



LEYLI O MAJNUN

LEYLI O MAJNUN, a narrative poem of approximately 4,600 lines composed in 584/1188 by the famous poet Neẓāmi of Ganja. It is the third of his five long narrative poems known collectively as the *Ḳamsa* (the Quintet).

The origin of the story. Majnun (lit. possessed) is an epithet given to the semi-historical character Qays b. al-Molawwaḥ b. Mozāḥem of the tribe Banu'Āmer b. Ṣa'sa'a. The early anecdotes and oral reports about Majnun are documented in Abu'l-Faraj al-Eṣfahāni's *Ketāb al-Aḡāni* (ii, pp. 1-78) and in Ebn Qotayba's *Ketāb al-Še'r wa'l-šo'arā*. The relevant sources are described and studied in a pioneering article by I. Yu. Krachkovskiĭ, published in 1946, that was later translated from Russian into Arabic and other languages, including German by Hellmut Ritter (1955). Another study of later collections of accounts of Majnun, by As'ad E. Khairallah (1980), analyzes Abu Bakr al-Wālebi's *Divān* of Qays b. al-Mulawwaḥ al-Majnun. Based on various reports in these Arabic books, it can be inferred that the story originates in Arabia in the seventh century. In the *Ketāb al-Aḡāni*, a reference is made to a poet of the Umayyad period who used the pseudonym Majnun to express his unrequited love for his cousin, singing love songs about the pangs of separation, and encountering misfortune.

Long before Neẓāmi's time, the legend circulated in anecdotal forms in Arabic *aḵbār*. The anecdotes are mostly very short, only loosely connected, and show little or no plot development. They commonly refer to only a few aspects of Majnun's physical or mental condition, his love-frenzy, his poetic talent and his reclusive lifestyle. In addition to reports about Majnun as a great poet of



love, other popular anecdotes in Arabic sources recount the wondrous way Majnun falls in love with Leyli; his marriage proposal to Leyli and her father's rejection; Majnun's pilgrimage to Mecca; the intervention of Nowfal b. Mosāḥiq (governor of Medina in 702) to unite the lovers; Majnun's strategies to meet Leyli; his swooning on seeing Leyli; his life in the desert amongst wild beasts; Leyli's marriage to another man; exchanging letters with Leyli; his conversation with a raven and, finally, Majnun's demise. Despite the large number of anecdotes, the story did not develop as a unified whole in Arabic in medieval times.

The romance belongs to the *'Uḍri* (*'Oḍri*) genre. The plot of *'Uḍri* stories is simple and revolves around unrequited love; the characters are semi-historical and their actions are similar to, and easily interchangeable with, those of characters from other *'Uḍri* romances. The lover falls in love at a tender age with his cousin, but the girl's father refuses to allow their union and marries her off to another man. The lovers are forbidden to see each other. This causes violent and perennial suffering for the lovers. They remain chaste all their lives, expressing their emotions in poetry. Made distraught by love, the lover roams the deserts alone, composing love poems about his beloved. Physical contact is alien to these stories, and when the lovers have an opportunity to meet, they sing poetry for each other while weeping. Sometimes they swoon on seeing their love. These lovers, as Mia Irene Gerhardt (1963, p. 129) points out, exemplify the heroism of sentiment and not of action. The language of *'Uḍri* stories is direct and devotional, describing the lover's agony, suffering, but above all, his supplication to God to increase his love. Despite the pangs of separation, the lover remains constant, bemoaning his unattainable union and ill fate in a poignant poetic voice.

