



Eastern Wisdom: Nizami Ganjawi's Romance Genre

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Abstract. Nizami Ganjawi's *Khosrow and Shirin* is a polysemous medieval romance set in Sassanid Persia. This article examines how the Persian poet, Nizami, retold a well known story and integrated it within a philosophical worldview, but in a language and style that needs to be deciphered. The focus of this article is how Nizami used the philosophical idea of the "active intellect," or the tenth intelligence, in his literary masterpiece, *Khosrow and Shirin*.

Keywords: Nizami; Persian literature; polysemous romance.

Resumen. *Khosrow y Shirin* de Nizami Ganjawi es un romance polisémico medieval ambientado en la Persia sasánida. Este artículo examina como el poeta persa relató una historia conocida y se adentró en esas cosmovisiones que necesitan ser descifradas. Este artículo se centra en como Nizami se sirvió de la idea filosófica del intelecto activo o la décima inteligencia en su obra maestra literaria.

Palabras clave: Nizami; literatura persa; romancez polisémico.

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A beautiful Armenian princess falls in love with the portrait of a handsome, young Persian prince, and thus begins a quest for the object of her love, in a far, far away land. In the famous Persian romance, *Khosrow and Shirin*, this quest is set in motion when Princess Shirin, on a leisurely walk, comes across a picture of the Persian prince, Khosrow, dangling from a tree branch. The princess lingers, unable to move away from the princely image, her gaze transfixed by the portrait. Inevitably, the princess's companions notice changes in their mistress. They hastily remove the portrait from the tree. The next day, a similar incident occurs, and this second portrait is also quickly taken down and concealed. After a third portrait appears, Princess Shirin spies a Zoroastrian monk peering at her from a distance. She summons him to her side and asks about the origins of the portrait. The Zoroastrian monk, none other than Shapur the master painter and advisor of the Persian court, admits to having deliberately placed the portraits of Prince Khosrow Parviz on the tree. Shapur extols the virtues of the young prince. He impresses Princess Shirin so much that within hours she is astride her steed, Shabdiz, riding out of her summer compound, heading secretly toward the

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capital of the Persian Empire, the Mada' yin, thousands of miles away, in search of the beloved she envisions².

The recurring motif of a character falling in love at the mere sight of a portrait is one that Persian literary masters have frequently employed from the medieval to the modern era. Nizami Ganjawi (1145–1207) repeats the portrait motif throughout his romance genre, where his love protagonists are introduced to each other through their portraits rather than through an initial encounter. Literary critics and art historians have offered varied interpretations of the portrait motif, emphasizing the motif of painting itself³ and paying less attention to the potential symbolic significance of the portrait motif or the significance of the painter, which appears in multiple stories. Nizami's depth of knowledge in varied spheres and his use of motifs and ideas from philosophy and a wide range of scientific fields, including astronomy, astrology, geography, history, and medicine, suggest the possibility of a sophisticated and complex symbolism at work in his romance genres that necessitates decoding and deciphering beyond what appears on the surface. Understanding Nizami's poetry and appreciating the remarkable qualities of his poetic narrative require unraveling the multilayered traits of his work and reading with an eye for intra- and intertextual allusions. What sets Nizami the poet apart is a literary prowess that engages vibrantly with philosophical and mystical ideas of the medieval period. The ideas prevalent during this time are entrenched within the philosophical discourse of his age, which unravels the natural dichotomies between the secular and the sacred, the corporeal and the incorporeal, the material and the spiritual world, in a language, form, and content that anticipate the process of being "deciphered."

Studying Nizami's layered narrative, the reader encounters an impressive engagement with the philosophical lore of his era. In an attempt to decipher the portrait and the painter motifs in Nizami's *Khosrow and Shirin*,⁴ I argue that Nizami allegorizes philosophical ideas that found their roots not only in Islamic texts but also in ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Persian lore, foundations for an eastern wisdom. In his very last book, in *Iskandar-Namah* (The Book of Alexander),⁵ the poet demonstrates a deep engagement with the philosophical debates of ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plotinus, Hermes, and Pythagoras. The philosophical debates between Alexander and his Greek philosophers in *Iskandar-Namah* highlight Nizami's in-depth knowledge of medieval philosophical debates, partly derived from translations of ancient Greek and Latin texts. In these debates, he pays special attention to the ideas of celestial cosmology that defined spiritual existence at the time. The portrait motif recurs within this philosophical context, and in each and every instance it functions not only as an initiator but also as a catalyzer, a facilitator of sorts, between the two future lovers. In the romance recounted in *Khosrow and*

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Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

³ For an example of an art historical analysis see SOucek, Priscilla, "Nizami on painters and painting" in Ettinghausen, Richard (ed.), *Islamic art in the Metropolitan Museum*, New York, 1972, pp. 9-21. Chelkowski, Peter, *Mirror of the invisible world: Tales from the Khamsah of Nizami*, New York, 1975. Meisami, Julie, *Medieval Persian court poetry*, Princeton, 1987. Bürgel, Christoph, *The feather of Simurgh: Licit magic of the arts in medieval Islam*, New York, 1985. Martin Al-Awadhi, Petra, *The Seven Pavillions*, Venice, 2001.

