: that of the patient, upright man Bishr, who clothed his wife in green, as she seemed to him so like a *hourī* of Paradise; or that of the Princess of the Fortress, better known in European circles as Turandot (Pers. *Tūrāndukht*, daughter of Turan), whose florid beauty so inflamed the hearts of men that many came to a bloody end for it; or that of the unfortunate merchant Māhān, whose greed and impetuosity led him through such tribulations that he vested himself in blue, the color of mourning, to commemorate his near-death and deliverance through the hands of his Creator. Although each story has its own theme and characteristics, love and desire clearly take the central role—in each case, love has smitten the hero, who, depending on his⁴ virtue, character, and strength of will, will be guided to any number of conclusions, each symbolically marked by a particular color, be it the black of mourning and melancholy, the white of chastity and purity, or the red of passion and sanguinity. All of these stories are linked together by a frame-tale in the *Haft Paykar*, “Seven Beauties,” a medieval Persian romance by the poet Nizāmī of Ganja (modern-day Azerbaijan) in the year 1197 CE. The frame-tale revolves around King Bahrām Gūr of Sasanian Persia, who builds seven palaces to hold his seven queens, each one a princess of a different realm; it is in these towers that a series of seven short tales are told, each one a tale of love in connection to a particular color.

This attention to love in its endless varieties and manifestations should not be underestimated or misconstrued as a frivolous topic. Just as Boccaccio’s hundred tales of love for his *dilicate donne* are far more than a diversion for the bored captives of family honor (as the author claims them to be⁵), and just as

⁴Or her; indeed, the relation of the women in these stories to love and the hero is critical for the story’s development. The narrative focus, however, remains entirely on the male hero.

⁵“For [ladies], in fear and shame, conceal the hidden flames of love within their delicate breasts, a love far stronger than one which is

Petrarch's ruminations on his love for Laura bespeak a deeper inquiry into the nature of God and his creation, love within medieval Persian literature is very much understood as a key component of the world's physical and moral makeup. These are ideas that extend back far beyond the periods of classical Islam or medieval Christendom, and part of my aim in writing this paper is to demonstrate how both traditions are in dialogue with ideas articulated in archaic Greek philosophy, classical Latin poetry, early Christian theology, and Perso-Hellenistic mystical thought of late Antiquity, as well as with each other. Given the rich and extensive trade taking place in the lands of the Mediterranean and southwestern Asia, the massive influx of newly-translated Greek texts into Arabic and Latin, and the tight political bonds between Christian and Muslim kingdoms in cultural axes like the Iberian peninsula, Norman Sicily, the merchant city-states of Genoa and Venice, Ayyubid Cairo and the Latin kingdoms of the Holy Land, and the great overland hubs of Baghdad and Tabriz, which connected Europe to the cities of Central Asia, India, and China, it is not at all surprising that we find examples of the same tales occurring in the canons of a wide variety of literary traditions, nor that an abundance of different approaches to a particular theme or idea is evident. The 'mirror for princes' genre, for example, is widely diffused throughout the court literature of all major languages of the Near East; so too is the narrative of the *mi'rāj*, the ascent to Heaven, which occurs most famously in Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*. The court romance, of which Nizāmī was the poet *par excellence* in the Persian tradition, was also a widespread genre within Europe, with *Tristan and Iseult*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Gawain and the Green Knight* and other Arthurian legends as central examples; certain elements of Nizāmī's style are also visible in the epic Italian romances of the sixteenth century CE, the *Orlando* sequences of Boiardo and Ariosto, and Tasso's *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, which all take place, interestingly enough, in the Holy Land.

Like many of the great works of medieval literature, the *Haft Paykar* is a highly elaborate work that applies elements of structure, symbol, and sequence to create a detailed *mappemonde* of ethics and wisdom as its author would have seen it. We recall that each tale in the sequence of seven function as exemplary *fabulae* on love and its relation to morals, comportment, and power. These seven tales, in turn, are enclosed

openly expressed, as those who have felt and suffered know; and besides this, restricted by the wishes, the pleasures, and the commands of fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, they remain most of the time enclosed in the confines of their bedrooms where they sit in almost complete idleness, now wishing one thing and now wishing another, turning over in their minds various thoughts which cannot always be pleasant ones." Giovanni Boccaccio; Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella, editors, *The Decameron: a new translation: 21 novelle, contemporary reactions, modern criticism*, (New York: Norton, 1977), 2.

within the broader narrative of Bahrām Gūr, who has his own adventures both before and after his encounter with the princesses. Through the tripartite structure of Bahrām’s journey, one can discern the hero’s overall arc of progression from hot-blooded worldliness to spiritual enlightenment, with his ‘education’ on love serving as the bridge between the two stages. Even the *Haft Paykar*, a complete work in itself, is the fourth in a sequence of five epic poems by Nizāmī, collectively called the *Khamsah*, “Quintet,” or the *Panj Ganj*, “Five Treasures,” which, as a single unit, are counted among the highest achievements of a romantic genre that was flowering in both Christendom and the *Dār al-Islām* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. Drawing from the wider world of contemporary science, philosophy, theology, and political thought, the romance could demonstrate the holistic intertwining and interconnectedness of all these disciplines through the seemingly simple vehicle of a love story. Nor was this mere metaphor; Nizāmī and some of his contemporaries regarded love as the actual engine of all movement, the glue that bound the Universe together. Thus a romance like the *Haft Paykar* was an expression of art and knowledge on multiple levels, from an entertaining tale, to a treatise on politics and kingship, to a literary planetarium of the cosmos and man’s place in it.

That people held such complex and manifold attitudes towards love is certainly nothing unique to any particular culture or time—as only befits a feeling so hard to articulate! There is a particular historical trend I would like to follow, however, in which love is theorized into a particular framework that tends to gather it, in all its infinite shades and flavors, into two basic categories. After a thorough treatment and analysis by the philosophers of ancient Greece, this framework seems to have become the dominant mode of describing love within all the major intellectual traditions of the Mediterranean and southwest Asia. In broad terms, love falls into one of two possible modes: the erotic, the ecstatic and destabilizing pursuit of self-fulfillment, or the sublime, the fundamentally altruistic love that places the well-being of others above the desires of the self. This should not be understood as an either/or construct, but rather two aspects of the same thing, a *yin yang* kind of duality in which neither part is complete or functional without the presence of the other; when taken as a whole, the superficial contrariness of the two natures is nullified, revealing a positive intentionality and purpose in love’s affect. Such a broad characterization is certainly reductionist to a certain degree and cannot be used to reliably describe the full understanding of love in any specific tradition or corpus, yet I hope that it may be useful if it is understood as a theme, a

starting-point from which the stories of Nizāmī and other poets can be approached. To begin our journey, then, I propose we turn to the vocabulary of love and trace its development in the philosophy and religious thought of the Near East and its cultural inheritors, always with the erotic-sublime dynamic in mind, so as to flesh out an idea of what these two kinds of love can do to lovers, what happens to the society they inhabit, and how these effects resolve themselves.

Erōs and Agapē : ἔρως και ἀγαπή

The idea that love is one of the prime forces that governs the movement and destiny of bodies, terrestrial and heavenly alike, is a strong theme even in the earliest examples of early Greek thought. The pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides says that Eros was created first of all the Gods, and Hesiod's *Theogony* names him, along with Chaos, Gaia, and Tartaros, as one of the four elemental constituents of being, entities whose law is so fundamental to existence, even Zeus and his pantheon must abide by their decree. They are the foundation for what would be called in later centuries "natural law," in which givens like light, gravity, motion, and body are established. Although Eros is the fairest of the four, he is also the most dangerous, for it is he who "unstrings the limbs and subdues both mind / and sensible thought in the breasts of all gods and men."⁶ The justification why such incredible power could reside in the hands of Love is explained partly by the fact that *erōs* is a word with a far broader range of application than the modern English 'love' would suggest. In archaic poetry, *erōs* is a force external to the body that drives one to satisfy a need, including such basic ones as food and drink. If left unattended, the *erōs* for these needs will eventually take over the body and result in its death, after a period of grievous suffering. Similarly, unfulfilled *erōs* between persons is a kind of affliction that can bring about madness and despair. It is not surprising then that *erōs* was not to be taken lightly; capricious and cruel, it could humble the mightiest king or ruin the most prosperous people, in all manner of ways. Many of the great tragedies of Greek history and literature—the death of Heracles, the Athenians' foolhardy adventure in Sicily, the Trojan War—were all a result of violent, uncontrolled *erōs*, whether for power, glory, or a woman's love.

With the great cultural efflorescence of classical Athens in the fourth century BCE, love underwent a

⁶Hesiod, *Theogony; Works and days; Shield*, trans. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 14.

great deal of theorizing and elaboration. In his *Symposium*, Plato articulates a number of kinds of love, each one defined and defended by a prominent speaker at the great banquet. Phaedrus, the first speaker of the evening, praises love for the benefits of courage, honor, and loyalty it confers, citing the tales of Alcestis' self-sacrifice, Orpheus' trip to the gates of Hades, and the bravery of Achilles for the love of Patroclus to demonstrate his point. Pausanias complicates the issue by contending that there is more than one kind of love to be discussed; common *erōs*, which is rather haphazard and restricts itself to the sexual act, is completely different from heavenly *erōs*, which orients the mind towards the eternal beauty of wisdom and intelligence. Depending on the kind of love one feels and the object it is directed upon, *erōs* can guide the lover towards good or bad acts. The love ignited by a pretty youth's looks will last only as long as the looks themselves, whereas the love for his fine intellect and good character will endure long after his physical beauty has faded away. Other speakers see love as the pursuit of completeness, the desire for harmony, and the appreciation of beauty, that inspire poetry and virtue. As we shall see, many of these ideas, such as Aristophanes' suggestion that every soul has a mate to which it was once bound, will recur centuries into the future,⁷ and with each oration, love becomes further defined and complex; yet it is with Socrates, the final speaker of the evening, that one of Plato's definitive contributions to the theory of love comes to light.

When Socrates' turn to speak arrives, he begins by confirming with Agathon that love is necessarily a state of relational absence—the lover must love “what he neither has nor himself is—that which he lacks.”⁸ One cannot be in love with nothing, but must rather have an object, external to oneself, upon which love is directed. Even if this object is within the lover's possession, there must always be that possibility of deprivation. The story of Narcissus exemplifies why this is so: if lover and beloved are one and the same, love will feedback on itself in an infinite loop with nowhere to go, paralyzing and consuming its victim. *Erōs*, therefore, can be neither good nor beautiful, if these are the very properties it is drawn to and desires; as these properties exist in both the mortal realm and the divine, the common and the heavenly, love is not entirely part of either realm, but is rather a “great spirit” (*δαίμων μέγας*) that falls midway between the two worlds. This is a critical role that Plato has given to love, far more involved with the affairs of humanity than the random capriciousness of Hesiod's Eros:

⁷Cf. Dimitri Gutas, ‘Plato's Symposium in the Arabic Tradition’, *Oriens*, 31 (1988).

⁸Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Tom Griffith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 200e4.

*[Love] acts as an interpreter and means of communication between gods and men. He takes requests & offerings to the gods, and brings back instructions and benefits in return. Occupying this middle position he plays a vital role in holding the world together. He is the medium of all prophecy and religion, whether it concerns sacrifice, forms of worship, incantations, or any kind of divination or sorcery. There is no direct contact between god & man. All association & communication between them, waking or sleeping, takes place through Eros.*⁹

With these words, love can now be understood as a kind of bridge that unites the lover, the imperfect mortal, with that which he is not: immortality. In whatever way it is practiced, *erōs* will bring the lover some degree closer to this state. The *erōs* between men and women produces offspring; the *erōs* between two warriors is commemorated in song and legend; the *erōs* for fame will promote the composition of beautiful poetry or great philosophy. The higher the ideal towards which *erōs* is directed, the more noble the progeny: as Socrates says, “We would all choose children of this kind [that of Homer] for ourselves, rather than human children.”¹⁰

In the guise of Socrates, Plato has thus posited two theses about love which will profoundly affect its treatment in the literature to come. The first is the transformation of the traditional duality of love between teacher/lover and student/beloved, championed by Pausanias in the *Symposium*, into a triangular relationship with love as the go-between that links the bond between two mortals with the world of the gods.¹¹ Thus, any relationship that is to be fruitful must have love acting as its guide. The second thesis is that the object to which love is drawn is not in fact the Good (τὸ καλόν), as Phaedrus had argued, but rather beauty (κάλλος)—the universal that makes all other universals intelligible. As Richard Hunter notes, such an overlap between these words is not as problematic in Greek as it is in English, as the Greek words for ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’ (καλόν, *kalon*, and αἰσχρόν, *aischron*) also indicate commendable or reprehensible behavior on a moral level—yet the distinction between the two is critical.¹² Unlike the Good, which is totally abstract and must be demonstrated in instances to be understood, beauty is a manifest property belonging to all things that attract our attention and arouse our desire. While the search for ‘good’ can be misleading to the inexperienced, the desire for beauty will be a sure guide for the initiate and philosopher alike. It is for this reason that Diotima tells Socrates that the true acolyte of love must begin his quest

⁹Plato, *Symposium*, 202e2.

¹⁰Ibid., 209c9.

¹¹Richard Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 84.

¹²Ibid., 80, 87. One will notice, of course, that the substitution of ‘beautiful’ for ‘good’ is a commonplace occurrence in many modern languages of the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia.

“with the pursuit of physical beauty.”¹³ This is the first step of a series of insights from which he will proceed to love *all* physical beauty, then the beauty of human behavior, then the beauty of knowledge, and finally the perfection of eternal Beauty itself:

*Then suddenly he will see a beauty of a breathtaking nature, Socrates, the beauty which is the justification of all his efforts so far. It is eternal, neither coming to be nor passing away, neither increasing nor decreasing ... All other forms of beauty derive from it, but in such a way that their creation or destruction does not strengthen or weaken it, or affect it in any way at all ... Such is the experience of the man who approaches, or is guided towards, love in the right way, beginning with the particular examples of beauty, but always returning from them to the search for that one beauty.*¹⁴

One may well notice how the language Plato uses in describing the philosopher’s encounter with Beauty strongly resembles that of the beatific vision narrative in Christian and Islamic literature centuries later; however, we must not forget that this rosy picture is not about love in general, but the sublime *erōs* of the intellectual realm. Back on earth, carnal desire remains an impediment to, or even enemy of, reason. It is a property of the appetite, that unthinking and insatiable element of the soul that leads us to gluttony and avarice if left unchecked. Of all the human appetites, Plato considers the sexual to be the most seductive and difficult to control, and thus the most dangerous, for if it is not directed and constrained by proper principles, it could “become the ingrained norm that falsely poses as the good society.”¹⁵ The danger to society posed by free love is not unique to Plato; as Kathy Gaca explores in her book, *The Making of Fornication*, the regulation of the sexual appetite is an issue that also preoccupies the Stoics, the Pythagoreans, and the Academics (not to mention our parents), and all of these thinkers produced systems for managing *erōs* and safely integrating it into the community. While these systems remained purely theoretical exercises during Plato’s lifetime, many of their their recommendations would eventually be incorporated into Christian practices and have a subsequently enormous impact on the sexual ethics of late Antiquity and the high Middle Period.