In composing his romance, Neẓāmi used many of the Arabic anecdotes and considered several key elements of the *'Uḍri* genre. He refers explicitly to his sources seventeen times, at the beginning of each episode, but none of the sources can be identified with certainty: these references are probably a narrative device to emphasize the romance's outlandish origin to his Persian readers (Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, pp. 55-57). Neẓāmi adds a strong Persian flavor to the legend. For example, the Nowfal episode is developed into a completely different event, hardly resembling the original Arabic account. The Arabic sources portray Nowfal as an official, but Neẓāmi's Nowfal is a chivalrous Persian chieftain (*javānmard*) ready to risk his life to bring the two lovers together. Neẓāmi threads the scattered anecdotes about Majnun's love into a



finely woven narrative with a dramatic climax. Persian verse romances are commonly about princes, and characters are usually related to courtly circles. Likewise, Neẓāmi portrays the lovers as aristocrats. He also urbanizes the Bedouin legend: Majnun does not meet Leyli in the desert amongst the camels, but at school with other children. Other Persian motifs added to the story are the childless king, who desires an heir; nature poetry, especially about gardens in spring and autumn, and sunset and sunrise; the story of an ascetic living in a cave; the account of the king of Marv and his dogs; the Zeyd and Zeynab episode; Majnun's supplication to the heavenly bodies and God; his kingship over animals, and his didactic conversations with several characters.

A summary of the story. The plot of the romance is simple. Qays falls in love with Leyli at school but Leyli's father forbids any contact. Separated from Leyli, Majnun becomes obsessed with her, singing of his love for her in public. The obsession grows to the point that he sees and evaluates everything in terms of Leyli; hence his sobriquet "the possessed" (*Majnun*). When he realizes that he cannot obtain union even when other people intercede for him, he grows disillusioned with society and roams naked in the desert among the beasts. Contemplating the image of Leyli increases his love so that he cannot eat or sleep. His only activity is thinking of Leyli and composing love songs for her. Meanwhile, Leyli is betrothed against her will but she guards her virginity by resisting her husband's advances. She arranges secret meetings with Majnun, and when they meet, they have no physical contact, rather they recite poetry to each other from a distance. When Leyli's husband dies, removing the legal obstacles to a licit union, Majnun is so focused on the ideal picture of Leyli that he runs away to the desert. Leyli dies out of grief and is buried in her bridal dress. Hearing this news, Majnun rushes to her grave where he instantly dies. They are buried side by side and their graves become a site of pilgrimage. In the coda, someone dreams that they are united in Paradise, living as a king and queen.

Analysis of the story. *Leyli and Majnun* was not the first Arabic romance to be versified in Persian. 'Ayyuqi's *Varqa and Golšāh* comes first and Neẓāmi adapted several narrative elements from this romance: the lovers meeting in school; war between two clans; the insertion of *gāzal* s, protecting virginity, and their grave as sites of pilgrimage. Neẓāmi composed his romance at the request of the ruler of Azarbaijan, Šervānšāh Aksetān, in the meter *hazaj-e mosaddas-e akṛab-e maqbūẓ-e maḥḍuf*. Neẓāmi initially doubted that this simple story about the agony and pain of an Arab boy wandering in rough



mountains and burning deserts would be a suitable subject for his cultured audience. It was his son who persuaded him to undertake the project, saying: “wherever tales of love are read, this will add spice to them.” It seems as if Neẓāmi did not want to spend much time on it, for he states that he would have composed the whole story in even less than four months if he had not had other things to do. Despite his initial reluctance, Neẓāmi writes a story from Majnun’s birth until his death, with a clear climax. Since the plot is thin, Neẓāmi inserted many descriptions of nature which have several narrative functions in the romance: indicating time and setting, forming a decorative backdrop for an episode, providing a meditative pause, or reflecting the mental and physical conditions of the protagonists. When the desperate Majnun complains to heaven about his wretched state, Neẓāmi places him in a setting in which he gives an animated description of a night laden with stars and all constellations. In his description, Neẓāmi follows Fakr-al-Din Gorgāni’s description of the night in *Vis o Rāmin* (Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, pp. 314-19). Likewise, when Leyli desires to see Majnun, she is placed in an exquisitely designed palm grove in spring. Analogous to this vernal garden, Leyli’s death is placed in a gloomy garden in autumn. Neẓāmi’s treatment of the female characters, especially Leyli, is completely different from the existing anecdotes. Despite the patriarchal setting of the original story and the limited role of women in it, Neẓāmi allots a more active role to Leyli. She composes exquisite poems, and takes the initiative in arranging meetings with Majnun. To prove her fidelity to Majnun, she fights for her virginity against her wedded husband, Ebn Salām: she slaps him in the face. Neẓāmi’s portrayal of Leyli’s character raises several questions about the role of women in such stories. Leyli’s loyalty lies with Majnun, but she remains obedient to her father and faithful to her husband. While married, she does not share her bed with her husband and even arranges secret meetings with Majnun. But when Majnun comes near her, she reminds him that she is married and any physical contact is against the religious code. Neẓāmi reveals her dilemmas in a medieval patriarchal society, emphasizing the problems generated by a closed society in which there is no freedom of choice in selecting a marriage partner, and tribal fealty and religious tenets come first.