⁴ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

⁵ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Iqbal-Namah*, 1381, (Zanjani, Barat, ed.), Tehran, 2002.

Shirin Shapur, the accomplished painter of the Khosrow portraits, takes on a pivotal role in the narrative. He represents the catalyst and the one who initiates a path that leads the union of the two lovers. It is through his painting that Shirin sets out on a quest to find her love. The lovers' quests were thus initiated through a portrait and by a particular painter with mesmerizing qualities—namely Shapur, the masterful painter. It is my contention that Shapur personifies a philosophical idea: he stands as a mediator initiating the soul's movement toward unity, a divine unity (*wahdat*) separating humankind from the world of multiplicity (*kathrat*). In this way, the poet imparts a spiritual wisdom that delineates the path to a quest. While ostensibly this quest is for a lover in the mundane world, there is another layer at work. It is the layer that delineates the road to spiritual perfection and indicates the existence of an Eastern wisdom.

Nizami's medieval romances are clearly *polysemous*. Dante defines polysemous texts as texts with many meanings, referring to several things in distinct yet metaphysically related spheres, such as fire signifying the sun and the seraphic intellect at the same time. The polysemous nature of medieval literature creates a major challenge, as Gordon Teskey points out, "The chief difficulty confronting students of allegory is that of separating rhetorical strategies from metaphysical assumptions."⁶ In other words, the polysemous nature of medieval allegories creates layers that lead to difficulties in interpretation, particularly in distinguishing between logos and mythos. Nizami's understanding of metaphysics and the assumptions of human ascent are ensconced in his deep knowledge of the Qur'an, the Hadith, and philosophical neoplatonic discourses of his era as well as an intertextual exchange with other contemporary poets and philosophers. This intricate web of spiritual philosophies and scientific knowledge in Nizami's work has contributed to his sophistication in *allegoresis*, the hermeneutic interpretation of allegories.

In medieval texts, we encounter the prevalence of the idea of *Wahhib al-Suwwar* (Giver of Forms) or the maker of portraits, who is also identified as the tenth "intellect" of an emanation scheme that outlines the road to divine unity, functioning as the initial stage between the human soul and divine union.⁷ Neoplatonic emanation schemes, which were also widely adopted in Persian literature, depict ten "intellects" (also referred to as intelligences), each generating the other in a vertiginous movement toward perfection, meaning the soul moves up from tenth to first intellect in this worldview. Thus, the tenth intellect's function of triggering love manifests itself as a prerequisite for the spiritual quest to divine unity. Persian cosmogony assigned the *Wahhib al-Suwwar* a salient role as a figure that facilitates the movement of souls toward spiritual perfection, seeking unity with the Divine. In *Khosrow and Shirin*, Shapur also catalyzes love between the two, paving the way for their unity. His function is thus that of a catalyst, as his portraits of Khosrow initiate the acquaintance of the two future lovers. As a *Wahhib al-Suwwar*, Shapur ensures that Khosrow and Shirin will embark on a quest for a material as well as a spiritual union.

Understanding the idea of *Wahhib al-Suwwar* requires knowing that Persians divided the spiritual world into three distinct and yet interrelated realms. To become

⁶ See discussion of Dante's theory of polysemy in Teskey, Gordon, *Allegory and violence*, Ithaca, 1996, p. 17. See also Teskey, Gordon, *Edebiyat*, 1998, p. 153.

⁷ Morewedge, Parviz. *Islamic philosophy and mysticism*, Delmar, 1981. Nasr, S. H., "The world view and philosophical perspective of Hakim Nizami Ganjawi", *The Muslim world* 82 (1992), 191–200, p. 195.

the perfect human (*Insan-i Kamil*),⁸ according to medieval spiritual texts, each person needed to cross over from the mundane world of multiplicity (*kathrat*) and travel through the figurative celestial spheres as a prerequisite to reaching the world of unity (*wahdat*). In other words, the knowledge of Divine Reality, existing beyond the ten intellects and the sublunar life, was a prerequisite for becoming a perfect human. The ultimate quest constituted of reaching the realm of the Immutable One or the *Wajib al Wujud* (The Necessary Existent), which required traversing abstract substances of the celestial spheres, namely the ten planetary spheres (or nine plus one according to Farabi).⁹ This celestial sphere stood above the realm, or the spheres, of the four elements—namely minerals, plants, animals, and humankind.¹⁰ Hence, The “perfect human”¹¹ needed to move beyond the life of humankind, represented within the realm of the four elements, and traverse the celestial spheres of the ten intellects, before reaching the Immutable One—the ultimate spiritual quest.