The root of the danger posed by *erōs* ultimately lies within Plato’s understanding of how the soul works. The appetitive element is one component; following that are the spirited and rational. Emotions arising

¹³Plato, *Symposium*, 210a6.

¹⁴Ibid., 210e8.

¹⁵Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity*, Volume 40, Hellenistic Culture and Society, (University of California Press, 2003), 2.

from the spirited element of the soul, such as fear or anger, are also beneficial in their appropriate context (the fight-or-flight mechanism, for example), but they can also overturn the rational element from its rightful place as the arbitrator and judge of action if left unchecked. As long as the chain of command is kept intact, the appetitive and spirited elements of the soul will function properly in keeping the body sustained and capable of action, but if their proper order is disrupted through a weakness of character or will, it can damage not only the individual body but also the society in which it lives. In the *Republic*, Socrates illustrates this disorder with the example of a man who really wants to have a drink, even when he knows he shouldn't. He may either remain paralyzed by his indecision, he may get drunk and regret it the next day, or he will allow his reason to guide him and put the wine away. The fracturing of this man's will is a result of *erōs* pitting two elements of the soul at odds with each other: "the element doing the stopping in such cases arise[s] ... from rational calculation, while the things that drive and drag are present because of feelings and desires."¹⁶ Although *erōs* is intrinsically sublime, being naturally oriented towards beauty, if it is diverted away from its heavenly source by human appetite or spirit and trained upon a mundane object, the result is, in pure terms, an abomination and perversion of the natural order; it is this very "monstrous" state in which "the mind commands itself and meets resistance" that Augustine finds himself at odds with in the *Confessions*.¹⁷ The use and misuse of the various divisions of the soul is a cornerstone in the thought of Ibn Sīnā and other Muslim philosophers, and the Platonic division of the soul into the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational similarly re-appears in Dante's division of Hell into the sins of cupidity, violence, and fraud.¹⁸

While Plato's ideas provide the basic foundation for most philosophical inquiries into love well into the early modern era, the work of Aristotle also plays a critical role, for much of the philosophical, theological, and literary work of the scholars of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was conducted with both thinkers in mind, often with the established goal of reconciling their views. Although Aristotle's hermeneutics are radically different from Plato's, his discussion of *erōs* does not seem to directly refute the ideas of his mentor, but rather enrich them and complicate them with alternative possibilities. Aristotle does not work within Plato's construct of forms, but rather with his own theory of substance; nevertheless, love remains

¹⁶Plato, *Republic*, trans. by C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 439c5.

¹⁷Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), VIII.ix (21), p. 147.

¹⁸Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. by Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 36.

a fundamental element of existence, providing cause and reason to the motions that bind the universe. Having divided all matter into three substances, the eternal, the destructible (which can be detected), and the unmoved (which is beyond perception), Aristotle concludes that all observable existence must flow from the unmoved substance, which he names the First Mover.¹⁹ Being the essence that confers eternity to those incorporeal yet sensible laws (mathematics, truth, beauty, etc.), the First Mover is intrinsically good, and all creation is moved by its presence. It is somewhat counter-intuitive at first to imagine that the First Mover is the one thing that does not itself move, but for Aristotle, movement represents change, and change is an indication of temporality. The First Mover does not bring about change through any action of its own—it is rather existence that causes its own movement by making the First Mover the object of its desire. Thus, Aristotle considers desire and the Good as one and the same: “the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of rational wish.”²⁰

It is well-known that some aspects of Aristotle’s thought were much harder to integrate into Christian theology than Plato’s. Petrarch writes that of the pre-Christian philosophers, “Plato could not fully grasp the truth, but he saw it and came closer to it than the rest.”²¹ A memorable scene of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* has the zealous monk Jorje of Burgos declare, “Every word of the Philosopher, by whom now even saints and prophets swear, has overturned the image of God.”²² He is speaking, for those who have not read the book, of the rehabilitation of Aristotelian principles with Christian doctrine by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), almost a millenium after Neoplatonist thought had been successfully established in the Church. Part of this conflict is due to issues of timelessness and temporality. To suggest that God is capable of action, of being drawn to his creation the same way it was drawn to him, would suggest that he is, like the world, subject to change—an unthinkable concept for Aristotle’s First Mover. This would, in turn, put God’s eternity and total perfection into question—an unthinkable premise from a Christian standpoint. The Aristotelean concept of unidirectional, unreciprocated *erōs*, flowing from the temporal to the eternal, is contrary to the Biblical tradition that understands God as the supreme active agent, as the Creator and Father who *is* moved and *does* show love towards his children. The Hebrew term for this

¹⁹Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), Lambda 1, p. 355.

²⁰Ibid., Lambda 7, p. 373.

²¹Francesco Petrarca, ‘On his own ignorance and that of many others’, in: David Marsh, editor, *Invectives*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 321-322.

²²Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1983), 473.

kind of love is אהבה ('*ahābā^b*'), which is translated into the Greek Septuagint not as *erōs* but as *agapē*, the reciprocal and unselfish love between people. In his study *Agape and Eros*, the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren argues that it is the sacrificial nature of *agapē*, rather than the self-fulfillment of *erōs*, that makes redemption through Jesus possible and distinguishes Christianity from Platonism.²³ C.S. Lewis also writes that *agapē*, which he calls *gift-love*, is the greatest of loves, the only one that is whole unto itself, and the cornerstone of Christian grace.²⁴ As we shall see, a similar concern regarding the *proper* way of loving God, or of describing God's love, will occupy the discussion of love in both the Latin Christian tradition and that of Islamicate literatures in Arabic and Persian.

Amor et Caritas

The world in which Augustine lived was one of rapid change and transformation. The western half of the Roman empire was visibly disintegrating, and Christianity, still a minority religion, was starting to mature into a system that could incorporate elements of the old intellectual heritage and compete with it for dominance. Augustine's own life reflects the heterogeneity and abundance of philosophical and religious movements that distinguished this time. Raised with an excellent education in the classical Latin style of Virgil and Cicero, he was never much impressed with the crude language of the Latin Bible (before its revision by Jerome in the late 300s) and remained lukewarm towards his mother's Christianity.²⁵ However, he was inspired by Cicero's *Hortensius* to begin questioning the difference between truth and eloquence, leading him to experiment with a number of the major spiritual and philosophical movements of his milieu, first the anti-materialist teachings of Mānī, then the absolute skepticism of the Academics in Milan. Neither path proved satisfying in the long run, but they provided him with the perfect background against which he could define and defend his theology, a polemical approach that would distinguish his writing for the rest of his life.²⁶

It was in this state of crisis that Augustine encounters what he calls "some books of the Platonists,"

²³Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 15.

²⁴C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 163-170.

²⁵Henry Chadwick, 'Introduction', in: *Confessions*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), xiv.

²⁶James Wetzel, 'Predestination, Pelagianism, and foreknowledge', in: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54.

translated from Greek into Latin. While there is some debate surrounding the question of who it was he was actually reading,²⁷ Book VII of the *Confessions* offers a striking reprisal of the Platonic approximation of eternity through turning into the self, expressed in an explicitly Christian context.

*By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself. With you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel ... and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind—not the light of every day, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it.*²⁸

For Augustine, this path of coming to know God through love is a two-tiered process. It is not enough to simply convert; one must confront and absolve one's own past if access to the truth is to be achieved. Much of the *Confessions* is Augustine's own process of self-rehabilitation, including his relationship with his father and mother, his grief over the death of a friend, his separation from his concubine of fifteen years, and his own perverse pleasure in wickedness, stealing his neighbor's pears merely for the thrill of "doing what was not allowed."²⁹ It is through this difficult and sometimes painful self-examination that he can confront the problem of his own evil in Book VIII, the appropriately-titled *Birthpangs of Conversion*, and acknowledge the need for outside intercession. The role of introspection as the first step towards wisdom is the same for Plato and Augustine alike; the opening passage of the *Confessions*, in which Augustine tells God, "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,"³⁰ is an expression of *amor*, the same yearning for the beloved that the classic writers saw as *erōs*. However, *erōs* is in itself a gift, borne out of a deeper love, the *agapē*, or for Augustine, the *caritas*, of a beneficent God who bestows the gift of introspection and subsequent salvation to his children.

It is this second component of conversion, the reliance upon *caritas* to deliver oneself from one's own

²⁷James J. O'Donnell, 'Augustine: His Life and Times', in: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 22.

²⁸Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.x (16), p. 123.

²⁹*Ibid.*, II.iv (9), p. 29.

³⁰*Ibid.*, I.i (1), p. 3.

darkness, that distinguishes Augustine's journey from that of his Neoplatonist predecessors, establishing a model of ascent through descent that is repeated in the works of the literary giants of the thirteenth century like Dante, 'Aṭṭār, and Nizāmī. While Plotinus claims that through discipline and training, the light of truth can be beheld without a guide,³¹ Augustine repeatedly points to the necessity of God's intervention in order to receive the beatific vision, writing that within the Scriptures, "all the truth I had read in the Platonists was stated here together with the commendation of your grace."³² The willful ignorance of this truth, this "culpable rejection" the on the part of the Neoplatonists, is the real cause of man's sin.³³ It is ultimately God's love, his *caritas*, rather than Platonic *erōs* or Ovidian *amor* that recalls the soul to the Divine and inspires goodness and virtue among humanity. The divine essence of *caritas* is found in its wholly self-effacing and self-sacrificing nature, in which the self is extinguished and the individual's needs and desires play no part in the relationship: in his *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes, "I call 'charity' the soul's motion toward enjoying God for his own sake, and enjoying one's self and one's neighbor for the sake of God."³⁴ Most importantly, it is the *caritas* of God's worldly incarnation in Jesus that gives humanity its unique path to salvation: "the realization of the Platonic eros depends on the gift of agape through God's Incarnation."³⁵ While *erōs* and *amor* remain an important element of the spiritual journey in Augustine's theology, they are ultimately dependent on *caritas*, a superior form of love that is not directed to the benefit of the self but to that of the other.

Although Augustine's writings provide a sound foundation for the redemptive element of *caritas*, it is Boethius who supports many of his conclusions from a purely rational standpoint (*sola ratione*), rather than the partial or wholesale reliance on scripture (*auctoritates*), as had been the method of Ambrose of Milan and Hilary of Poitiers.³⁶ Well-versed in both Latin and Greek, Boethius composed a body of work that established the basis for the study of logic for many centuries after his death, translating and commenting

³¹Richard Sorabji, 'Time, mysticism, and creation', in: William Mann, editor, *Augustine's Confessions: Critical Essays*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 213.

³²Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.xxi (123), pp. 130-31.

³³William E. Mann, 'Augustine on evil and original sin', in: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46.

³⁴Michael S. Sherwin, 'Aquinas, Augustine, and the Medieval Scholastic Crisis concerning Charity', in: Michael Dauphinais, Barry David and Matthew Levering, editors, *Aquinas the Augustinian*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 184.

³⁵Lindberg, 57.

³⁶M.W.F. Stone, 'Augustine and medieval philosophy', in: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 254.

upon the work of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Porphyry.³⁷ In addition, he was a Christian, living in the post-Augustinian world in which Plato's identification of the Good was seen to be one and the same as God, and it is from this position that he writes his famous *Consolatio philosophiae*, one of the most widely-read, published, and translated treatises in the Middle Ages.³⁸ This work in many ways exemplifies the successful synthesis of Neoplatonism with Christian theology: when Boethius is unjustly accused of treason against the state and thrown into prison, Philosophy comes to him, driving off the ineffectual Muses who only know how to fuel his grief, and reminds him how reason can reorient his bewildered mind towards the truth and bring him to an understanding of the greater wisdom of God's plan, turning his death itself into a Socratic victory over injustice.

The opening chapters of the *Consolatio* begin with a series of classically-inspired injunctions against Fortune, that false friend who only lures men into a false sense of security in material prosperity before stealing it away once more. This familiar trope is then tied into a Christian-Augustinian rooting of the final good with God; while wealth, power, glory, and other transitory pleasures are nice while they last, at the end of the day they are necessarily finite and worthless. The real problem, in Boethius' view, is that man's devotion to all of these happinesses, wealth, rank, sovereignty, glory, and physical pleasure—which *are* good after all, because our hearts desire their possession—can distract him from the greater good from which they are all derived, in essence substituting the fruit for the tree, that same elevation of 'common' love over 'heavenly' love which Plato condemns. He writes: "Human depravity, then, has broken into fragments that which is by nature one and simple; men try to grasp part of a thing which has no parts and so get neither the part, which does not exist, nor the whole, which they do not seek."³⁹ Wisdom is attained when the philosopher realizes that *all* of these pleasures are in fact components of a greater, indivisible substance, the true happiness promised by the Good.

The harmonious integration of philosophy with divine revelation, one of the chief goals of Boethius' intellectual career, reaches a peak in the tenth and eleventh proses of Book Three of the *Consolatio*. In a series of logical steps, Boethius lays out the general schema for a Neoplatonist understanding of God that

³⁷Richard Green, 'Translator's Introduction', in: *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1962), xi.

³⁸Victor Watts, 'Introduction', in: *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (London: Penguin Group, 1969), xi-xii.

³⁹Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by Richard Green (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1962), 58.

would resonate in the literature of the Middle Ages for centuries to come. The sequence is as follows: if God is the perfect good, and if true happiness comes from the perfect good, then God is true happiness. We already know that all earthly happinesses are in fact incomplete, transitory manifestations of a deeper, eternal, and wholly self-contained happiness, the unity of being that we call divine. The truly happy man, then, is one who partakes in the joy of divine unity: “Everyone who is happy is a god and, although it is true that God is one by nature, still there may be many gods by participation.”⁴⁰ Fundamentally, all things are drawn towards unity to the capacity of their own bodies, for it is through sustained and ordered unity that their own existence continues; while animals seek sustenance through unity of body, it is in the capacity of humankind to achieve unity of mind by disregarding the transient pleasures and focusing on the fundamental gift of *caritas* that they all stem from. This is the true aberration behind the cardinal sins: gluttony, lust, avarice, sloth, and so on—these behaviors invert the natural order and inclination of things, confusing the part for the whole and splitting apart the very unity that bestows life and happiness upon us. In the end of this prose, Boethius calls once again for the Platonic turning-inwards of the soul, the reclamation of the unity of being, emanating from and bestowed by God, that gives us life and true happiness:

*The man who searches deeply for the truth, and wishes to avoid being deceived by false leads, must turn the light of his inner vision upon himself. He must guide his soaring thoughts back again and teach his spirit that it possesses hidden among its own treasure whatever it seeks outside itself.*⁴¹

Bearing these words in mind, let us now turn eastwards.

***Ḥubb, Hawá, and ‘Ishq* : الحب والهوى والعشق**

As in Greek, there are many words for love in the Arabic classical tradition with decidedly different connotations. Probably the most common, then and now, is *ḥubb*. Lane notes that *ḥubb* tends to lean towards a

⁴⁰Boethius, 63. This may sound a little strange for an orthodox understanding of monotheism, and indeed it is; it is good to remember that ever since Plato, philosophers had the potential to become gods among men, due to their proximity to the esoteric truth that would naturally elude most people. A similar elitism can be found later in the mystical traditions of Neoplatonism and Christian asceticism, and Boethius shows it here. The early Muslim mystic Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah, to whom we will turn presently, is similarly counted among the *abl al-khawāṣ* (the elite, the elect).