As in Arabic sources, Neẓāmi refers to Majnun’s poetic genius at least thirty times (Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, pp. 187-89). He is presented as a poet who is able to compose dazzling poetry in various poetic genres. As in other ‘Udri stories, the language of his poetry is devotional. Neẓāmi puts love poems and elegies in Majnun’s mouth, which can be seen as psychological self-analysis displaying



his frustrations and reasons for his actions. In his comments on Majnun's speech, the narrator always takes his side, a fact that influences the reader's interpretation.

As well as being engagingly written, the poem also has a strong moral undertone, depicting the way mundane and earthly love are transfigured into a sublime spiritual force. Neẓāmi operates at the boundary of the profane and mystic, although he leans more towards mystical concepts. One important aspect of love the poet shows is that a pure mystical and God-centered love creates havoc when focused on an object in a human society and in an earthly setting. Through the character of Majnun as an ideal lover who becomes entirely absorbed by love, Neẓāmi skillfully shows how the lover's situation and condition correspond to those of an ascetic; indeed, asceticism is given as an alternative. When Majnun's character is viewed as an ascetic, he observes the basic principles of abstinence such as celibacy, mortification, silence, seclusion, sleep deprivation and avoidance of food. In pictorial presentations, Majnun is depicted as an emaciated ascetic. Neẓāmi shows that the experiences of a lover and of an ascetic are similar, except that an ascetic acts intentionally whereas a lover is afflicted by the force of love. In the prologue and epilogue, Neẓāmi imparts pieces of advice to the reader about various themes including life's transience, death, humility, etc.

The popularity of the theme following Neẓāmi's Leyli o Majnun. Poetic citations ascribed to Majnun, and anecdotes about his love occur in Persian and Arabic texts before the appearance of Neẓāmi's romance. But Neẓāmi's *Leyli o Majnun* changed the image of Majnun decisively from the twelfth century onwards. Despite its simple structure and plot, the romance is among the most imitated works in Persian, and in other languages under Persian cultural and literary influence, such as Pashto, Urdu, Kurdish, and the Turkic languages. There are numerous 'imitations' (*naẓīra*s) of the romance. In his statistical survey of famous Persian romances, Ḥasan Ḍulfaqārī enumerates 59 'imitations' (*naẓīra*s) of *Leyli o Majnun* as the most popular romance in the Iranian world, followed by 51 versions of *Kosrow o Šīrīn*, 22 variants of *Yusof o Zoleykā* and 16 versions of *Vāmeq o'Adrā*. S. Asadollayev names 80 poets who have written versions of *Leyli o Majnun*. J. E. Bertel's names 20 Persian, one Chaghatay Turkish, three Azari, 14 Ottoman Turkish, and one Kurdish version of Neẓāmi's poem (*Izbrannyye Trudy*, pp. 275-313). Basing their poems on Neẓāmi's, these poets adopted the poem's meter, several narrative elements and Neẓāmi's innovations in his lengthy prologue. One important innovative



element is Neẓāmi's introduction of a *sāqi-nāma* section, in which the poet treats themes such as the world's transience, the licit nature of wine in the religion of love, asceticism, and death, in the form of an address to a cupbearer (*sāqi*). All these themes are then elaborated in the narrative.