The Romance and the “Mediator Figure”

This, then, is the meaning of the saying of the Ancients that the whole has one mover and a particular Beloved and that each sphere has a particular mover and a particular Beloved. Therefore, each of the spheres would have a soul imparting motion that intellectually apprehends the good. It would, by reason of its body, have imagination—that is, an imaged representation of particulars and a willing of particular [things]. What the [sphere] had intellectually apprehended of the First and what it apprehends of the principle proper and proximate to it become the principle of its desire to be in motion. To each sphere there would belong a separate intellect whose relation to it is as the relation of the active intellect to us. It being a universal, intellectual exemplar of the species of its act, [the celestial sphere] imitates it.¹² (Avicenna).

Thus, in the romance between Khosrow and Shirin, the initial mediation of Shapur highlights the allegorical significance of the “portrait” motif. In *Khosrow and Shirin*, the initiation of romantic love is intricately designed, divinely ordered, and outwardly premeditated by Shapur, without the two protagonists having any direct role in it. Shapur sketches a portrait of the fallen prince and hangs it out on a tree, and Shirin falls for it. Not once, not twice, but thrice. Shirin realizes there is a deliberate plot to attract her attention to the “portrait” of the handsome prince, but she is not yet aware of the true nature of this plot. This salient episode emerges as the early onset of a journey, both literally and figuratively. In a wider metaphorical

⁸ Al-Nasafi, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad; Molé, Marijan (ed.), *Livre de l’homme parfait (Kitāb al-Insan al-Kāmil)* : Recueil de traités de soufisme en persan publiés avec une introduction par Marijan Molé, Tehran, 1962.

⁹ Reisman, David C. “Al-Farabi and the philosophical curriculum”, in Adamson, Peter (ed.), *Cambridge companion in Arabic philosophy*. Richard C. Taylor, Cambridge, 2005, p. 57. See also Nasr, Sayyed Hossein, *An introduction to Islamic cosmological doctrines: Conceptions of nature and methods used for its study by the Ikhwan al-Ṣafa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina*, Boulder, 1978.

¹⁰ For a more thorough description of this worldview see Heath, Peter *Allegory and philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): With a translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent to heaven*, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 36.

¹¹ al-Nasafias’asa Allāh ibn Aḥmad; Molé, Marijan (ed.), *Livre de l’homme parfait*, Tehran, 1962.

¹² Avicenna, *The metaphysics of the healing*. (A parallel English–Arabic text translated, introduced, and annotated by Marmura, Michael E.), Provo apparently , 2005, p. 313.

sense, the portrait, and its love-inciting characteristic, facilitates the introspection and inner journey that would lead to the path of Divine Reality. This function of Shapur as the mediator figure in this narrative evokes and subsequently exemplifies the philosophical medieval theories regarding the active intellect or the intellect of the terrestrial world (*'Aql al- 'Alam al-Arz*), in which the portrait motif has a seminal role throughout the story. Avicenna posits that “one achieves intellectual (and thus spiritual) perfection by coming into contact with the First, or Universal, Intelligence.”¹³ Like Avicenna, Farabi believed humans perfected themselves by coming into contact with the active intellect, who transported them from the tenth intellect to the first intellect.

The oral transmission of the pre-Islamic story of Khosrow and Shirin resonated deeply in medieval times. In fact, the mimetic tradition led to the existence of several renditions of the *Khosrow and Shirin* by the time Nizami wrote his ingenuous and masterful version in verse. In addition to the version in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*,¹⁴ which differs greatly from Nizami's rendition, earlier versions of the same story had appeared in the *al Mahasin wal Azdad*,¹⁵ by Jahiz and in the *Ghurar i Akhbar i Muluk al Fars*¹⁶ by Tha 'alibi. Nizami's narration of the story, however, demonstrates a departure from folk poetry, highlighted by his use of vivid imagery and dense language, replete with Arabic words and complex vocabulary. In fact, his version of *Khosrow and Shirin* distinguishes itself from previous stories by his use of intermittent techniques that allow the reader to oscillate between the ostensible forms and the complex, intra- and intertextual levels of philosophical sophistication. In this striking story, the initial trigger for the encounter between Khosrow and Shirin epitomizes Nizami's allegory in the following romance.