⁴¹Ibid., 69.

sense of admiration and praise, the acknowledgment of affect and approval, especially as a naturally arising instinct.⁴² The *Qāmūs al-muḥiṭ* associates *ḥubb* with generosity (*karam*) and friendship (*widād*).⁴³ *Wadd* and its cognates *mawaddah* and *widād*, for their part, are defined in the *Lisān al-‘Arab* as “love in all ways towards the good” (*al-ḥubb fi jamī‘ madākbil al-kbayr*),⁴⁴ while Lane emphasises the affectionate, tender, and desirous elements of *wadd* in his lexicon. Both words are closely related to each other and seem to jointly express a kind of love that is not dissimilar to the Hebrew *‘ahāvāh*⁴⁵ and its Greek translation *agapē* in the Bible. It is therefore not surprising to find that *wadd*, *ḥubb*, and their cognates appear in the Qur’ān 140 times in total. *Ḥubb* is used in the context of both God and humankind in the same way Lane describes, with a connotation of judgement or approval: “God loves the godfearing” (3:76, 9:4), “God loves the just” (49:9), “God loves not the evildoers” (3:57, 3:140); “they give food, for the love of Him” (76:8), “if these are dearer [*aḥabb*] than God” (9:24).⁴⁵ *Wadd*, on the other hand, carries a distinct flavor of yearning, longing, and desire that *ḥubb* lacks, e.g., “they yearn for you to suffer” (3:118), “would any of you wish to have a garden of palms and vines” (2:266), in addition to its familiar connotation of affectionate love “I do not ask of you a wage for this, except love for the kinsfolk” (42:23).⁴⁶ *Wadd* is also the root for one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God, *al-Wadūd*.

The converse of *ḥubb* in the Qur’ān is *hawá*, which indicates, through its cognate *hawā’* (air, wind), the mercurial and capricious aspect of lust, whether it be for sex, power, or material desire. One need only imagine Dante’s *contrapasso* for the lascivious in the second circle of Hell to imagine what is implied by *hawá*: “the infernal whirlwind, which never rests, drives the spirits before its violence; turning and striking, it tortures them.”⁴⁷ The use of the word in the Qur’ān is overwhelmingly negative and consistently linked to the deeds of the wicked (*al-zālimūn*) and those who are astray (*al-ḍāllūn*); it is, in fact, almost always found in counterposition to the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), e.g., “then follow not caprice, so as to swerve” (4:135), “many lead astray by their caprices” (6:119), “him who has taken his caprice to be his god” (45:23).⁴⁸ Due to the weight of the Qur’ānic invective against it, *hawá* remains a largely negative term

⁴²Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863).

⁴³Muḥammad ibn Ya‘qūb Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥiṭ*, (Bayrūt: al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabīyah, [197-]).

⁴⁴Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1988).

⁴⁵Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur’an*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 40-41, 509. All verse numbers are from the Cairo Standard Edition of the Qur’ān.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 1255.

⁴⁷Dante, V.31-33, p. 89.

⁴⁸Kassis, 504.

in later literature on love, something akin to the English ‘lust.’ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) has a full treatise entitled *Dhamm al-hawá*, “The Condemnation of Lust,” which combines the rebuke of the preacher with the advice of the physician: “You should know that for your sake, to bring about your safe recovery and health, I came down off the hill of dignity in this book to the low point of cheapening myself by speaking of [some of] those things.”⁴⁹ Whatever variations it had, *hawá* never approaches the realm of mysticism or transcendence; it remains first and foremost an earthly pleasure, nice to write about, but dangerous for one’s spiritual growth.

One word for love that does *not* appear in the Qur’ān at all is *‘ishq*, which is reasonable, because it is the word used to describe pathological love-sickness, as *erōs* had been in ancient Greece. The influence of Hellenistic medicine is clear in this regard: *‘ishq* was considered a total imbalance of the emotions and a loss of stability and rational thought.⁵⁰ The early philologist and lexicographer al-Aṣma’ī (d. 831) reports that the Bedouin would say, “Madness has its varieties and *‘ishq* is one of them.”⁵¹ The relentless desire of *‘ishq* was known to burn the blood, creating an excess of black bile and leading to confusion, blunted wits, and madness. Love could also transmit heat, evidenced by the hot sighs and flushed extremities of the lover, and the gaze of the beloved (*ma‘shūq*) could literally boil the blood of the poor soul it was trained upon.⁵² The Galenic diagnosis of love through the humors is found in the works of the Byzantine physicians Oribasius (4th c.) and Paulus of Aegina (7th c.), who both classify love-sickness as a category of melancholic illness; some centuries later, the treatises of al-Majūsī (10th c.), Ibn Sīnā and Ibn al-Jazzār (11th c.) affirm this opinion.⁵³ Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (d. 873), who translated Paulus’ work into Arabic, also transmits a late Alexandrian text ascribed to Hippocrates in his *Nawādir al-falāsifah*, in which Aristotle enumerates the many unfortunate ends that await the lover:

Sometimes he moans heavily, causing his spirit to remain concealed for twenty-four hours. He continues [in this state] until he is taken for dead, and then he is buried while still alive. Sometimes he heaves a deep sigh and his soul is stifled in his pericardium. The heart then closes in on the soul

⁴⁹Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre*, (New York: New York University Press, 1971), New York University Studies in Near Eastern Civilization 3, 28.

⁵⁰Joseph Norment Bell, ‘Avicenna’s Treatise on Love and the Nonphilosophical Muslim Tradition’, *Der Islam*, 63 (1986):1, 79.

⁵¹Giffen, 64.

⁵²Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnūn: Love, Madness and Mystic Longing in Niẓāmī’s Epic Romance*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 20.

⁵³Dimitri Gutas, ‘The Malady of Love’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 104 (1984):1, 22.

*and does not release it until he dies. Sometimes during moments of relaxation he raises his eyes to look around and he suddenly sees the person he loves—and his soul departs in one stroke.*⁵⁴

Dimitri Gutas notes that this text has been paraphrased, alluded to, and cited in the Arabic literary corpus for almost seven centuries, from the verse of al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) to the treatise of al-Salaṭī (d. 1655), confirming its place “in the very fabric of Arabic literature.”⁵⁵ As *‘ishq* develops as a term within the Islamic milieu, it should be recognized that it will always carry this implication of madness and imbalance in its use. It is this very duality that allows it to be applied to the Greek understanding of *erōs*, giving it a suppleness of meaning and manifestation that makes it such a critical tool in the formation of mystical and romantic verse.

Perhaps due to its absence in the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth literature, *‘ishq* was probably a more appropriate term for theorization than *ḥubb* or *hawá*. Despite the obvious dangers posed by the concupiscent love that *‘ishq* represented, it nonetheless carried a certain allure as “a complex and exceedingly interesting but mysterious human experience.”⁵⁶ The super-human acts of strength, endurance, and virtue, the mad self-destruction of lover and beloved, the total upheaval of body and soul pitted against one another, and all the amazing highs and lows experienced by the love-stricken were a part of what gave the experience its appeal as a literary subject. It is, in fact, a challenge, an opportunity to test the mettle of those who dare to swim in such perilous waters. In her invaluable overview of profane love in Arabic literature, Lois Anita Giffen makes the point that “the dark depths of passion are essentially tragic rather than evil; as long as one conducts oneself honorably such love appears to be a noble adventure of the spirit or at least a noble form of suffering.”⁵⁷ While this theme is a well-known aspect of the quest narrative in medieval literature, it can also be found in an early genre of love poetry in the Islamicate world, the *‘udhrī* poetry that reached its peak during the Umayyad caliphate in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. This style, named (perhaps spuriously) after the ‘Udhrá tribe that performed it, essentially consisted of narratives of unfulfilled, Platonic love, leading to its present-day meaning of ‘chastity’ in Arabic.⁵⁸

The plots of ‘Udhrī poetry tend to rely on stock characters and conventional scenarios, in which the

⁵⁴Gutas, ‘Malady of Love’, 43.

⁵⁵Ibid., 54.

⁵⁶Giffen, 117.

⁵⁷Ibid., 118.

⁵⁸Seyed-Gohrab, 60.

focus is not on the story itself but the psychological intensity of its telling, and the themes of pleasure in pain (*isti'dhāb al-alam*) and transcendence through intense feeling (*al-tasāmī bi-al-āṭīfah*) are at the fore. The basic story is some variation of the following: the poet falls in love with a girl, but is rejected by the maiden's father, who seeks to marry her to another man. Distraught, the lover runs into the desert in a total renunciation of the world. He grows famished, his clothes are rent, and he spurns all human contact. Eventually, he dies and becomes a kind of martyr to love; his gravesite may even become a place of pilgrimage.⁵⁹ Probably the most famous example of this genre is the famous *Laylā and Majnūn* cycle, attributed to Qays ibn al-Mulawwah and later appropriated and retold by Nizāmī, who adds numerous Persian elements and threads the disparate episodes of the Arabic sources into an extended narrative, the third of his *Panj Ganj*.⁶⁰ In some of the Arabic versions, Qays and Laylā come from two rival families and know each other as children, but when they grow up, Laylā is taken away from him (*hujibat 'anhu*), and in separation, their longing grows all the more intense.⁶¹ By chance they meet again, and, emboldened by his desire, Qays goes to Laylā's father to request her hand in marriage, but is turned down for the sake of avoiding scandal. When Laylā gets married to another man, the grief-stricken Qays refuses food and drink and wanders aimlessly into the desert, where he eventually pines away, despite the efforts of his family to save him.

The debate over the origins and motives of this poetry extends from the 'Abbasid period onwards and makes for very interesting reading. In his *al-Aghānī*, Abū Faraj al-Aṣḫānī (d. 967) observes that nobody could prove they had actually seen Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, nor that there was a consistent record documenting his origins.⁶² A contemporary scholar, Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Raḥmān, attributes the birthplace of 'Udhri poetry not to the Arabian peninsula, but to Iraq, where he sees the 'Udhri renunciation of the world and denouncement of human endeavors as a consequence of the revived intertribal hostilities that broke out after the death of the Prophet.⁶³ Others ascribe the style to a kind of "clash of civilizations" felt by the newly-settled Bedouin in the *amṣār* (garrison towns) of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, or to an emotional crisis brought upon by the imposition of strict Islamic sexual codes on their formerly licentious lifestyle.

⁵⁹Syed-Gohrab, 66.

⁶⁰Ibid., 53.

⁶¹Muḥammad Ghunaymī Hilāl, *Laylā wa-Majnūn fī adabayn al-'Arabī wa-al-Fārisī*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-'Awdah, 1980), 42-43.

⁶²Balūḥī, 'al-Shi'r al-'udhri'.

⁶³Ibid.

‘Udhri poetry is strikingly anti-social, self-destructive, and preoccupied with death, leading Renate Jacobi to see it as a wholesale rejection of the status quo.⁶⁴ One of the most well-known commentators on the subject is Taha Hussein, who prefers to see this genre as a collective response by the Arabs of the Ḥijāz and Najd to their increasing marginalization at the hands of the Umayyads. As the Bedouin withdrew from political life, they turned to figures like those of Majnūn, in which the frustration, despair, and deprivation they felt could be expressed through the metaphor of an unattainable love.

وانصرف هؤلاء الناس عن حروبهم وأسباب لهوهم الجاهلي ، كما انصرفوا عن الحياة العملية في الإسلام إلى أنفسهم ، فانكبوا عليها واستخلصوا منها نعمة لا تخلو من حزن ولكنها نعمة زهد وتصوف . وأنا أعلم أن لفظ التصوف هنا لا يؤدي معناه الذي أريده ، فقل أنهم انصرفوا إلى شيء من المثل الأعلى في الحياة الخلقية .

These people turned away from their wars and their pre-Islamic means of pleasure as they withdrew from an active life in Islam into themselves. They devoted themselves to this and derived from it a tone, not devoid of sadness, yet a tone of self-denial and mysticism. I know that the word “mysticism” here does not carry the meaning of what I want; let us say that they turned towards something of the highest example in moral life.⁶⁵

Hussein’s uneasy reference to “mysticism” (*taṣawwuf*) brings us to an important issue within the topic of ‘Udhri love, which is its similarity with Sufi accounts of love developed later on. Similar characteristics between the two genres include asceticism, isolation from society, a relentless fixation upon the beloved, and especially the performance of *fanā’*, in which the intensity of passion and longing for union is actively harnessed and amplified to the point that the lover initiates his own annihilation, like a moth consumed by the flame. These elements make it tempting to suggest a direct lineage from ‘Udhri imagery to Sufi mystical narratives and even the courtly literature of the ‘Abbasid period. Such interpretations are not devoid of complications, of course. Jacobi points out that much of the ‘courtly’ flavor of ‘Udhri writing was in fact back-projected onto an idealized Bedouin past by ‘Abbasid poets,⁶⁶ and Muḥammad Ghunaymī Hilāl argues that even though the loves of the ‘Udhri and the Sufi are expressed in similar ways with similar outcomes,

⁶⁴Renate Jacobi, “Udhri”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (2010) (URL: <http://www.brillonline.nl/>).

⁶⁵Taha Hussein, *al-Majmū‘ah al-kāmilah li-mu‘allafāt al-duktūr Tāhā Ḥusayn*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Ālamī, 1980), volume 2, 194. Translation mine. This and following original translations from Arabic and Persian are included with the original text, in case I have made any errors.

⁶⁶Jacobi, “Udhri”.

they are based on differing motives and concepts.⁶⁷ Although transcendence is possible in ‘Udhri poetry, it is attained through an intense devotion to a specific individual that cannot be transferred to another object. The early Sufism of people like Aḥmad al-Baṣrī (d. 728), in contrast, is rooted in a now-familiar process of reflection (*fikr*) and self-examination (*muḥāsabah*), consolidated with the state of *islām*, total submission to God’s will.⁶⁸ Not being bound to a specific object, love can be sublimated from one object of desire to another, for the inspiration of that love remains eternally embedded in the abstract qualities of beauty, virtue, and so on. As Muḥammad Balūhī summarizes:

الذات العذرية تعبير عن وجدان مفعم بالحنين إلى ذات المحبوب في بعدها المكاني والزمني، أما
الذات الصوفية فهي ذات عارفة تعبر عن آراء فلسفية ذات أبعاد معرفية متصلة في جوهرها برؤية
عرفانية وبذلك فهي تخاطب ذات مطلقة بعيدة عن المحدودية في بعدها الزمني والمكاني.

The ‘Udhri nature consists of a sentiment overflowing with yearning for the being of the beloved in her positional and temporal dimension. However, the Sufi nature is that of knowledge, consisting of the esoteric aspects of philosophical ideas, connected, in their essence, with the mystical vision; thus it addresses a being absolutely removed from that which is limited to and constrained within space and time [al-maḥdūdīyah].⁶⁹

The Sufi approach to love might be well viewed through the example of Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah (d. 801), a contemporary of Aḥmad al-Baṣrī and a revered model of early Sufi mysticism. Her life represents a turning point in mystical terminology within Islam, for while previous Sufis had preferred to use words like yearning (*shawq*) and friendship (*khullab*) to describe their feelings towards God, she was the first major Muslim mystic to describe her relationship with God in terms of intense, personal *ḥubb* and *maḥabbah*.⁷⁰ Rābi‘ah’s appropriation of *ḥubb* as a feeling one could have towards God is rooted in a Qur’anic concept that describes the kind of love one can bear towards one’s better half, a state grounded in ‘repose’ or ‘residing,’ in Arabic, *sakan*. Among the verses that suggest this idea is Sūrat al-Rūm, verse 21:

⁶⁷Hilāl, 172.