Several imitations of this romance are original literary works in their own right, treating aspects of Majnun's love not treated by Neẓāmi. The first emulator was Amir ẖosrow Dehlavi, who completed his *Majnun o Leyli* in 1299 and dedicated it to his mystical teacher, Neẓām al-Din Owliyā', and to the ruler of Delhi. Amir ẖosrow's romance differs on many points from Neẓāmi's. It is much shorter (only 2,660 couplets) and is less imbued with mystical ideas. Amir ẖosrow introduces several new motifs, including the prognostication of an astrologer about Majnun's madness at the beginning of the story, Majnun's marriage to ẖadija, daughter of the chieftain, Nowfal, and Majnun's conversation with a nightingale. 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi's version (completed in 1484) amounts to 3,860 couplets and is dedicated to ẖwāja 'Obayd-Allāh Aḥrār (d. 1498), the Naqṣbandiyya Shaikh. Jāmi's treatment relies heavily on the Arabic anecdotes, several of which are treated as mystical allegories. Majnun does not fall in love at a young age with Leyli, but with another girl. He is disillusioned about love until he later meets Leyli. Two other imitations of the romance are by Maktabi of Shiraz and Hātefi (d. 1520): these became popular in Ottoman Turkey and in India. Sir William Jones published Hātefi's romance in Calcutta in 1788. Hātefi's romance (2,065 couplets) contains several innovative elements: for instance, Majnun loves beautiful women at a young age; when Leyli and Majnun are going to be united, a *raqib* appears who wants to kill Majnun but (like the hand of Jeroboam) it is mysteriously paralyzed (like Jeroboam too, he asks for forgiveness); Nowfal falls in love with Leyli and dies when he attempts to poison Majnun. In one episode, Majnun walks barefoot in the snow, and in another saves a cypress tree which is about to be felled, by ransoming it: from then on, people call the cypress 'free' (*sarv-e āzād*). In another episode, in order to see Leyli, Majnun pretends to be a poor, blind man who accidentally trips and falls into her tent.

In addition to its numerous imitations, the popularity of the romance following Neẓāmi's version is evident from the references to it in lyrical poetry and mystical *matnawī*s. Before the appearance of Neẓāmi's romance, there are no more than ten allusions to Leyli and Majnun in Persian *divāns*, but there are 36 in Sa'di's *Divān*, 52 in ẖwāju of Kermān's, and 106 in Rumi's *Divān-e Šams*. The number and variety of anecdotes about the lovers also increased



considerably from the twelfth century onwards. Prior to Neẓāmi, poetic allusions in Persian *Divān*s were about Majnun's intense love, as in the following verse by Rudaki (p. 45): "Those who possess the attributes of Leyli are not aware of our state / a mad lover (*majnun*) knows what the state of Majnun is." There are several allusions to Majnun's weeping, by poets such as Manuċehri, Mo'ezzi, and Rābi'a Qozdāri, from whom we may cite the following line: "Are Majnun's eyes behind the cloud / that the roses assume the color of Leyli's cheeks?" Bābā Ṭāher of Hamadān refers to the couple as an epitome of mutual love: "How sweet is love when it is mutual, / for one-sided love is all pain of the brain. // Although Majnun had a distraught heart, / Leyli's heart was more distraught than his." There are many references to Majnun's suffering, and his melancholic and agonized state. Other characteristics referred to include Majnun's loneliness, his masochistic love, and his deprecation of the material world. Allusions to Leyli usually point to her beauty or to love as the coiffeur of Leyli's locks (for a detailed list of these references see Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, pp. 69-74).