In fact, the romance between the two historical figures begins when Shapur is talking to Khosrow, describing Shirin for Khosrow, after the prince's rowdy midnight bout of brawling at an Iranian village and his falling out with his powerful but loving father Hormoz. In this opening incident, Nizami presents Khosrow as someone who has sullied the name of his own grandfather, Anushirwan-i 'Adel (the Just One), the famous and just Sassanid king, whose justice was well known among his subjects. Khosrow has dishonored that fame, and by ravaging a village and its villagers, he has created chaos with a carpe diem mentality. Against this background and after Khosrow's altercation with his father, Shapur mentions Shirin and her beauty. With words he draws a portrait of the beautiful princess. Enchanted by Shapur's verbal embellishments of Shirin—the “daughter of fairies,” “a dark-eyed beauty,” “a princess tall and slender, with pearl teeth, both her lips and name Shirin [sweet],”¹⁷ the prince orders Shapur to immediately set about delivering Shirin to him. While Shapur only had to use his verbal skills to convince the prince of the suitability of this match, he had to use a different ploy with the beautiful Armenian princess.

¹³ Heath, Peter, *Allegory and philosophy*, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 187.

¹⁴ *Shahnameh: The epic of the Persian kings* / [Abolqasem] Ferdowsi ; translation & adaptation [to prose], Sadri, Ahmad; Sadri, Ahmad ; Firdawsī. Shāhnāmāh ; Rahmanian, Hamid, 1968- ill ; Canby, Sheila R., New York, c. 2013.

¹⁵ al-Mahāsīn wa al-aḏḏād / li-al-Jāhīz ; ḥaqqāqahu Fawzī 'Aṭawī. Jāhīz, Bayrūt : al-Sharikah al-Lubnānīyah li-al-Kitāb, 1969 .

¹⁶ *The weaving of words: Approaches to classical Arabic prose*, Behzadi, Lale, Behmardi, Vahid, Behzadi, Lale, and Bihmardi, Waḥīd (eds.), Beirut, 2009.

¹⁷ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

By the time Shapur travels to the Armenian queen's summer pastures to bring back the queen's daughter Shirin, the reader has learned that there is a deliberate intention, one of divine nature, in Shapur's intricate plot to nurture an amorous relationship between the two characters in this romance. In describing Shapur, Nizami idealizes him as "a painter who could draw even without a pen," and "his imagination generated images with such flair and finesse that enabled him to draw on water."¹⁸ In terms of his skills in painting, Nizami compares Shapur with some of the very best, including Mani, the prophet painter, and in terms of his knowledge of geometry—knowledge that was essential for painting and architecture in the middle ages—to the Greek mathematician, Euclid. Thus, Shapur acts as a mediator between the two greatest lovers of Persian literature (later on in this story, he also mediates between Shirin and Farhad, the artisan master and architect who had studied painting with him in China, who is also the one who becomes the love rival of Khosrow.¹⁹ Shapur draws an enchanting portrait of his master and, dressed in a Zoroastrian robe, hides behind the trees to see Shirin's reaction when she finds the image.

After her initial confusion about the portraits, where they come from and how they are placed in the tree, Shirin notices the visitor. Shapur, disguised in a monastic robe, is summoned to her side. Shapur's religious garb lends authority to his words but also a sacred, meaning to his words. In his holy garment, he praises the prince to such an extent that Shirin falls for the unseen prince, and Shapur thus continues, "Just imagine what shall happen once you see him in person."²⁰ Shapur further adds to his earlier praise for the prince Khosrow Parviz, boasting to Shirin,

He is gifted, sharp and brave. Although he hasn't seen the world yet, he has seen the light. In love, he is a deer, and in hate like a wild lion. When he speaks he creates pearls out of corals, and when he yields his sword, he takes the life out of the lion. With all his *farr* (glory and destiny), and his beauty, that world illuminator, has your love's passion in his head, every day of the year.²¹

Shapur's visual representation, thrice repeated, coupled with the embellished verbal descriptions, make him convincing. His monastic attire assigns a holy quality to this mediating figure.

Shapur's use of the portrait incites Shirin's imagination to such an extent that it is contrasted with truth (*sidq*). Avicenna believed that mimetic imitation possesses an element of wonder that truth lacks. While truth, or nonmimetic representation, is quite evident and "devoid of novelty, the mimetic representation has imaginative appeal."²² By including three sequential portraits of the prince, drawn by one of the most celebrated masters of painting, Nizami intends to show the magical power of this mimetic imitation, which transcends truth.²³ Although Shirin has not seen

¹⁸ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

¹⁹ Duda, Herbert W. *Ferhad und Schirin: Die Literarische Geschichte eines persischen Sagenstoffes*. Leipzig, 1933.