⁶⁸Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), Studies in Oriental Culture 5, 235.

⁶⁹Balūhī, ‘al-Shi‘r al-‘udhri’.

⁷⁰Fakhry, 236, and Seyed-Gohrab, 19.

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

*And among his signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, so that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and that he has put love and mercy between you; signs are in this for those who consider.*⁷¹

In this verse, we see how for every person, God has created a ‘mate’ or ‘partner’ (*zawj*, pl. *azwāj*) in which one can reside in tranquility (*li-taskunū ilayhā*). In another passage, Sūrat al-Zumar verse 5, we find a recurrence of Aristophanes’ idea that every human soul has a half with which it was once united: “He created you out of one soul, from which he then created its mate” (*Khalaqakum min nafṣ wāḥidah thumma ja‘ala minhā zawjabā*).⁷² Rābi‘ah’s innovation is to use this term towards God, rendering *him* the partner in which she can reside, something she effectively confirms in this saying attributed to her: “I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. I have become one with God and am altogether His.”⁷³ This is done not through devotion to another soul situated in time and space, but rather to the eternal concepts of beauty and majesty (*jamāl* and *jalāl*) which provide her residence. The ultimate result is the end of her existence, just as it is with the ‘Udhri lover, but it is a mystical transcendence that—despite the suggestion that her soul was formed out of the same substance as God’s essence, an idea that Augustine, for example, considered outrageous—was palatable enough for al-Ghazālī to accept as being compatible within Sunni orthodoxy.

Although there is a clear understanding of the destructive power of love—physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually—in all these genres of prose and poetry, the experience of sublime beauty and out-of-body transcendence are possible through through the lover’s *ishq*, the selfless and noble rending of the corporeal self in return for spiritual purification. The infatuated gentleman is prescribed by physicians like al-Rāzī to “continuous fasting, carrying heavy burdens, undertaking lengthy journeys and the like.”⁷⁴

⁷¹Qur’ān, 30:21. Translation mine, based off of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur’an: Text, Translation & Commentary*, (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1987).

⁷²Qur’ān, 39:5.

⁷³Margaret Smith, ‘Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyya al-Kaysiyya’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (2010) (URL: <http://www.britannica.com/entry/rabi-ah-al-adawiyya>).

⁷⁴Unsur al-Ma‘ālī ibn Iskandar Kay Kā’ūs, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qābūs Nāma*, trans. by Reuben Levy (Cresset Press, 1951), 72.

The ‘Udhri lover, once isolated from society, adopts an ascetic lifestyle akin to the practice of early Christian monks and other holy men; he fasts, avoids eating meat, abstains from sleep, and consecrates his entire being to the image of his beloved. The Sufi mystic would do similarly. Such singular focus on the object of devotion disciplines the lower soul (*nafs*) and allows the unhindered ascent of the higher soul (*rūb*)—as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) would later say, the body is like a reed whose *nafs* has been hollowed out, allowing the *rūb* of the Deity to blow through it unhindered.⁷⁵ Nor were these practices unacceptable for orthodox Muslims; while the Prophet himself rejected the most extreme forms of asceticism, traditionists recorded a number of ḥadīth in praise of fasting and vegetarianism and their beneficial influence on the spirit.⁷⁶

Parallel to the development of love in ‘Udhri and Sufi thought was the renaissance in Hellenistic philosophy through Arabic translation, an event that would leave an enormous impact on the poets who attended the courts of Muslim, and later Christian, royalty. The importance of this movement cannot be overstated; it lasted for two hundred years, united the old Byzantine and Sasanian elites with their new Arab counterparts, and resulted in the critical editing and translation of nearly all secular Greek writing available in late Antiquity into Arabic.⁷⁷ The effects of this translation movement are equally significant for both the Islamicate and Christianate cultural spheres.⁷⁸ Studies by Dimitri Gutas and Majid Fakhry have shown a remarkable overlap in specific theological positions between the Alexandrian theologian John Philoponos (d. 570) and his Muslim counterparts al-Kindī (d. 873) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037): in the first instance, both thinkers break from the dominant intellectual current of Neoplatonism to argue for creation *ex nihilo*,⁷⁹ and in the latter, Philoponos and Ibn Sīnā argue for the separation of body and the rational soul along parallel tracks.⁸⁰ In subsequent generations following the translation movement, the literary efflorescence of both ninth-century Byzantium and twelfth-century Europe can also be tied to this effort.

⁷⁵Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi, Book Two*, trans. by Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford University Press, 2007), Oxford’s World Classics, 31.

⁷⁶Seyed-Gohrab, 91-94.

⁷⁷Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsī Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-6.

⁷⁸The above terminology is used so as not to ignore Jewish philosophy and mysticism, which plays a key role and is regrettably underrepresented in the present study.

⁷⁹Fakhry, 77.

⁸⁰Dimitri Gutas, ‘Philoponos and Avicenna on the Separability of the Intellect: A Case of Orthodox Christian-Muslim Agreement’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 31 (1986):1-2, 128.

While the medicinal and physiological diagnosis of love-sickness as a disease had been common in Arab, Byzantine, and Persian lands before Islam and the early centuries after its arrival, the integration of certain philosophical concepts about love into Islamic thought took some time and was not always free of contention. Al-Kindī, for example, was wary of the emanative character of Neoplatonist *erōs*, arguing that nothing outside God himself can be supposed to possess infinity.⁸¹ Almost a century later, the great philosopher and polymath al-Farābī (d. 950) wrote some of the most erudite expositions of Plato and Aristotle in the world at the time and, in a manner reminiscent of Boethius, sought to harmonize the two using Neoplatonist methods. Starting from an Aristotelian understanding of the Unmoved Mover as *intellectus intelligens intellectum*, thought thinking itself, he argues for the origin of existence through the pure and overflowing perfection of the Supreme Being, to which all existence longs to be reunited.⁸² Through this work, al-Farābī incorporates the Neoplatonist tradition into Islamic thought and paves the way for Ibn Sīnā, whose eschatology is clearly at work in both the *Haft Paykar* and the *Divine Comedy*, guiding the distinction between guided and misguided love.⁸³

Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) is one of the great philosophers and polymaths of the Islamic heritage, probably only rivaled by Ibn Rushd for his impact on medieval European philosophy. His *Risāla fī al-‘ishq*, “Treatise on Love,” is a graceful exposition of *‘ishq* within Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonist models. Similar to Aristotle and Boethius, Ibn Sīnā describes love as a universal force that pervades all extant being; it is the very state of existing that causes it to be filled with love—or conversely, it is the state of being filled with love that causes existence: “It is obvious that all beings determined by a design possess a natural desire and an inborn love, and it follows of necessity that in such beings love is the cause of their existence ... that which has arrived at the extreme of defect has been carried to absolute non-being.”⁸⁴ The engine of love, as we saw in the *Symposium*, is physical beauty, which provides the access to heavenly Beauty. This theme occurs in Augustine, who says that if one merely gazes out over the world and allows himself to be struck by its inherent beauty and harmony, the sheer grandeur of God’s design will be felt and the soul will be

⁸¹Fakhry, 75.

⁸²Ibid., 118.

⁸³Olga Lizzini, ‘La questione delle fonti arabo-islamiche della Divina Commedia: qualche riflessione sulla filosofia (e su Avicenna in particolare)’, in: Claudio Gabrio Antoni, editor, *Echi letterari della cultura araba nella lirica provenzale e nella Commedia di Dante*, (Udine: Università degli Studi di Udine, 2006), 60.

⁸⁴Emil L. Fackenheim, ‘A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina’, *Mediaeval Studies*, 7 (1945), 212.

inspired to return to its natural state of loving the Creator.⁸⁵ Ibn Sīnā's approach to this idea is as follows: "No being is ever free from *some* connection with a perfection, and this connection with it is accompanied by an innate love and desire for that which may unite it with its perfection."⁸⁶ Thus, even inanimate objects like dust or immaterial forces like light and gravity are all manifestations of Love, in that what gives them their existence and movement is their longing to be reunited with the Pure Good from which they came.

Ibn Sīnā also offers an interesting elaboration of Plato's division of the spirit into appetitive (nutritive), spirited (emotional), and rational components by classifying five categories of love that correspond with the various stages of elevation: the love of the simple and inanimate, the love of the vegetative faculty, the love of the animal faculty, the love of the noble-minded and gallant (*zuraḥā'* and *ḥityān*) for external beauty, and the love of divine souls.⁸⁷ All of these loves are derived from of the divine substance of God and are all intrinsically good; the way a being loves or the faculty that it employs in its loving, however, will reflect the fineness of the creature and the nobility of its spirit. Matter, the base form, will remain in existence out of love for the cause of its being and its desire to remain in existence. Besides avoiding non-existence, this form has nothing noble or praiseworthy in its love; Ibn Sīnā compares it to a low-born woman who covers her defects with her sleeve if her veil is removed, a colorful if misogynist way to put it.⁸⁸ Vegetables are capable of nutritive love, which is expressed by seeking sustenance, growth, and reproduction, thus continuing their existence. This corresponds with Plato's appetitive property of the soul and would apply to the "common *erōs*" that is so poorly regarded by moralists of all stripes. In addition to natural love, animals are also capable of voluntary love, due to their freedom of will and action. Thus a donkey, to quote Ibn Sīnā's example, will forsake the pasture if a wolf appears. It is capable of discerning two goods, the first a tasty meal, the second continued life, and can choose the better of the two. Emotions such as fear, anger, lust, and courage are forces that guide animals to voluntarily move towards the greater good.

It should be noted, if it is not already clear, that these categorizations of love are not exclusive to a particular category of being, but rather build off of each other with cumulative effect; plants are both matter and living, so they love both through their existence and their growth, reproduction, and development.

⁸⁵R.A. Markus, 'Augustine: God and nature', in: A.H. Armstrong, editor, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁸⁶Fackenheim, 212.

⁸⁷Bell, 76.

⁸⁸Fackenheim, 215.

Humankind is capable of all three kinds of love described above and two more, although Ibn Sīnā believes that most of our time is spent in the first two states, existing, consuming, and reproducing. Although his philosophy is committed to the idea that humankind is capable of fulfilling incredible potential, it is evident that Ibn Sīnā has a dim view towards the bulk of humanity, equating the majority of our activity to that of weeds. Even the exceptional individual who exhibits bravery and courage has only risen to the emotional state of a lion—again, nothing to sneer at, but as humans, it is inappropriate and insulting to neglect our capacity for rational thought, given that it is God’s unique gift to us that elevates us above the animal kingdom. Love, after all, is about loyalty and honoring the obligations you hold unto your beloved. Just as animals have an emotional faculty that allows them to make decisions that vegetables cannot, so too do humans have a rational faculty that allows and obliges them to bring their love to a higher and nobler level than what animals could perceive or pursue:

If a man loves a beautiful form with animal desire, he deserves reproof, even condemnation and the charge of sin, as, for instance, those who commit unnatural adultery and in general people who go astray. But whenever he loves a pleasing form with an intellectual consideration, in the manner we have explained, then this is to be considered as an approximation to nobility and an increase in goodness. For he covets something whereby he will come nearer to the influence of That which is the First Source of influence and the Pure Object of love, and more similar to the exalted and noble beings. And this will dispose him to grace, generosity and kindness.⁸⁹

Although this philosophy hearkens back to Plato’s dualistic concept of the ideal image and the fundamentally flawed or imperfect nature of materiality, it is closer to Aristotle in its outlook by creating a teleology for all things and acknowledging the positive role matter plays in enabling divine love to be manifest. This is due to the harmonious cooperation between the accumulated faculties of the higher forms: “the appetitive faculty of the animal assists the vegetative one; ... the rational faculty of the soul assists the animal faculty in its aims.”⁹⁰ Like a servant obeying the orders of his master, the lower faculties can be employed for positive ends—as long as they aren’t allowed to call the shots. A similar reconciliation of materiality and goodness is also prominent in Augustine, who writes, “sin is not a desire for naturally evil things, but an abandonment of better things ... evil is to use a good evilly.”⁹¹ Ibn Sīnā explains how

⁸⁹Fackenheimer, 221.

⁹⁰Ibid., 218.

⁹¹Mann, 45.

the normally reprehensible perversion of sex for pleasure can thus be redeemed by allowing the intellect to redirect the appetitive faculty from its primary aim, *i.e.*, the attainment of pleasure, towards the “most excellent” act of preservation of the species through procreation. Similarly, the love of beauty and the desire to kiss and embrace it “are not in themselves blameworthy,” so long as they are fortified with a high moral rectitude.⁹² An appreciation of the physical form can be a very positive thing, if it inspires the soul to the Neoplatonic turning-inwards that will cause it to be aware of the Absolute Good. Thus it is possible that one can desire, love, fear for, and converse with the object of desire, the *ma’shuq*, all with the guidance of divine love; as Von Grunebaum explains, “The moral duty for Avicenna is no longer the suppression of the lower parts but rather their integration in the soul’s struggle toward perfection.”⁹³ This rigorous approach to a holistic appraisal of love creates a space in which an extraordinarily complex and rich expression of love can thrive. Far from being a simple sublimation of earthly love onto a divine target, this love—a fascinating integration of old concepts and new, of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, of *erōs*, *agapē*, and *ḥubb* ‘*udhrī*, of *sakan* and *fanā*’—is a force simultaneously concupiscent and pure, allowing for a multiplicity of objects while remaining unified in its overall direction.⁹⁴

While specifically written from the perspective of a philosopher, Ibn Sīnā’s view was not at all incompatible with the intellectual and spiritual endeavors of those in other disciplines: poets, mystics, political thinkers, theologians, and the (*udabā*’), the men of letters and high society. As Joseph Bell observes, the uncorrupted state of rational cognizance in the reception of Divine Truth is philosophically equal to the Sufi concept of Divine Union (*ittiḥād*);⁹⁵ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, known as the Renewer (*mujaddad*) of Islam, describes light emanating from God with much the same language Ibn Sīnā uses in his discourse on love.⁹⁶ In a treatise on ethics, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī argues that the need for political justice arises from the loss of love in the world, “for if Love were to accrue between individuals, there would be no need for equity and impartiality.”⁹⁷ In short, love came to take a crucial role in matters as diverse as personal comportment, religious devotion, political stability, the cosmic order, medicine, and the mystical experience.

⁹²Fackenheimer, 222.

⁹³G. E. Von Grunebaum, ‘Avicenna’s *Risāla fi l-’Iṣq* and Courtly Love’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 11 October (1952):4, 233.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 237.

⁹⁵Bell, 88.

⁹⁶Seyed-Gohrab, 177.

⁹⁷Julie Scott Meisami, ‘Kings and Lovers: Ethical Dimensions of Medieval Persian Romance’, *Edebiyāt: The Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures*, 1 (1987):1, 18.