Anecdotes about Majnun's love appear in various contexts and their number too grows considerably from the twelfth century onward. While Sanā'i recounts only one anecdote in his *Ḥadiqa* in the following century, Farid-al-Din'Attār (d. ca. 1221) recounts 25 anecdotes in his three most popular works, the *Ilāhi-nāma*, *Moṣibat-nāma*, and *Manteq al-ṭeyr*. The increase in these anecdotes can be partly attributed to a direct reading of Neẓāmi's romance and a desire to expand it, but it appears that poets and mystics also tended to transfer any extreme behavior of lovers, and any case of unconditional love, to Majnun. An example of such an attribution is the anecdote about a king who summons Majnun to his court, asking him about Leyli's beauty. When the king then summons Leyli and sees how ugly she is, he asks Majnun how he could be so infatuated with her. Majnun answers that the king should view Leyli through Majnun's eyes. A similar tale is told about the 'Udri pair Buthayna and Jamil, at the court of Abd-al-Malek b. Marwān. 'Attār, Sa'di and Rumi recount this anecdote but alter the names to Majnun and Leyli. In the centuries that followed, many such anecdotes were incorporated in imitations modeled on Neẓāmi's romance.

Mystics contrived many stories about Majnun to illustrate technical mystical concepts such as annihilation, love-madness (*divānagi*), self-sacrifice, etc. Majnun's selfless love and the way he had lost himself in the beloved was particularly attractive to the mystics. Majnun provided mystics with a



palpable example of ‘annihilation’ (*fanā*) in the Beloved. Majnun’s famous saying, “I am Leyli and Leyli is [I],” corresponded to Ḥallāj’s mystical aphorism (*šatḥ*): “I am he whom I love; whom I love is [I].” Aḥmad Ġazālī uses two anecdotes in his *Savāneḥ*. Several commentaries on this short treatise have used at least one anecdote about Majnun. Mystics had several other pairs of lovers such as Maḥmud and Ayāz, Farhād and Širin, Wāmeq and ‘Aḍrā to explicate one aspect of love, but the story of Leyli and Majnun remained one of the most popular for mystic poets. The Arabic *aḵbār* provided a rich source of anecdotes for the mystic poets.

Manuscripts, editions and translations. A large number of manuscripts of Neẓāmi’s narrative poems are scattered in many libraries around the world. These manuscripts usually contain Neẓāmi’s *Ḳamsa*. The oldest extant manuscript dates from 718/1318 and is preserved in the Central Library of Tehran University (no. 5179). There are numerous editions of the romance from many countries, in a variety of forms. An enormous body of lithographed publications appeared in India, and these need to be examined not only for their texts but also for their illustrations. Critical editions of the romance appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in Persia. The Persian scholar Waḥid Dastgerdi made a critical edition containing 66 chapters and 3,657 lines: he omits 1,007 couplets as interpolations, but he admits that some of these are by Neẓāmi. According to Dastgerdi, the interpolations must have taken place between 780/1349 and 800/1398. Under the supervision of Evgeniĭ E`duardovich Bertel’s, A. A. Alizada prepared another edition (Moscow, 1965) which consists of 66 chapters and 4,559 couplets. Behruz Tarvatiān’s edition has 63 chapters and 4,553 verses, while the most recent critical edition of the poem, edited by Barāt Zanjāni, has 67 chapters and 4,583 verses.

Neẓāmi’s *Leyli and Majnun* has been translated into many languages. The English reception of this story in the eighteenth century was indirect, usually based on translations of an imitation of Neẓāmi’s romance. Sir William Jones (1746-94) introduced Neẓāmi to the English world in several of his publications. He did not translate any of Neẓāmi’s romances, but did publish a Persian edition of Hātefi’s (d. 1520) *Leyli o Majnun* in 1788. This version of the romance became a source of inspiration for Isaac D’Israeli (1766-1848), who made an adaptation in English. D’Israeli’s work was later put into the opera *Kais, or Love in the Deserts: An Opera in Four Acts* by William Reeve, which was performed in London at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. Louis Aragon (1897-1982), one of the leading representatives of the Surrealist movement,



bemoaned his love for his beloved in *Le Fou d'Elsa* (1963). Aragon's version was based on Jāmi's *Leyli and Majnun*, again an imitation of Neẓāmi's version. The first translation of the romance was an abridged verse rendition by James Atkinson published in 1836; this has been reprinted several times (1894, 1915). In recent decades, several translations, adaptations and performances of this romance have appeared in English, of which those by Rudolf Gelpke (originally in German) and Colin Turner should be mentioned.

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