²⁰ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

²¹ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kulliyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

²² Avicenna remarks in his *Poetics*: "Mimetic imitation [muhaka] has an element of wonder [ta'jib] that truth [sidq] lacks, because a known truth is evident and devoid of novelty while an unknown truth is neglected. When a truthful utterance is turned from the commonplace and attached onto something congenial to the soul, however, it may combine both demonstrative assent [tasdiq] and imaginative appeal [takhayul]." See Heath, Peter *Allegory and philosophy*, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 163, n38.

²³ Heath, Peter, *Allegory and philosophy*, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 163. See also BRITTAN, Simon, *Poetry, symbol, and allegory: Interpreting metaphorical language from Plato to the present*, Charlottesville, 2003, p. 94.

Khosrow in person, the element of wonder (*ta'jib*) drives her to set out on a journey to meet the enchanting prince.²⁴ Shapur's artwork, magical in texture, fabric, which is enchanting has an and its ability to trigger the imagination, creates the path to love between these two most celebrated lovers of Persian literature.

Figuratively speaking, the portrait reveals the inner vision of the incorporeal world for Shirin. To unite with that vision, Shirin leaves the temporal, corporeal world where she dwells as a princess, soon to be named queen, and seeks the path that will lead to the Divine, or spiritual perfection. She embarks, then, on a journey that can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. ‘

Now if a lover sees an image of his beloved engraved on a wall, or sees his beloved's garment being worn by someone (else), he thereby immediately remembers the beloved; and he believes the image is like him, but less perfect than him, or that the garment does not establish his (presence), but yet has come from his body. In the same way, if the soul, with the intermediation of sense, has become aware of a straight line or of a just, wise man, it remembers absolute justice and absolute wisdom, and absolute length and absolute straightness; and it knows that this which it has become aware of resembles that which it holds as certain, except that one of the two is particular and mutable, while the other is universal and eternal.”

Shirin's encounter with the image of Khosrow sets her on a journey, a quest for this ‘universal’ universal and ‘eternal.’ ‘Amiri continues,

Sensual perceptibles are distinct from intellectual forms, but there is nothing to prevent the former from being a reason for the intellect's becoming conscious of the latter—since they do, in reality, resemble them, although they are less perfect than them. Their causal relation to the soul will be, then, very like (that of) a motion which awakens an animal from motion which reaches it from outside, it becomes perfect (kamala) for undertaking voluntary motions by itself.²⁵

In other words, the road to the perfect human in the philosophy of the soul asserts that the image, with the intermediation of sense, becomes a vehicle for ascending toward perfection. The soul requires that sign or image of the beloved in order to undertake the voluntary motion that will lead to *kamala* (perfection). This perfection appears as a process rather than a state in itself, as the verb *kamala* suggests. By using the portrait motif, Nizami employs a language and narrative required to awaken Shirin and incite her to begin a journey toward perfection, toward the realm of the *Wajib al-Wujud*, beyond the celestial spheres. Avicenna calls it the *Wajib al-Wujud*, but for Plato it was “The Good,” for Aristotle, “The Prime Mover,” and for Plotinus, “The One.”

The commentary (*Sharh*) genre has played a remarkable role in deciphering allegories, functioning as the hermeneutic interpretation of allegories. Nizami's romances, in particular, have been the subject of multiple commentaries as well as several mimetic works²⁶ These commentaries have uncovered numerous dualities: the

²⁴ Nasr, S. H. “The world view,” *The Muslim world* 82 (1992), 191–200, p. 195.

²⁵ Rowson, Everett, *A Muslim philosopher on the soul and its fate: Al-'Amiri's Kitab al-Amad 'ala l-abad*. New Haven, Chapter X, 1988, p. 117.

²⁶ *Mirror of the invisible world: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami*, adapted and translated by Chelkowski, Peter

distinctions between literal and figurative, logos and mythos, exoteric and esoteric, as well as the profane and mystical and spiritual, that might otherwise have remained hidden from the reader. These texts reveal the indispensability of transcending the linguistic frameworks of imageries and erudite diction to investigate the often-encoded revelations, since allegory elicits continual interpretation as its primary aesthetic effect.

The structural framework in the romance genre allows the reader both to interpret the two lovers within a profane love scheme and to engage in a spiritual reading of the text. Khosrow and Shirin's love has frequently been examined within a worldly context as a profane love—even when the spirituality of their love is highlighted. However, if we read Nizami as a poet who attempted to focus on the mythos, despite the extraordinary narrative, we can identify his poetry as theophanic.²⁷ Most medieval poets transcended the logos and elaborated on the mythos, a structural organizing principle of literary form.²⁸ This form generated a distinctly sophisticated language, assimilating widely diverse elements into one *mythopoeic* whole. In this fictional universe, humans and the cosmos were analogs of each other, as microcosm and macrocosm, and all things were signs of higher spiritual realities. As such, truth was available to human understanding in two distinct, complementary modes of expression, storytelling and philosophical reasoning, or mythos and logos.²⁹

In the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrup Frye refers to the four senses of the medieval scheme—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic. In his theory of symbols he suggests that these four medieval schemes correspond to four phases—descriptive, formal, mythical, and anagogic—and he explains that meanings “were taken over from theology and applied to literature.”³⁰ For Frye, man in the last phase, the anagogic, reaches an imaginative conception of the whole, as he says,

When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols . . . are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way.