In contrast to the perceived gap between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences of today, the thinkers of the medieval Islamicate milieu had a holistic approach to all schools of knowledge, based on the assumption that there is a discernible, eternal truth that could be detected between the lines of any science or discovered within any phenomenon of the natural world. Love is the agent of this truth, the force that orders the universe and guides it towards its proper destination. In this schema, it is morally incumbent for people to use their elevated powers of discernment to distinguish between the proper and improper forms of love and choose the path of virtue. The distinction is not always easy; this is why we need a guide.

Mirrors for self-scrutiny : *Le miroër aus amoreus*

Alongside the more high-brow works of the philosophers and theoreticians we have examined thus far, there exists a massive corpus of work concentrated on the more practical aspects of love—what to do if you fall in love with a pretty boy or lovely lady, how do you keep the flames of passion alive, the remedies for a broken heart, the pitfalls of jealousy and *schadenfreude*. In Europe, much of this genre owes a great debt to Ovid, whose *Ars amatoria* was studied and reworked by authors from Andreas Capellanus to Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Marlowe. In Iraq, Persia and Egypt, it is unlikely that Ovid was so well known, but there are indications that the Greco-Latin heritage of the Eastern Empire was familiar to Muslim authors. Dick Davis has an interesting study in which he juxtaposes the literary motifs and devices of Greek Hellenistic and Persian romances, suggesting that “an intermittent mutual borrowing and mingling of Greek and Persian literary cultures existed for several hundred years [from the time of Xenophon into the Sasanian period].”⁹⁸ A.M. Piemontese locates Persian narrative elements within the Arthur cycle, citing parallels such as the figures of *Artus* with *Chusrus*, *Gahmuret* with *Gayomars*, the Grail with *Jām-i Jamshīd* the cup of Keyd in the *Shāhnāmāh*, and even Excalibur (*Calibor*) with the Arabo-Persian *qal‘ibur* (“sword-cutter”).⁹⁹ Other interesting parallels can be found in the popular stories and *fabliaux* of the period, such as the ‘Pear Tree Episode,’ which occurs both in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* and Boccaccio’s

⁹⁸Dick Davis, *Panthea’s Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances*, (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2002), Biennial Yarsharter Lecture Series 3, 1.

⁹⁹Angelo Michele Piemontese, “Tracce del romanzo di Artù in testi narrativi persiani”, in: G. Carbonaro, E. Creazzo and N.L. Tornesello, editors, *Medioevo romanzo e orientale : Macrotesti fra Oriente e Occidente*, (Napoli: Rubbettino, 2003), *Medioevo romanzo e orientale*, 295-96, 303, 311.

Pyrrhus and Lydia (*Decameron*, Day 7, Tale 9) as well as in the *Maṣnavī-yi ma‘navī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and the *Kitāb al-adhkiyā*’ of Ibn al-Jawzī, or the ‘Chaste Wife’ tale that appears in the tale of the *Man of Law*, John Gower’s *Confessio amantis*, ‘Aṭṭār’s *Ilāhī-nāmāh* and al-Kulaynī’s (d. ca. 940) *Kitāb al-kāfi*.¹⁰⁰ Given the presence of these connections, it is only appropriate to include both Latin and Arabic authors in our discussion of courtly love.

One of the most famous writers of classical Arabic prose, Abū ‘Uthmān ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868 or 869), was notoriously fond of puncturing the bounds of propriety of the *ahl al-khawāṣ*, be they Neoplatonist philosophers or Sufi ascetics. Among his many works are two tracts on love, the *Risālah fi al-‘ishq wa-al-nisā*’, “Treatise on Passionate Love and Women,” and the *Risālat al-qiyān*, “Treatise on Singing Girls.” In the latter piece, he offers a definition of *‘ishq* that would be repeated many times in later work: “*Ishq* is the name for what exceeds that which is called *ḥubb* and every *ḥubb* is not called *‘ishq*, for *‘ishq* is the name for what exceeds that degree,” just as stinginess is the extreme of economy or prodigality is the extreme of liberality.¹⁰¹ He was not particularly concerned with the higher echelons of love, however; his work tends to forge an explicit link between *‘ishq* and women, while disparaging sexual relationships between men in works like *Tafḍīl al-baṭṭān ‘alā al-ẓabr*, “The Superiority of the Belly Over the Back.” Although he is rarely quoted directly, being as a whole outside the realm of polite society, the above-mentioned citation often appears in later works on love.

Muḥammad ibn Dā’ūd (d. 910), the transmitter of the aforementioned Alexandrian text attributed to Galen, also produced a treatise on profane love by the name of *Kitāb al-zabrah*, “The Book of the Flower.” Deeply informed by the traditions of Hellenism and Sasanian Persia, he sets himself the daunting task of redeeming *hawā* in the eyes of the reading public; through the retelling of beautiful poems and moving anecdotes, he hopes to persuade the reader that love can be a positive force in life. In one story, he recounts the words of a man who lies dying of love-sickness for his (male) friend, but refuses to go to him for fear of the sin he would commit. He relates a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet that says, “He who loves passionately and conceals his secret and remains chaste and patient, God will forgive him and make him enter Paradise”;

¹⁰⁰Franklin Lewis, ‘One Chaste Muslim Maiden and a Persian in a Pear Tree: Earlier Islamic Analogues for Two Tales of Chaucer’, in: Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, editor, *Metaphors and Imagery: Studies in Classical Persian Poetry*, (Brill, under review).

¹⁰¹Giffen, 85.

that very night, he dies.¹⁰² In general, Ibn Da'ūd seems to believe that love presents its victim with an opportunity to prove his moral integrity, like Andreas Capellanus, who will later write, “He who does not exploit an available opportunity to sin is more pleasing to God than he who is not afforded the chance to go wrong.”¹⁰³

Another important author of this period is Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Washshā' (d. 936), whose *Kitāb al-muwashshā* played a significant role in introducing the concept of idealized 'Udhri love to Arabic *belles-lettres*, changing its focus from an intense emotional state to a code of genteel behavior between lovers.¹⁰⁴ His writing bears many of the same characteristics that distinguish the revived genre of *ars amatoria* literature in Europe a century later.¹⁰⁵ The book sets out to delineate what the young man of high society should know, chiefly revolving around three virtues, polite behavior (*adab*), manly honor (*murūwah*), and gentility (*ẓarf*). Throughout these virtues, the conventions of love, in an idealized and 'civilized' adaptation of pure 'Udhri chastity, “underlie or color the most mundane relationships and social activities.”¹⁰⁶ A similar, somewhat pragmatic attitude towards courtly love emerges in the *Qābūs-nāmah*, a 'mirror for princes' composed by the Ziyārid scion Kay Kā'ūs ibn Iskandar in 1082 for his son. Along with counsel on the acquisition of wealth, the game of polo, agriculture and knight-errantry, Kay Kā'ūs has a number of chapters on romantic passion, in which he advises his son, “resist falling in love and guard against becoming a lover, for a lover's life is beset with unhappiness.”¹⁰⁷ If—or rather, as Kay Kā'ūs admits, when—his son does fall in love, he advises him to indulge once or twice to ease the sting of longing, then let the beloved go and wait for the malady to run its course. The principle of going with the lesser of two evils seems to be at work: “When you do it, let it be in accordance with appetite and not as a matter of course, so that it may have as little ill effect as possible.”¹⁰⁸ Thus the maddening effects of infatuation and obsession are relieved and a healthier, more socially acceptable love takes its place.

An important author in this chain is the famous Ibn Ḥazm of Córdoba (d. 1064), an ambitious courtier

¹⁰²Giffen, 11.

¹⁰³P. G. Walsh, *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1982), Duckworth Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Editions, 287.

¹⁰⁴Jacobi, “Udhri’.

¹⁰⁵Peter L. Allen, *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), University of Pennsylvania Press Middle Ages Series, 48.

¹⁰⁶Giffen, 14.

¹⁰⁷Kay Kā'ūs, 70.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 77.

who lived in the final days of the Umayyad caliphate of Andalus and had the good sense to retire from political activity after his fourth imprisonment. Living in exile in Játiva, he turned his energy to the pen, composing a number of works on theology, religious law, science, and a unique experiment in elegant literature, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāmah*, “The Ring of the Dove.” This work, remarkable for its streamlined, personal style, runs the gamut of the various stages (*aḥwāl*) that await the one who falls in love, from the first encounter with the beloved, to allusion, hinting, flirting, and other love games, the use of the go-between, the ecstasy of union, the pain of infidelity, breaking off, and reconciling oneself with the eventuality of death. In the chapter on union, Ibn Ḥazm invokes the theory of Aristophanes, claiming that love is the longing of the soul to be fused with the soul of the beloved, and that upon fulfillment one would experience “the perfect realization of hopes and the complete fulfillment of one’s dreams.”¹⁰⁹ However, he absolutely condemns any love outside the pure love for God at the end of his work, a move that mirrors that of Ovid and Andreas Capellanus.

Both Ibn Ḥazm and his predecessor Ibn Dāʿūd were jurists of the Zāhirī school, a literalist reading of scripture that tended towards social conservatism and was directly at odds with the Muʿtazilī rationalism of al-Jāhiz. Despite this, they are both quite bold in their approach to their topic—as we have seen above, Ibn Dāʿūd makes the unusual move of defending and rehabilitating *hawā*, while Ibn Ḥazm spares no detail in describing all the ways lovers violate the rules of society and religion in their quest for union. Yet, the condemnation of such actions and the love that causes them is never far away. This is also the case with Andreas Capellanus’ *De amore*. The simultaneous presentation of *amor curialis* with *amor concupiscentiae* found in these works presents an interesting puzzle for modern readers: how much is meant to be taken literally, and how much is tongue-in-cheek? This has been a problem under much scrutiny in medieval European scholarship. D.W. Robertson, a specialist in medieval English, and C.S. Singleton, a Dante scholar, have both written articles that suggest that many of the definitive examples of “courtly love,” like *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, *Le roman de la rose*, and Andreas’ *De amore* are all works that play with and problematize these idealized tropes and should be read humorously and ironically.¹¹⁰ P.G. Walsh also believes that the author of *De amore* “is daringly and humorously discussing in stylized play ideas

¹⁰⁹Ali Aḥmad Ibn Ḥazm, *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love*, trans. by A.J. Arberry (London: Luzac, 1994), 118.

¹¹⁰F. X. Newman, editor, *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969).

of love and marriage which have no status in the real world of twelfth-century society, but which challenge and criticise the prevailing mores of sex and marriage imposed by feudal law and Christian precept.”¹¹¹ The same could very well be applied to Ibn Ḥazm, although I would like to suggest an alternative reading for these texts. Given the fact that, as we saw in Ibn Sīnā, love in its entirety simultaneously contains elements both redemptive and damning, both base and sublime, it is also possible to take these authors at their word. It is entirely natural to praise love and condemn it in the same work, for as a middleman, a go-between, neither of the mortal realm nor of the divine (recalling the words of Socrates), the goodness or evil of love is entirely dependent on *context*—who it strikes and for whom, when, for how long, and how everyone involved handles themselves during the ordeal.

The wealth of Islamic sources available to us are an invaluable source for reading Andreas Capellanus’ *De amore*. Walsh points out that while the author may have been somewhat familiar with the works of Plato through the *De dogmate Platonis*, a well-known *summa* of the Latin world, it is the concepts of Ibn Sīnā and the style of Ibn Ḥazm that are most striking in his work.¹¹² Maria Rosa Menocal confirms this point; in her book *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, she provides a vivid illustration of the widespread presence of Arabic writing in Paris, Toledo, Cluny, and the court at Troyes, where Andreas is supposed to have resided. The close ties between the Norman courts of Sicily, France, and England, especially manifest in the figures of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, who traveled to Spain to collect the Qurʾān and other Arabic sources in 1142, made the rapid dissemination of Arabic texts in translation possible. At the same time, Andalusian scholars and intellectuals were moving northwards, notably Petrus Alfonsi, a Jewish convert to Christianity who attended the court of Henry I for some years and taught in northern France.¹¹³ By the early 1200s, the works of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroës), Mūsá ibn Maymūn (Maimonides), and many others were centerpieces of the curricula of philosophy and science at the universities of London, Paris, and Bologna.¹¹⁴ A comparison of the *Ṭawq al-ḥamāmah* with the *De amore* could thus be very instructive in clarifying the many readings possible within these handbooks on love.

¹¹¹Walsh, 6.

¹¹²Ibid., 21.

¹¹³F. Lewis, 3.

¹¹⁴Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), University of Pennsylvania Press Middle Ages Series, 57.

Just as Ibn Ḥazm writes, “You charged me—may God exalt you !—to compose for you an essay describing Love ... I have accordingly hastened to fulfill your desire ; though but for the wish to comply with your commission I would never have undertaken it at all,”¹¹⁵ the *De amore* opens thus: “My revered friend Walter, my most sedulous and insistent affection for you compels me to publish for you in my own words and to instruct you by my own hand how the condition of love can be maintained inviolate between lovers ... So though dwelling on such topics seems hardly advisable, and though the man of sense shows impropriety in making time for such hunting as this, the affection that binds us makes me utterly unable to oppose your request.”¹¹⁶ Any classicist would recognize this formula, for Ovid himself brings this epistolary frame tale to use. It is an important element of the composition, far beyond simply providing an excuse for the author to broach a subject that may stretch the bounds of propriety; it immediately sets up the groundwork for *duplex sententia*, a double meaning in which the paradox of teaching something that should not be taught is left to the discretion of the reader to puzzle out. The ending of the *De amore* similarly mirrors that of the *Ṭawq al-hamāmah*: after writing at length of the impossibility of love within marriage, the importance of secret-keeping and falsifying one’s emotions, and the necessity of jealousy and mistrust to keep the flames of love alive, Andreas concludes his work with a fiery denouncement of all who engage in such relations outside the divine sanctity of marriage: “How wretched, mad, and assuredly infra-bestial is the man who for momentary pleasure of flesh surrenders the joys of eternity, and seeks to enslave himself to the flames of everlasting Hell!”¹¹⁷ On the surface, there seems to be no justification for writing this treaty, if the arts prescribed within it are to be avoided at all costs—yet, as a work of literature, it perhaps provides keys to *other* kinds of wisdom, beyond the knowledge of how to break some hearts or your own.

One topic that preoccupies classic and medieval thinkers alike, by means of an example, is that of eloquence versus truth. Cato and Cicero both write that skill in words without truth is merely foolish talk—true eloquence is that which promotes and is inspired by high virtue and moral righteousness.¹¹⁸ For Muslims, the miracle of the Qur’ān lies within its *ijāz*, its inimitable eloquence. Augustine, on the other hand, struggles with the problem of identifying truth within rhetoric and warns against being misled

¹¹⁵Ibn Ḥazm, 17.

¹¹⁶Walsh, 31.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 287.