Frye adopts his theory of medieval hermeneutics from the commentaries on scriptures and how theologians debated and theorized allegorical readings of scriptural texts, a medieval hermeneutics that was quite widespread.

Nizami clearly had a significant role in the evolution of Persian allegorical writing, following his predecessors in the Islamic world. One prime example of allegorical writing is Avicenna's *Hayy- ibn Yaqzan* (Ode of the Soul—a reconstruction of Plato's *Phaedrus*). But what separated such allegorical stories from the historical and epic narratives of the *Shahnamahs* (Book of Kings) (Ferdowsi was not the only poet who composed a *Shahnamah* at this time) or the courtly embellishments of the

J.; Nizāmī Ganjavī, 1140 or 1141-1202 or 1203. *Khamseh*; Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.) New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975.

²⁷ Menocal, Maria Rosa, *Shards of love: Exile and the origins of the lyric*, Raleigh, 1994, p. 73.

²⁸ For a definition of mythos see Frye, Northrop (2000) *Anatomy of Criticism: with a new foreword by Harold Bloom*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p.341.

²⁹ Teskey, Gordon, *Edebiyat*, 1998, p. 153.

³⁰ See Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, 2000, p. 72.

panegyrics, derives mainly from the poet's concern with the personification of major unexplainable philosophical concepts associated with the transcendence of the soul in *Nafs*, *Jan*, or *Ruh*. Whereas the readers of the *Shahnamah* did not need to interpret the stories beyond their apparent meaning and their literal historical significance, in Nizami's allegorical romances, there was constantly the expectation of a hermeneutic participation of the audience in the process of decoding and deciphering an inlaid meaning. The reader's role in eliciting their own allegoresis, according to their own style and based on their own knowledge, evokes the notion that every commentary (*sharh*) is another allegory.³¹ Interestingly, the commentaries of Persian literary texts are in no way restricted to commentaries in the Persian language, but they appear in a variety of languages throughout the centuries, in Chaghatai, Azeri, Kurdish, and Turkish and among others, among others. While there are numerous works studies in Eastern languages that offer interpretations of Nizami's works, there is little of such effort in Western languages—partly due to the obfuscated and arcane language of Nizami's poetry. Christopher Buerger, the foremost scholar of Nizami's poetry, has proposed to regard seeing Nizami's *Khamseh* (Pentamerone) "as belonging to the genre of *fuerstenspiegel*, or mirror of princes, in that they were written for princes with a view to conveying moral instruction."³² Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasat-namah*,³³ or *Qabus Namah*,³⁴ were commissioned by the kings to be written for their children so they could learn from these writings the ways and means of ruling. Perhaps *Makhzan al-Asrar*³⁵ and its disconnected and yet interrelated stories can be regarded as part of the mirror of princes genre; however, its style is modeled more on Sana'i's *Hadiqat al-Haqa'iq* than on the *Siyasat Namahs*. On the other hand, the narratives in the *Pentamerone* clearly depart starkly from the mirror of princes genre, notwithstanding their moral engagement. As Julie Scott Meisami has asserted, "Haft Paykar is far more than a 'mirror for princes'; it is a mirror of the world itself, in its material and spiritual aspects, both reflecting and figuring forth the correspondences between the two, a speculum by means of which man may come to know both himself and his Lord."³⁶ *Khosrow and Shirin* is also, in the same way, more than a mirror of princes.

While there has been exhaustive allegorical exegesis (*ta'wil*), in the form of

³¹ See Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, 2000, p. 72.

³² J. C. Buerger (1998) "The Idea of Nonviolence in the Epic Poetry of Nizami," *Edebiyat* 9, pp. 61-84. Also see Buerger, Christoph J. (1980) *Chosrou und Schirin*. Uebertragung aus dem Persischen, Nachwort und Erläuterungen (Manesse Verlag). Corbin, Henri *Spiritual body and celestial earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*, trans. Pearson, Nancy, Princeton, 1977. According to Corbin, "This imagination does not construct something unreal, but unveils the hidden reality; its action is, in short, that of the *ta'wil*, the spiritual exegesis practised by all the Spirituals of Islam, whose special quality is that of alchemical meditation: to occultate the apparent, to manifest the hidden" (p.12). See also Razi, Hashim, Hashim Dānishnāmah-yi Īrān-i Bāstān, Tehran, 2002).