¹¹⁸Jerrold E. Seigel, ‘Ideals of Eloquence and Silence in Petrarch’, *Journal on the History of Ideas*, 26 (1965):2, 147.

by the persuasive power of elegant speech,¹¹⁹ an issue that Petrarch, the consummate humanist and lover of eloquence, also admits as problematic in his *Secretum*.¹²⁰ In the same vein, a manual on the dissimulations, pretences, and posturing of love can also be an instruction book on the art of critical reading (*assidua lectio*).¹²¹ One of the major themes in the *De amore*, for example, is the deceptiveness and treachery of women. Although they are not all necessarily bad (although the trend seems to be in that direction), the task of distinguishing the virtuous from the corrupt requires a strong ability to interpret and decode that not all men possess (although the trend seems to be in that direction, too). Andreas repeatedly warns Walter, his pupil, to be on guard against women who wear too much make-up (I.6.9), women who are looking for money (I.9.3), women who grant favors a little too willingly (I.10.1), women who don't give favors at all (I.5.4), women who want to be loved yet refuse to love (II.7.19), and women who lie about being in love (I.6.319): “*The man says: ‘Though the words you utter seem to beguile men’s ears, if the truth is sought they are covered with a cloak of sophistry.’*”¹²² As the deceivers and abusers of speech *par excellence* in Andreas’ world, women are the best suited to train the young knight how to steel himself against flattery and false blandishments, maintaining a firm grip on reason to protect himself from dissimulation.

Critical discernment should not be restricted to one’s dealings with women. Although women are lustful, gluttonous, intemperate in their speech, easily swayed by their vanity, and so forth, there are many positive examples of female virtue to be found, and their predisposition and vulnerability to deceit is limited to their physical desires and aspirations. The clergy, on the other hand, who receive a special chapter in the work, are somehow deviously excused for their carnal lusts:

*The cleric must detach himself as a foreigner from all the processes of love ... However, there is scarcely a man who ever lived without sinning in the flesh, and the life of the clergy is naturally exposed to the temptation of the body more than are all others because of their considerable and uninterrupted leisure.*¹²³

Something very odd is going on here. The cleric must be a “foreigner” to all kinds of love—but, boys

¹¹⁹William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought Through the Confession Story*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 43.

¹²⁰Francesco Petrarca; Carol E. Quillen, editor, *The Secret*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 72-75.

¹²¹Allen, 63.

¹²²Walsh, 131.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 211.

will be boys. In comparison to women, the clerics actually come off as the more treacherous; everyone knows that women can be lustful, but clerics, we see, can be hypocrites, using their outward piety to mask sins far greater than those of the flesh.¹²⁴ As Andreas tells Walter, even the text itself of the *De amore* must be approached from a critical standpoint: “There are many other points which I could make to you about the diminution of love, but I leave them entirely to your diligence to seek out.”¹²⁵ Thus, embedded in the text, there is a second level of deception that requires a certain amount of *assiduo* before one can even become aware of it. As the mind expands in its ability to analyze and decipher, it uncovers deceptions that are far more serious than the relatively superficial games that lovers play. Let us remember that Dante places the lovers in the highest level of Hell, just after Limbo, for they are essentially *good* people who let themselves get carried away by their desire, while the fraudulent, those who have intentionally abused their gift of reason, reside deep within the Malebolge. Dante himself faints in horror upon hearing the sad story of Francesca and Paolo (“*caddi come corpo morto cade*”),¹²⁶ whereas he takes it upon himself to attack the head of Bocca degli Abati as he lies frozen in ice, striking it with his foot and tearing out its hair!¹²⁷ The love literature of Ibn Ḥazm and Andreas Capellanus does not need to be understood as either descriptive or prescriptive of social practice, but rather as a literary endeavor that is acted out within the imagination of the reader, offering wisdom through the act of critical reading and interpretation. If extra-marital affairs, lying, carnal pleasure, and the rest have no moral value in Christian or Muslim society, at least a controlled space can be carved out for them within literature.

خواست از بهر عشق : Quest for Romance

A similar use of multiple meanings and double entendre is present in the courtly romance of Islamicate literature. During the ninth and tenth centuries and the height of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, the premier genre of Arabic poetry was the ode (*qaṣīdah*), which always begins with an erotic prelude (*naṣīb*) in memory of an absent beloved. The *naṣīb* is followed by a journey narrative (*riḥlah*) and then either tribal boasting (*fakhr*) or a panegyric (*madīḥ*) in praise of the patron. The poets of the ‘Abbasid court developed a distinctive style

¹²⁴Allen, 67.

¹²⁵Walsh, II.5.3, p. 233.

¹²⁶Dante, V.142, p. 92.

¹²⁷Ibid., XXXII.76-100, p. 503.

of poetry prized for its subtlety and nuance called *badī'*, “innovative,” and the elegant display of metaphors, symbols, and puns was a measure by which one could assert his literary achievements. As the caliphate disintegrated into a succession of smaller local dynasties, the composition of panegyric odes in a highly metaphoric language remained a constant element at the court, and ambitious amirs and sultans, hoping to leave their mark on history, would compete with one another in recruiting the best poets of the day to sing their praises. In the courts of the Samanids, Seljuks, Ghaznavids, Ilkhans, and others, poetry played a vital role in establishing the righteousness and virtue of its patron dynasty and granting it the moral legitimacy to rule.

Because of his close association with ethics and chivalrous behavior, the poet took on the role of moral preceptor and stimulator of virtue, offering his patron the means of obtaining al-Ghazālī's “double treasure,” good repute in this life and salvation in the next.¹²⁸ In this relationship, the patron's act of generosity provides tangible proof of his virtue, while his dependents furnish him with the means of demonstrating this virtue so that he may become an exemplar for all his subjects. It is the poet's place as the articulator of morality and wisdom, combined with the metaphorical prowess of *badī'* panegyrics, that led to the flourishing of the romance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹²⁹ The passionate words for the beloved in the *naṣīb* and the lofty praise for the patron in the *madīḥ* are often set up as parallel structures, incorporating the same language and extolling the same virtues. Loyalty, in particular, is emphasized; a sense of loyalty and fealty between the servant/lover and the master/beloved would ensure proper behavior on both parties and bring just reward to all those who honored their obligations. Due to this parallelism, the message of a romance resonates far beyond the literal story of two lovers and their adventures—it could, by association, be a political treatise on the virtuous conduct between a lord and his subjects, or it could be a religious allegory on the obligations between the Lord and His followers.

The fusion of love-philosophy with notions of virtue, power, and justice is evident in the development of what Meisami calls the ‘lover-king’ in romantic literature, in which the private aspect of a king's personal love is directly reflected in the public manifestation of prosperity and stability in his kingdom. As Ibn Sīnā says, love is not a guaranteed beacon for guidance unless it is approached from a noble disposition

¹²⁸Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 45.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, Chapters 1 and 2 in particular.

within the soul; thus “the protagonist’s conduct as lover reveals his fitness, or unfitness, for kingship.”¹³⁰ To demonstrate this fusion, Meisami points to an early romance composed by Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī in 1054 CE, *Viś and Rāmīn*, in which two kings (and brothers), Mawbad and Rāmīn, compete for the love of Viś. Mawbad is the very image of a powerful, lusty king, dominated by excessive passion that gives him over to hastiness, cruelty, and irrational behavior. Rāmīn, the quintessential courtly lover, prefers to weep, pine, and write poetry to his absent beloved. Although their behavior takes different forms, they are both acting from the same base faculty and have made the same fatal flaw: they have in fact mistaken their concupiscence, their animal desire for physical possession and self-aggrandizement, for divine love.¹³¹ Other poets, such as Firdawsī in the *Shāhnāmah* (c. 1010) or Niẓāmī in *Khusraw and Shīrīn*, the second of his *Panj Ganj*, combine the two figures of king and lover into one person. Niẓāmī’s King Khusraw is gripped by a lustful desire for Shīrīn that drives him to commit a number of atrocities and injustices, most strikingly the killing of the innocent Farhād. Eventually, the good example and wise counsel of the virtuous Shīrīn finally guides Khusraw to justice and rectitude, thus fulfilling the promise of spiritual love. The conflation of the two figures into a single individual creates a kind of Everyman that allows the poem to move outside the literal issues discussed in the text and address a universal audience: “Thus *Khosrow o Shirin* is not merely about love, or kingship, but also about man’s ability to interpret both the evidence of his senses and the moral issues ... with which he must grapple.”¹³² The *Haft Paykar*, directly composed after *Khusraw and Shirīn*, is Niẓāmī’s most complex work, integrating the persona of the lover-king into a comprehensive world order guided by Love.

The *Haft Paykar* is an extremely tight composition, eliciting comparisons with works like the *Decameron* or the *Divine Comedy* for its seemingly limitless wealth of intertextual references, structural patterns, and number-color symbolism.¹³³ It is essentially a literary schematization of love, an elaborate allegory that takes into account the astrology, geography, and medical knowledge of the time to show how love works in this natural system. The central narrative of the poem, and the topic of its title, is that of the seven stories, told in seven pavilions, or domes, over the span of a week—but equally important is the frame story

¹³⁰Meisami, *Court Poetry*, 182.

¹³¹Idem, ‘Kings and Lovers’, 6.

¹³²Ibid., 13.

¹³³The word *paykar* itself has multiple meanings, complimenting the multi-layered nature of the text. It can mean ‘face’ or ‘portrait,’ indicating the seven beautiful princesses; it can also mean ‘form’ or ‘structure,’ which may point to the seven pavilion-domes, the seven climes, or the seven stations of transcendence that Bahrām Gūr traverses.

that surrounds these tales.¹³⁴ The protagonist is Bahrām Gūr, so called for the onager (*gūr*) that he likes to hunt. His adventures are so numerous, it would be difficult to summarize them in a few lines, but the basic thread is his rise to the throne of Persia and his many exploits once becoming king. The crowning achievement of this period is his acquiring no less than seven brides and erecting an exquisite pavilion for each one of them—the time-honored emblems of virile power. Having accomplished so much, he takes the year off to take his pleasure with his wives, who regale him with stories of love in all its forms: noble, failed, lustful, and spiritual. Once emerging from the pavilions, he finds his kingdom in disarray, with a corrupt vizier usurping power, a war with China on the horizon, and a populace living under tyranny. Fortified with his new understanding of love, Bahrām manages to set things right and restores justice to the realm, before finally setting off on a hunt one day, entering a cave (long cited as a locus of mystical ascendance),¹³⁵ and disappearing forever.¹³⁶

Meisami's analysis of this structure focuses on Nizāmī's portrayal of love as a guiding force for justice. She distinguishes the first period of his rule as a superficial, temporary state, a "kingship of will"; upon his reemergence from the pavilions, Bahrām establishes a spiritually pure, virtuous reign, or "kingship by law."¹³⁷ The sharp contrast between the two sections places a correspondingly heavy emphasis on the stories of the Seven Princesses, who supply Bahrām with the wisdom he needs to correct the imbalances of his reign. These stores, then, are no "mere fables," as Nizāmī writes, but a "treasure-house" of wisdom, provided for the benefit of his king and patron.¹³⁸ Taken as a whole, the seven pavilions function as a microcosm in which the audience (Bahrām explicitly, the reader by implication) will learn the secrets of divine love and reach the mature, rational stage of being that ensures just rule and the establishment of order upon the world.

¹³⁴It could alternatively be argued that the seven stories are an interruption in the central tale of Bahrām Gūr and provide a means for his transition from concupiscence to virtue. This seems to be the interpretation Meisami prefers (see Meisami, 'Kings and Lovers', 17), but either way, the three sections of the poem all bear equal weight in terms of their importance.

¹³⁵Idem, 'Introduction to the *Haft Paykar*', in: *The Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), xxxiii.

¹³⁶Some food for thought: C.S. Lewis, who is very familiar with this tradition of love and whose own writings on love I have occasionally referred to, brings this same structure to use in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which the four children emerge from the wood, remove the usurper from the throne and restore legitimate kingship, and finally, as grown adults, vanish in the same wood on a hunt. There is probably no strong connection, but it is interesting to see these same motifs reappear in modern literature.

¹³⁷Idem, 'Kings and Lovers', 17.

¹³⁸Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, l. 29, p. 267.

At the time of Nizāmī, the world was traditionally divided into seven zones, stretching from the equator to the pole. This was a practice that has its roots in Babylonian geography, with the city in the center, surrounded by seven islands, or climes. Roman mapmakers worked off of this concept, placing Rome and the Mediterranean at the center of the world with Europe and Africa on either side and Asia stretching out to the east. The Muslim geographers al-Wardī, al-Istakhrī, al-Balkhī, and Ibn Hawqal moved the geographical center to Jerusalem or Mecca, in accordance with their focus on the holy places of Islam, but the concept of seven climes remained intact. In Nizāmī’s version, they are represented as follows: India, China, Khwārazm (Central Asia), Siqlāb (Slovenia, Russia, and the Far North), the Maghrib (Egypt and North Africa), Rūm (Greece, by extension Europe), and Persia. Surrounding Earth are seven celestial bodies, which correspond with both the seven climes and the seven days of the week: by proximity to Earth, they are the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Each planet is also associated with one of the seven colors of the spectrum, thus the color of the dome for each day of Bahrām’s visit corresponds with the color of the ascendant celestial body. The days have a number of secondary characteristics as well; drawing from the tradition of Greek and Roman myth, each celestial body carries the characteristics of the deity associated with it. Thus, Tuesday (‘Tiw’ being the Anglo-Saxon equivalent to Mars) is a passionate day, a good day for love and war. Friday, the day of Venus (Freya or Frigg in Norse mythology), is also auspicious for love, but in contrast to her sanguine counterpart Mars, the love Venus offers is the white love of devotion and fealty, or *agapē*. The fact that Friday is also the holy day of Islam strengthens the connection between pure, selfless love and religion.

The numerological significance of this sequence has been the object of much scrutiny. In his essay “Color and Number in the Haft Paykar,” Georg Krotkoff tracks a progression from the physical four elements of the body to the three aspects of the mind.¹³⁹ Within these two worlds, there is a parallel structure of theme and outcome; thus stories 1 and 4 end in loss and mourning, 2 and 5 in a lovers’ tryst, 3 and 6 in marriage.¹⁴⁰ He also detects a linear emphasis upon the feminine, masculine, and spiritual trines as the stories progress. Meisami sees a certain balance in alternation between concupiscence and irascibility, which are the two forms of animal desire exhibited by Mawbad and Rāmīn.¹⁴¹ This corresponds perfectly with

¹³⁹Georg Krotkoff, ‘Color and Number in the Haft Paykar’, in: R.M. Savory and D.A. Agius, editors, *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 107.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 110.

¹⁴¹Meisami, ‘Introduction’, xxv.

Order of Stories							
Order of Visit	1 Saturday	2 Sunday	3 Monday	4 Tuesday	5 Wednesday	6 Thursday	7 Friday
Celestial Body or Deity	Saturn	Sun	Moon	Mars / Tiw	Mercury / Woden	Jupiter / Thor	Venus / Frigg
Clime	India	Rūm	Khwārazm	Siqlāb	Maghrib	China	Persia
Color	black	yellow	green	red	blue	brown	white
Concupiscent or Irascible	c	i	c	i	c	i	c
Auspicious for Love	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Attributes	beauty, <i>erōs</i> , eternity, gnosis	joy, merriment, cheer	health, growth	value, courage, vitality	nobility, loftiness, misfortune	healing, medicine, repose	purity, <i>agapē</i> , justice, truth
The seven stages (<i>ahwāl</i>) of spiritual ascent							
Structure (Nājm al-Dīn)	ecstatic love	faith	tranquility	gnosis	certitude	beneficence	Islam
Qualities of nature and elements							
Structure (Krotkoff)	earth	fire	water	air	Qualities of spirit body, spirit, soul		
	black bile	yellow bile	phlegm	blood			
	melancholy	cholera	phlegmaticism	sanguinity			
Structure (Chelkowski)	spirit (black)	primary colors of being (yellow, green, red, blue)			body (brown)	soul (white)	

Figure 1: Structural patterns within the *Haft Paykar*

Seyed-Gohrab's observation that Saturn, the Moon, Mars, and Venus were typically seen as the instigators of love.¹⁴² Two contemporaries of Nizāmī, the Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, have their own schemas of a seven-tiered path of ascension, using a color symbolism approximate or parallel to that of the Haft Paykar.¹⁴³ In every case, the sequence of stories representing the King's discovery of love begins and ends with concupiscence, first that of the black variety and then the white—and tellingly, the black love of Saturday, as magnificent as it is, does not endure and ultimately leaves the hero in despair, while the white love of Friday resolves with all parties happy and fulfilled.

This brings us to a second structural aspect of the *Haft Paykar*, its use of color. The four primary colors of red, green, blue, and yellow represent the physical universe in all its aspects.¹⁴⁴ This encompasses Galen's four humors, Aristotle's four elements, the four seasons, the four physical sciences (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), the four directions, the four stages of life, and the four castes (crafts, chieftains, rulers, prophets).¹⁴⁵ Because these are the elements that compose reality, they must be kept in equilibrium in order to preserve health and stability. A body with unbalanced humors will fall ill; a climate with unbalanced seasons will lead to physical defects in its inhabitants.¹⁴⁶ This is applicable even in political thought: the role of the king is to balance power between the four types of men in his kingdom and prevent any one of them from getting out of line. Thus the 'king as physician' is a widespread motif, articulated by Nizām al-Mulk, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qutaybah, who writes, "There can be no government without men—No men without money—No money without cultivation/prosperity—and no prosperity without justice and good administration."¹⁴⁷ The three remaining neutral colors, black, white, and brown, are associated with the ethereal properties of the spirit, corresponding with Plato's three aspects of vegetable, animal, and rational. The three arts of speech, grammar, rhetoric, and poetry, are the three sciences that refine and elevate the soul opening it for higher things. Three is the number of the Universal Soul, the number of the Christian Trinity, and the sacred trine of masculinity, femininity, and spirituality. The color black is said to be the color of mystical gnosis, an understanding of reality based on its 'deep' (*bāṭin*) structure. Brown, the color

¹⁴²Seyed-Gohrab, 6.

¹⁴³Meisami, 'Introduction', xxxi.

¹⁴⁴Peter Chelkowski, *Mirrors of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamsah of Nizami*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975), 113.

¹⁴⁵Meisami, 'Introduction', xxix.

¹⁴⁶Abd Allāh ibn Muslim Ibn Qutaybah; F. S. Bodenheimer and L. Kopf, editors, *The natural history section from a 9th century "Book of Useful Knowledge," the "Uyūn al-akhbār of Ibn Qutayba*, (Paris: Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences, 1949), 40.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., Chapter 4.

of the body, is seen in the tale of the Sandalwood Dome to represent healing and restoration—the hero of that particular story is cured of blindness, and then cures the maladies of others. White, as the color of purity, is the emblem of lawfulness and propriety and brings closure to the seven tales.

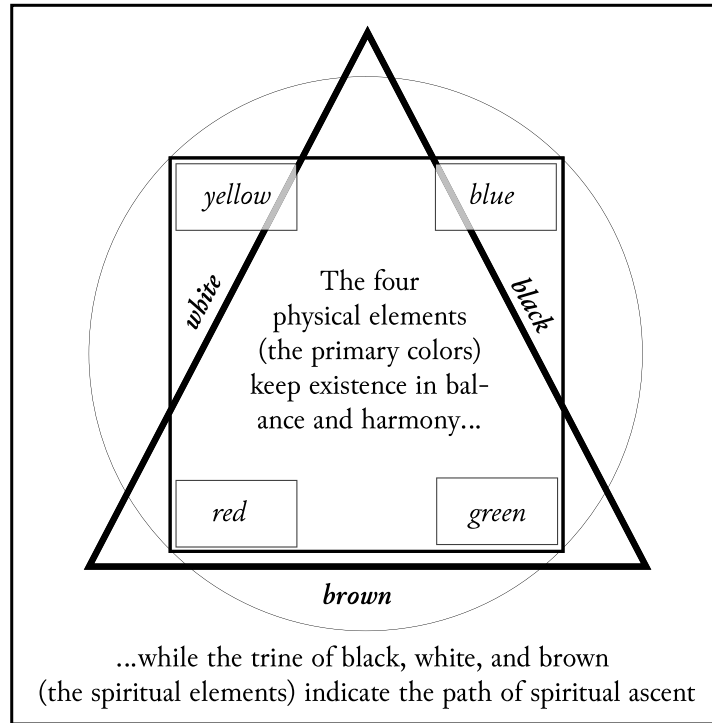


Figure 2: A balanced world for spiritual growth

The Story of the Black Dome

Having journeyed across a millennium and a half, from Nishapur to London, it is now time to return to our tale of the Black Dome as we ask the question, why does the King wear black, and what does it have to do with love? As she concludes her story, the Princess of the Black Dome recites these verses in praise of her color:

*The moon in blackness shines forth bright,
king-like, 'neath parasol of night.
There is no better hue than black;
fish-bone's less prized than fish's back.*

*Black hair's a sign of youth, and down
of black the youthful face adorns.
The eye's black pupil views the world,
and robes of black are never soiled.
The moon—if night's fine silks weren't black—
would a fit bridal chamber lack.
Seven colors 'neath the seven thrones:
no color beyond black is known.*¹⁴⁸

There are many images to be interpreted within these lines; for example, “the eye’s black pupil views the world,” or, in Persian, *bih siyābī baṣar jabān bīnad*, which could be more literally translated as “with/in blackness, the gaze sees the world.”¹⁴⁹ This nod to the pupil of the eye may also be an allusion to man’s unique capacity of discernment, the ability to see that which is hidden. The same allusion is present in the image of the whiteness (truth, purity) of the moon, made visible by the black shroud that surrounds it. Black is eternal, by virtue that the black robe is never stained. Finally, black is the most distant color. Saturn was the farthest known planet in Niẓāmī’s day, and beyond the celestial bodies, only black remains. This is seen in the final line, which perhaps is best re-visited in the original Persian: *haft rang ast zīr haft aurang / nist bālātar az siyābī rang*, “seven colors beneath seven thrones [heavens]; there is no color higher than blackness.”¹⁵⁰ If whiteness is the color of chastity, virtue, and loyalty, blackness is the color of perception, gnosis, inner meaning, and the eternal nature of Truth.

Black is also the most dangerous color. As it falls within the sphere of concupiscent desire, it retains all the properties of love-as-malady inherent in the words *‘ishq* and *erōs*. Furthermore, it is a color of the soul, not of the body—unlike the lusty nature of red, which is confined to physical wants and needs, black indicates a kind of desire that will lead the lover ever further into the abyss, plumbing it for secret knowledge and understanding. If successfully pursued, the rewards can be great, but it is a little like walking a tightrope—one false move, one small distraction, and the lover will risk losing everything he has gained. There is no doubt that a Sufi reading of this story is possible, for by Niẓāmī’s time the mystical language of ardent desire for union with God had been well-established. It is possible, even commendable, that the

¹⁴⁸Niẓāmī, *Haft Paykar*, ll. 514-519, p. 132.

¹⁴⁹The beauty of this line is that it is ambivalent whether blackness (*siyābī*) and vision (*baṣar*) are linked as a compound phrase or not. It could just as easily be “in the blackness of vision, one sees the world.” The double entendre of this and similar passages is an excellent example of the poem’s multi-layered nature.

¹⁵⁰Also a Persian proverb.

initiate (*murīd*, literally ‘wanton’) should desire his goal with the same insatiable hunger of a lover for his beloved, for it is this very state that gives him the heroic capacity to overcome all obstacles and temptations; yet such longing must be vigilantly kept in check by discipline, concentration, and a will of iron, if it is not to be diverted onto an object of lesser value and bring about the fall of the lover.

From this perspective, our unhappy King was doomed from the outset, for it is clear that he is used to getting what he wants and does not take no for an answer. Although he is confined to the limits of his kingdom, he manages to satisfy his curiosity by building an elegant guest-house for travelers, who regale him with tales of their journeys and adventures, both good and ill. One day, a stranger comes to the court, dressed entirely in black. As per usual, the King inquires into his affairs, and is shocked when his inquiries around the reason for the stranger’s costume are rebuffed:

*‘Leave off this talk,’ he said; ‘for none
knows where the Simurgh can be found.’
... ‘None knows the secret of this black,
save he who wears it on his back.’¹⁵¹*

This mysterious warning is enough to hint that there is more to this secret than meets the eye; as a mythological creature of annihilation and rebirth (not unlike the Western phoenix), the *simurgh* is a prominent symbol of mystical transcendence and union with the Divine Essence. The King, unfortunately, fails to heed this warning, and in fact his desire to know is only further inflamed by such reticence. Casting off all pretenses of decorum and control, his pleas grow “past all measure” before the stranger finally relents and informs him that the answer to his question lies in China, before abruptly taking his leave, “closing the door upon my [the King’s] need.”¹⁵² His desire unfulfilled, the King becomes utterly obsessed with this riddle, and eventually he abandons his kingdom and sets off in search of the mysterious village. The warning signs are increasing; now the state is forced to suffer for his greed. The King will repeat this same motion in greater and greater iterations until his story spins out of control.

The undertaking of a quest, one of the great tropes of romantic poetry, is intrinsically linked with love and desire. The English word ‘quest’ is itself related to the Persian root *kbwāst*, meaning to seek

¹⁵¹Nizāmī, *Hafī Paykar*, ll. 57 and 60, pp. 108-109.

¹⁵²Ibid., l. 70, p. 109.

or want. During and before Nizāmī's time, the literary milieu across the continent was rich with quest narratives—the famous quest for the Grail in Arthurian legend, Beowulf, the classic epics of Homer and Virgil, the troubadour poetry of the western Mediterranean lands. In all of these stories, the object of desire often plays second fiddle to the search itself. It is the quest that defines the hero's life and gives it value. The best quests were those which were impossible and doomed to failure—if it was an easy quest, what would a great hero prove by completing it? Yet, in exerting every resource available and putting forth the most valiant of efforts, the hero could be victorious even in failure. This is the transcendent element of the quest; the Holy Grail might have been able to grant eternal life to the one who grasped it, yet those who died in its search in fact attained that very goal, by virtue of their great feats and renown, passed down in song.

While the quest—the search for desire's fulfillment—can call the hero to feats of chivalry and virtue, both the desire and the intentions must be pure for that to happen. Our King's object of desire is far from lofty; like Rāmīn, all he really wants is to satisfy his own lust for knowledge, and like Bahmān, he will neglect all his kingly duties in pursuit of this self-centered goal. Additionally, unlike the typical knight-errant or 'Udhri lover, who renounce the world in order to purify their love, the King travels in fine robes with gems a-plenty to ease the hardship of the road. When he arrives to the town, he finds that, just like the stranger at his court, no one is willing to speak about their black raiment. He therefore uses his wealth to lure an unsuspecting butcher, *chū gāv-i qurbānī* “like an ox to the slaughter,” as he says, into divulging his secret.¹⁵³ The butcher leads the King to a ruined land far from the village and procures for him a basket with the instructions to sit in it and let fate run its course. When the King takes his seat, he is whisked skyward to a beautiful land of sweet-scented flowers and running rivers, where every night the fey-like Queen Turktāz and her entourage arrive to feast and make merry amongst the gardens. The King, whose name is coincidentally Turktāzī, is received with boundless hospitality; he is made to sit at the banquet table, given sweet wine to drink and rich food to eat, and every night has his choice of the Queen's lovely handmaidens to accompany him to bed.

Although one would expect the King to be pretty happy with the outcome of his journey, he remains cursed by his greed; despite his “blessings in excess,” the King finds himself nevertheless discontented and

¹⁵³Bakhtiyārī, 134.

restless: *varaḡ az ḡarf-i khurramī sbustam / k-az ziyādat ziyādīyat jastam*, “I washed joy off of [my] page / for in abundance, I sought even more.”¹⁵⁴ The one thing that remains outside his grasp, is, of course, the Queen herself. She humors his desire to a certain extent, allowing him to embrace and kiss her, but warns him, “Beyond this nothing is allowed / true lovers should show gratitude.”¹⁵⁵ As with the mysterious black-garbed stranger in the beginning of the story, the King is unable to constrain himself, and the more his advances towards her are rejected, the hotter his desire for her burns. The Queen, for her part, attempts to bring him around to reason, telling him:

*For he who's with contentment pleased
will ever find a life of ease;
But he who makes desire his friend
will be a beggar in the end.*¹⁵⁶

And the following night, she offers him the promise of a greater reward in return for his patience now:

*Put off this fancy for a night,
and you will gain eternal light ...
On this one craving shut your door,
and laugh with joy forever more.*¹⁵⁷

These verses may well remind us of Boethius, who finds himself in the *Consolatio* outside the bounds of reason, questioning in his rage and despair the justice of creation, or even more so of Dante, who finds himself *per una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smaritta*, “in a dark forest, for the way ahead had been lost”;¹⁵⁸ it is only with the arrival of reason, embodied as Philosophy or as Virgil, that the author can extricate himself from his plight and comprehend for himself the inherent justice of God’s ultimate plan. Similarly, if the King were to follow the Queen’s advice, he would find the way to “eternal light” opened to him. Instead, the King’s desire gets the better of him, and he loses all rational self-restraint. He begs and pleads with the Queen to give him what he wants, that he must have her that night or he will go mad. At

¹⁵⁴Bakhtiyārī, 145.

¹⁵⁵Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, l. 284, p. 120.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., ll. 345-46, p. 123.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., ll. 362 and 364, p. 124.

¹⁵⁸Dante, 1.2-3, p. 26.

this, Turktāz finally gives in and instructs him to close his eyes. Drunk with anticipation, the King does as he is bid; but when he opens his eyes again, he finds himself alone in the basket that had only thirty days ago carried him to Paradise: “No man or woman near; alone, / my sole companion sighs and groans; / Without light’s radiance, like a shade.”¹⁵⁹ He is hereupon discovered and embraced by the butcher, who says to him:

*A hundred years I might have told
this tale; you’d not have grasped its truth.
You went and saw what was concealed;
to whom could it have been revealed?
I too from that hot passion burned,
and dressed in black at being wronged.*¹⁶⁰

In sorrow, the King too dons robes of black and returns to his kingdom, a broken, yet wiser, man.