Buerger, J. C., "The idea of nonviolence in the epic poetry of Nizami," *Edebiyat* 9, 1998, 61–84.

Buerger, J. C., "The idea of nonviolence," *Edebiyat* 9, 1998, 61–84. See also Buerger, Christoph J., *Chosrou und Schirin*. übertragung aus dem persischen, Nachwort und Erläuterungen Manesse Verlag, 1980. Buerger, Christoph, *The feather of Simurgh*, New York, 1985.

³³ *The book of government, or rules for kings: the Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama of Nizam al-Mulk*, trans. Nizām al-Mulk, Darke, Hubert, 1018-1092; Darke, Hubert, 3rd edition, Richmond, 2002.

³⁴ *A mirror for princes; the Qābūs nāma*, trans. Levy, Reuben. Kaykāvūs ibn Iskandar ibn Qābūs, \Unşur al-Ma\ ālī, 1021 or 2-1098 or 9; Levy, Reuben, New York, 1951]

³⁵ Ganjawi, Nizami, *Kullīyyat-i Khamsah*, 1373; trans. Kabir, Amir, Tehran, 1994.

³⁶ *Haft Paykar*, trans., Meisami, Julie Scott, New York, 1995, p. xxxiv.

the commentary genre, of several works of Persian literature, starting with the Persian rendition of the *Kalila and Dimna*, ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, Jami’s *Haft Awrang*, or Rumi’s *Mathnawi-yi Ma’nawi*, in modern scholarship, Nizami’s narratives have not been the subject of a similar process of decoding and deciphering. Sayyed Hossein Nasr has argued that “many of the exalted and imaginative poetical metaphors of Nizami concerning metaphysical or theological discussions are no other than the perennial truths of which Muslim Gnostics and *hakims* have spoken.”³⁷ There is thus a strong conviction of Nezami’s metaphysical objectives in his allegories.

The *Wahhib al-Suwwar* (Giver of Forms/Images)

As for us, the praise we seek and desire is a perfection that is not real but only believed [to be so]. And the virtuous disposition which we achieve through action does not have the action as its cause. Rather, the act impedes the opposite [of the virtuous disposition]; [it] makes preparation for [such a disposition]. This disposition comes about from the substance that perfects people’s souls —namely, the active intellect or some other substance similar to it. It is in this manner that the temperate heat is the cause for the existence of the psychological faculties, but only in [the sense] that it prepares the matter [for their reception], not in that it brings about [their] existence; but our discourse is about that which brings about existence. In brief, if the act is a preparer for the existence of a perfection, motion terminates when [the perfection] comes to be. (Avicenna)

Thus, love is the necessary condition for the marriage of body and soul, to fulfill its innate potential for ascending spheres of emanational schemes. This is also the state which the prophet Muhammad had reached before his *mi’raj* (nocturnal divine ascent). It is therefore not surprising that Muhammad’s *mi’raj* would be narrated in four of Nizami’s *Khamseh*, just before each and every romance. Especially in *Khosrow and Shirin*, the *mi’raj* is an important segment of the poem that foreshadows a spiritual journey.³⁸ As mentioned earlier, the stages to the path of the Divine were a journey that traversed the spheres of ten intellects, each one generating the other. The tenth intellect, also known as *Wahhib al-Suwwar* or *aql-i fa’al* (the active intellect), initiated the spiritual journey by igniting love between body and soul, preparing humans for their spiritual journey toward the ultimate reality. In theological texts, the tenth intellect has also been represented as the Archangel Gabriel, the mediator between man and God and the one who brought the revelations to the prophet.³⁹ Just as Gabriel was an essential figure in preparing Muhammad for his nocturnal journey to the heaven the *Wahhib al-Suwwar* also prepares humans for the love needed to prepare for the ascent to the next “intellect”, all the way up to the first “intellect”. Therefore, the predominant theme of this romance revolves around the spiritual and ancient quest for unity; the three portraits that Shapur draws are catalysts for the initial stage of this quest.

³⁷ S. H. Nasr. *The Muslim World*, p.194.

³⁸ Nasr (1992) *Ibid*, p. 195.

³⁹ Nasr, S.H. (1978) *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: conceptions of nature and methods used for its study by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā* (Boulder : Shambhala). Also see Peter Heath,

The creative intellect initiates the process of fulfilling the teleological potential for perfection, just as Shapur does in this allegorical romance. The medieval cosmic teleology thus believes that each level of the hierarchy achieves perfection only by engendering the next. In *Khosrow and Shirin*, Shapur's role exemplifies that of a mediator, who by divine intercession prepares the spiritual ascent of the souls to the first "intellect". Nizami takes the meaning of the phrase *Wahhib al-Suwwar* literally and embodies this idea in an accomplished painter, Shapur. Shapur is, therefore, both the maker of the form and the intercessor who delivers man to the Immutable One.