From start to finish, the King’s journey to Heaven and back is a powerful metaphor for the Sufi and Neoplatonist experience of transcendence, the province of black. From the Sufi perspective, the King’s quest is very much in line with the renunciation of the world in an attempt to achieve proximity to the Beloved. He renounces all (well, most) of his worldly possessions and sets out on what we could call a pilgrimage to find the object of his desire—in this case, the answer to his question. As he gets closer to his goal, his journey physically lifts him into the air and takes him to another world, a world veiled to the ordinary eye. The answer to the King’s question, ‘Why do you wear black?’ can only be answered by going through the same experience, or to borrow a Sufi term, the same ‘taste’ (*dhawq*). As al-Ghazālī says, *dhawq* is the means through which one attains a greater intimacy with the object of attention: “what a difference between being acquainted with the definition of drunkenness ... and being drunk!”¹⁶¹ Yet wine, while it can elevate the spirit to realms inaccessible to the ordinary mind, is dangerously seductive and can easily confuse the mystic into losing sight of his ultimate destination, thus the necessity for the strict discipline and obedience to the guide (*shaykh* or *pīr*) if one hopes to stay oriented on the right path—hence its prohibition for all but the elect (according to the philosophers). The King says as much, blaming his failure on his immaturity and inexperience:

¹⁵⁹Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, ll. 495-96, p. 131.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., ll. 501-503, p. 131.

¹⁶¹William Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1953), 55.

*That I, who am the King of Black,
like black clouds now bewail my lack:
That my desire, so nearly gained,
was, through my rawness, unattained.*¹⁶²

Without a guide, such a journey is doomed to end in failure, because it was begun and pursued in a state of *erōs*, in which the King's selfish intentions could only goad him into pressing further without allowing reason to guide his actions. In many ways, the tale is a replica of the Orpheus myth, for although the bard's overwhelming love for Eurydice can bring him down to the underworld and transgress the bounds of mortality, he cannot, in the end, keep himself from looking back to satisfy his desire for certainty, and thus fails to save her. Nonetheless, a certain fellowship is realized through these experiences, even in failure, as expressed by the embrace between the King and butcher, an interaction that would be impossible in normal social conventions; because of their shared experience and understanding (what is called *ma'rifah* in Sufi circles), these social distinctions become irrelevant and they can interact with one another as equals. The King's female slave, who hears his story and also dons robes of black, can be understood in this same sense. In the end, the king's efforts were not all in vain; indeed, the bitterness of his loss taught him wisdom no amount of prosperity and opulence could have provided. He returns to his realm and administers it with the grave dignity and sagacity of an ideal monarch. He becomes a member of the elite, the *abl al-khawāṣ*, those who have probed the secrets of the world and experienced proximity to the Beloved. The price of such wisdom, of course, is to be doomed to sorrow and mourning for the rest of his days. The King's handmaiden seems aware of this state, the futility of the quest, and the life-changing effect it has on the pilgrim, even before she hears a word of the King's story. The black robes speak for themselves:

*O best of rulers, who supports
all those who sorrow: who on earth
Has power to attempt the task
of scraping Heaven with an axe,
Seeking to know a hidden tale?
you know it, you alone can tell.*¹⁶³

¹⁶²Nizāmī, *Hafī Paykar*, ll. 509-10, p. 132.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, ll. 48-50, p. 108.

The Story of the White Dome

As is to be expected, the Story of the White Dome is in many ways an inversion of the Story of the Black Dome. Gone is the metaphor of the quest; gone is the question that drives our hero mad seeking its answer. Paradise is where we live, and beauty emerges from within.

Let us recap. Our hero, a young, chaste, and accomplished man, “A Jesus at his studies, and / a Joseph who the feast illumed,” keeps a garden away from the city, protected from the evil eye and outside corruption by four high walls, with towers that touch the moon.¹⁶⁴ One day, at the time of noonday prayer, he comes back to find that a gang of beautiful maidens have invaded his immaculate home and locked him out of it! These are strange times indeed. One wonders what the King of the Black Dome would say, having journeyed to the ends of the earth to trespass upon the realm of the *houris*, only to come back home and find that they had in turn taken up residence inside his own palace! However, the youth in this story is very unlike the King; he is compared to the prophets Jesus and Joseph, the latter especially a paragon of chastity in the face of temptation. He is virtuous and pious, and it seems to all intents and purposes that he has already *found* Paradise and is wise enough to keep it secluded and protected from worldly impurity. It is a testament to the subversive power of love that he doesn’t have the women all thrown out on the spot; unfortunately, his gaze is allowed to wander upon the most forbidden of all fruit: a bathing scene.

*Gracefully to the pool they came,
and loosed their flowered wrappers' bands.
They doffed their robes, removed their veils,
entered the water, fair as pearls;
Splashed water on their silvery forms;
in black concealed their silver. Moons
And fish played in the pool; enflamed
the world with ardent passion.
... A while they played, their hands clasped tight,
mocking the jasmine with their white;
A while they scattered pearls about,
and launched fair rounded fruits like boats.¹⁶⁵*

This is the trump card Eros may wield against the virtuous. Actaeon, brave and valiant a hero as he

¹⁶⁴Nizāmī, *Hafī Paykar*, l. 25, pp. 217-18.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, ll. 107-110 and 113-114, p. 222.

was, did not stand a chance against the bathing scene; as for our Joseph, whatever defenses his virtue could have mustered are instantly razed, and he is left helpless in the grip of love-sickness: “His blood, aboil in every vein, / made all his limbs cry out in pain.”¹⁶⁶ The physical pain he feels upon seeing this image of beauty is a common trope of romantic literature, both within Christian and Muslim contexts. For example, in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Mantiq al-Ṭayr*, “The Conference of the Birds” (c. 1177), the pious Shaykh Sam‘ān is inspired by a dream to journey to Rome, where he sees a Christian girl of such beauty, long decades of piety and virtue are instantly incinerated: “all that he was, was no longer / from the fire of melancholy his heart turned to smoke” (*harchi būdash sar bib sar nābūd sbud / zi ātish sūdā dilash chūn dūd sbud*).¹⁶⁷ A similar fate awaits the unfortunate Palamon of Chaucer’s *Knigh’t’s Tale*, who, gazing from his prison cell in the top of the tower, “cast his eye upon Emelya, / And therwithal he bleynte and cride, ‘A!’” His cousin, Arcite, is sure that Palamon is simply upset at being in prison and tells him to bear it like a man. Palamon retorts,

*This prison caused me nat for to crye,
But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
The fairness of that lady that that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is cause of al my crying and my wo.*

And sure enough, when Arcite takes his turn to look, he “is hurt as muche as he, or moore.”¹⁶⁸ The outcome of such a state in both of these stories is inevitably tragic: Palamon and Arcite will fight each other to the death, and Shaykh Sam‘ān will burn the Qur‘ān, intoxicate himself with wine, and become a swineherd for the sake of his pretty Christian girl. This is an outcome already decided from the outset; as readers, we all know someone caught in such a hopeless state can hardly be rebuked for seeking union with his beloved. The poetic voice of Niẓāmī himself interjects and confirms this expectation, lamenting the loss of such a fine youth to the cruel barbs of love, “Such unbelief! alas for faith!”¹⁶⁹ If tradition and experience is any guide, it will only be a matter of time before the chaste youth and the innocent girl will exchange their priceless virtue for sin.

¹⁶⁶Niẓāmī, *Hafi Paykar*, l. 122, p. 223.

¹⁶⁷Farīd al-Dīn Aṭṭār; Muḥammad Rizā Shafī‘ī Kadkanī, editor, *Mantiq al-ṭayr-i ‘Aṭṭār*, (Tihārān: Sukhan, 1387 [2008 or 2009]), l. 1236, p. 287. Translation mine.

¹⁶⁸Geoffrey Chaucer; Larry D. Benson, editor, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), ll. 1078, 1095-1100, 1116, p. 40.

¹⁶⁹Niẓāmī, *Hafi Paykar*, l. 136, p. 223.

And so it seems, for the girl is more than willing to accommodate the youth's desires; and yet, somehow, the inevitable is repeatedly delayed by bizarre accidents of nature. There seems to be an intervening force at work, warning, interrupting, slowing things down, almost like a parent seizing her son by the shoulder as he brushes by with the car keys, demanding, "And where do you think *you're* going?" The children, of course, do not understand, nor do they appreciate their parents' meddling. They cry, they lament, and even their would-be go-betweens lose patience with this seeming ineptitude and start to beat the girl! It is only at the brink of this disaster, this most urgent of warnings in which the natural friendship between friends and lovers begins to disintegrate, that the youth finally comes to his senses and realizes that something is at work. The calamities have "removed the flaws" from his "defective reason"; now he understands that "he who for the unlawful yearns ... is baseborn."¹⁷⁰ These words would have made Ibn Sinā proud, for the youth has realized how the prioritization of lust over law *debases* his origins and standing as a human and as a gentleman (*zarīf*, as we saw in the *Risālah*). The animal desire that had guided their efforts up till now was the cause of their upset and disorder: "The eyes of [a] hundred beasts were on / us two; thus we became undone."¹⁷¹ Only by returning to reason are the youth and his beloved pulled back from the brink and saved for marriage, which they promptly carry out. Natural and holy law restored, the story resolves happily, contrary to our initial expectations.

Yet what saved these two from disaster? As we have seen time and time again, love is so strong, it can reduce any hero to slavery or make an infidel out of any saint. Even the youth holds himself outside any blame for the incident, saying, "With such a perī-visaged bride / no true man could her love avoid."¹⁷² The girl, too, is above reproach: *gawbar-i ū zi har gunah pāk-ast / har gunāhī ki hast az īn kbāk-ast*, "Her essence is pure of every sin / What sin there is, is from this dust."¹⁷³ It is the *kbāk*, the 'dust' or 'clay' of their physical bodies that cannot resist corruption. By all rights, they should have been doomed, despite their best intentions—it is only the *direct intervention* of God through the world that has reversed the calamity and restored reason to its proper place:

In this world, those who clever are

¹⁷⁰Nizāmī, *Hafī Paykar*, ll. 290 and 293, pp. 231-32.

¹⁷¹Ibid., l. 298, p. 232.

¹⁷²Ibid., l. 294, p. 232.

¹⁷³Bakhtiyārī, 275.

*and quick, are slaves before the pure.
God's grace, eternal and divine,
save us from being harmed by sin.*¹⁷⁴

This is a key thought, for it can illustrate how *agapē* remains a crucial element in the Islamic context as it is within Christian theology, and how the act of grace, *i.e.*, divine intervention, can take place even without Jesus as a necessary mediator, as he is in Christianity. The Persian lines read, *kār mā rā 'ināyat-i azalī / az khaṭā dādab būd bī khalalī*;¹⁷⁵ the word Nizāmī uses for God is in itself interesting, for it is not the more common Arabic *Allāh* or Persian *Khudā*, but rather *azalī*, which means that which has existed for all eternity, the opposite of *abadī*, the infinite future projection of time. God's grace is described as *'ināyat*—gift, bounty, or favor. Thus it is that God, in this final story, exhibits the same concerned, proactive, and compassionate love for humanity that distinguishes his nature in scripture. God *moves*. He is not the impassive, external font of goodness that is only able to direct his thoughts upon himself, as the Neoplatonists believe, and it is only through his intervention that the two lovers are brought together in happiness and safeguarded from sin. The King of the Black Dome, no matter far outside he goes in his quest for love, is ultimately doomed to failure, whereas it is almost as if the lovers merely let God come to *them*, in the paradise on Earth that they already *inhabit*. Just as Ibn Ḥazm and Andreas Capellanus create literary spaces in their work that takes us outside the bounds of normal human habitation and experience, yet, in an about-face, bring us back into the fold of religion, Nizāmī seems to do the same here, placing white, as the colorless purity of God's love, on a Friday, the day of religion, in which union, both earthly and divine, is made possible through the restoration and implementation of sacred law. In both cases, fulfilment is made possible through the act of submission (*islām*) to divine love, a theme that receives much attention in Nizāmī's *Laylá and Majnūn*.¹⁷⁶ The reaffirmation of the centrality of gift-love *agapē* or *'ināyat*, after the failure of *'ishq* to achieve union, is a fascinating example of a motival turn-around, such as we see in other classic collections of stories. One would be hard-pressed to believe, if he or she had only read the first half of these works, that the saucy *Decameron* would conclude with the grim, almost horrifying tale of patient Griselda, or Chaucer's *Tales* with the Parson's sobering homily. The carnival of love is drawing to an end; it is time for law to reassert itself.

¹⁷⁴Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, ll. 288-89, p. 231.

¹⁷⁵Bakhtiyārī, 276.

¹⁷⁶Seyed-Gohrab, 49.

As in the work of Andreas Capellanus, the ultimate triumph of faith over love is a problematic issue and not easily explained as a simple case of one being better than the other. The holistic integrity of Nizāmī's project should be beyond dispute by this point—there is clearly some way in which the two stories complement each other and present as a unit a more complete picture of what the author has in mind. Possibly the most interesting figure of the Story of the White Dome is not the virtuous youth, who more or less plays out his part as we all expect him to, but the girl, who in herself seems to embody some of these contradictions:

گفت جای ت کجاست گفتا تخت	گفت نام تو چیست گفتا بخت
گفت چشم بد از تو گفتا دور	گفت اصل تو چیست گفتا نور
گفت شیوه ت چه شیوه گفتا ناز	گفت پرده ت چه پرده گفتا ساز

He said, 'what is your name?' She said, 'Bakht.'
He said, 'where is your place?' She said, 'the throne.'
He said, 'what is your source?' She said, 'light.'
He said, 'the Evil Eye?' She said, 'far away.'
He said, 'what kind is your veil?' She said, 'a musical instrument.'
He said, 'what is your mode?' She said, 'coquetry.'¹⁷⁷

Another chapter could be written on these lines. *Bakht*, the girl's name, is the word for Fortune. Her source is light, her place is the throne, and the presence of evil is far away from her. Yet she has her secrets, which she hides in music and song—a brilliant play on the word *pardab*, which means both 'veil' and a fret, such as on a setar or guitar. Her *shivah*, 'style' or 'disposition,' or, continuing the punning on musical language, 'mode,' is playful coquetry. She is essentially good (as the story confirms for us at its conclusion), yet she is not an open book, and will even hide herself from the inquisitive guest. When approached in the right way, all that is hers will be available to the young man, but if not, none of it will be. This story, despite its apparent elevation of marriage and holy law at its conclusion, does not seem to write out the importance—and possibly even the necessity—of music, games, and coquetry. It is these things that make

¹⁷⁷This translation is a product of three sources, Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 224 for the English (although I modified the translation somewhat), Bakhtiyārī, 270, and Nizāmī Ganjavī, *Afsānah' hā-yi haft gunbad : rivāyat-i Aḥmad Shāmlū*, (Tīhrān: Niḡāh, 1379 [2000 or 2001]), 274, which provide the same text but with certain lines omitted. I verified the poetry on the useful website 'Kitābkhānah-yi āzād-i fārsī' (<http://rira.ir/>), which holds the full text of many Persian classics.

her beauty all the more enticing, giving the young man the determination and strength of will he needs to overcome all the mishaps before him and arrive at the truth. Although the stories of the Black and White Domes are placed at opposite ends of the *Haft Paykar* sequence and in seeming opposition to each other, it seems likely that, taken together, they encompass an understanding of love that allows for ambiguity and riskiness, in which black and white, external desire and inherent goodness, *erōs* and *agapē*, *‘ishq* and *ḥubb*, all have a part to play in bringing about union with God, justice in the world, and inner contentment and salvation.

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