In most emanation schemes, the tenth intellect prepares the human soul for a spiritual return, for *ma'ad* (different from its eschatological meaning of resurrection, this term connotes a return to spiritual perfection that will lead the path to Divine Reality). According to Avicenna, if the universe is conceived as a static structure of downward devolution from the ultimate perfection represented by the *Wajib al Wujud*, (the Necessary Existent), humans perfect themselves by the process of *ma'ad*. This *ma'ad* therefore aspires to a return from the world of multiplicity to the Immutable One, to the world of unity (*Wahdat*). In this way, the premise of *Khosrow and Shirin's* romance situates itself in a cosmic teleology, where the ultimate destination exists beyond the corporeal world.

Khosrow personifies the bestial and instinctive side of the form, the body, but he is a necessary component that will be complemented by *Shirin* for this quest for unity. The poet deliberates extensively on the unruly, raucous, and strident life the young Sassanid prince led before meeting *Shirin*. Historically speaking, *Khosrow Parviz* ruled the Persian Sassanid Empire between 590 and 628 A.D. during the advent of Islam. Many historians have called him one of the most tyrannical Persian kings.⁴⁰ The historical *Khosrow Parviz* did not heed the letters from the prophet Muhammad, in which Muhammad called on the ruler to embrace the new religion that he, the Prophet, professed. *Khosrow Parviz's* wars with the powerful Byzantines left the Sassanid Empire weak.⁴¹ Furthermore, his own subjects challenged him in battles with *Bahram-i Chubin*. The Persian historiographer *Gardizi* also shows *Khusraw Parviz* in a negative light, as he both plots the murder of the defeated *Bahram Chubin* and rejects the Prophet's summons to Islam. *Gardizi* believes "the seeds are being planted for the ultimate collapse of the Sassanids, finalized by the defeat of *Yazdigird III*,"⁴² the last Sassanid king. The rule of the Persian Sassanid dynasty did end with *Khosrow Parviz*. Thus, *Khosrow* is the ultimate personification of boisterous characteristics and animal traits. While *Nizami* does portray *Khosrow's* flaws and follies in his poem, he succeeds in showing him as a redeemable character who needs *Shirin* to balance him out for the spiritual journey.

The character of *Shirin*, on the other hand, is the ultimate model of feminine beauty, both spiritually and externally.^{43 44} In *Nizami's* romance, *Shirin's* character

⁴⁰ Christensen, Arthur (1971) *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Osnabrück, O. Zeller).

⁴¹ Meisami, Julie Scott (1999) *Persian Historiography: To the End of the Twelfth Century*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) p. 69.

⁴² *Gardīzī*, 'Abd al-Ḥayy ibn al-Ḍaḥḥak (1968) *Zayn al-akhbār*. (Tehran: Intisharat-i Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran) pp. 34-35.

⁴³ Hammer von Purgstall, Joseph (1809) *Schirin. Ein persisches romantisches Gedicht nach morgenlaendischen Quellen*. (Leipzig: bei Gerhard Fleischer)

⁴⁴ Wilhelm Baum (2004) *Shirin*.

is in total contrast with Khosrow's. In terms of her serenity, her sense of reasoning, and her submission, she is quite accomplished. Although Shirin is, in fact, an Armenian Christian princess, Nizami shows Khosrow to the straight path, urging him to heed the Prophet Muhammad's call to Islam. Nizami illustrates Shirin not as a woman symbolizing ideal beauty, but as a woman whose allegorical representation exemplifies a philosophical understanding of the sensual *soul*, as understood by Islamic philosophers. The marriage of body and soul, instigated by love, is allegorized in this romance to pave the way to spiritual perfection.

An understanding of Shapur's role, as the ultimate facilitator of this spiritual ascent, is indispensable for an allegorical analysis of *Khosrow and Shirin*. The personified tenth intellect, *'aql-i fa'al*, plots a journey, mediating between man and the Immutable One, paving the way from the realm of multiplicity to the realm of unity.

While allegorical readings of modern literature are out of vogue, pondering not only archetypal representations, but also the additional layers of meaning that an allegorical work open up for readers, is inevitable. Medieval romances thus require interpreting and engaging with a series of meta-discourse. . Clearly, reading Nizami's *Khosrow and Shirin*, text and metatext, is indispensable to a full appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of this romance, which emerges from its multilayered richness and its allegorical significance.

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