Love that binds: Sacrifice, Pleasure, and Conceptualizing *ʿishq*

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“One who loves (*ʿashaqa*) and hides his love and stays chaste unto death, dies a martyr.”

-Prophetic hadith (unverified)

The saying above is the closest reference to an authoritative recommendation of *ʿishq* (often translated as radical love, passionate love, mystical/romantic love, eros) in the earliest Islamic sources of the Qurʾān and hadith (sayings of the prophet Muhammad). Not found in the generally agreed upon collections, this hadith is transmitted by Muhammad ibn Dāwūd (d. 908-9), a jurist and writer of belles-lettres (*adab*) who is most known for his anthology of love poetry, *Kitāb al-Zahra* (Book of the Flower).[[1]](#footnote-1) Ibn Dāwūd references the above hadith as a way of countering curative approaches to *ʿishq* that were fostered by the medical views of the time that I explored in the last chapter.[[2]](#footnote-2) Status unverified, this hadith’s recourse to death-as-martyrdom signals how Ibn Dāwūd and early Abbasid literati like him appeal to not only religious authority but also to early Arabic poetry as a way of legitimizing their own views. Indeed, the idea of lovers’ inevitable suffering and martyrdom resonates with the behavior of a legendary group of poet-lovers associated with the *ʿudhrī* style—a group of seventh-century poets whose work was retroactively attributed to just after the arrival of Islam, and whose lyrics speak of an unfulfilled longing for an unobtainable beloved that lasts until death.[[3]](#footnote-3) As early examples, *ʿudhrī* poets remain intertextually relevant for Abbasid courtly circles as well as for poets from al-Andalus to South Asia and beyond, authoritatively backing a licit practice of *ʿishq* as chaste desire that nevertheless remained, like this hadith, subject to question.

As one of these legendary *ʿudhrī* poet-lovers, Majnun as a literary figure was eventually valorized in courtly circles as an exemplary poet-lover due to the fact that his story includes more extreme forms of suffering that lead to madness and death. Ruqayya Khan has shown the popularity of Majnun’s poetry at the Abbasid court in her analysis of the lengthy portion dedicated to him in al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 967) *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs) dedicated to Majnun, arguing that this popularity was due to how a group of Abbasid literati related to early Arabic poetry after the Baghdad translation movement of Greek philosophy and medicine had begun (8th-10th centuries).[[4]](#footnote-4) Majnun’s popularity in fact extended far beyond Baghdad as poetic attributions as well as imitations continued to accumulate, as evidenced by the lengthy *Dīwan* as well as by the request of King Akhistan I of the small dynasty of the Shirvanshahs located along the Caspian Sea (modern-day Azerbaijan) that the poet Niẓāmī (d. 1209) write “the king of love-stories.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The Shirvanshahs, like other local dynasties in West and Central Asia, patronized New Persian as the language of court as a way to legitimize their own local rule, a patronage that drew on the power of the long epic tradition of Persian narrative poetry that made its way into the emergent Islamic world with the inaugural event of Firdowsī’s (d. 1019 or 1025) *Shāhnāma*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Continuing with the impact of the *Shāhnāma*, the *masnāvī* (long, narrative poem) as a literary form remained of great importance even as there was a transition towards themes of love and romance. Works such as Gorgānī’s (c. 1050) *Vis o Rāmin*, like the *Shahnāmā*, take inspiration from the pre-Islamic past, while others such as ʿAyyūqī’s (c. 11th century) *Varqa o Gulshāh*, and Niẓāmī’s (d. 1209) *Laylī o Majnūn* draw inspiration from the lives of *ʿudhri* poets.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a love-story, *Laylī o Majnūn* adopts many features of this style of narrative poetry that began in the Persianate world in the eleventh century. Cameron Cross has situated Persian *masnāvī* production within a semi-global medieval genre of romance, arguing that shared motifs lead to similar forms of emplotment as well as a loose range of ethics that draws from Helleno-Abrahamic thought.[[8]](#footnote-8) While such a macro-picture helps with placing premodern Persian literature into a web that transcends the Islamic world, I want to pause on how these works thematize *ʿishq* itself. By approaching this thematization, I maintain that we get a sense of how premodern writers thought of *ʿishq* conceptually, and how their conceptions resonate, differ, and/or challenge other premodern approaches to love as well as our own. *Laylī o Majnūn* is a good text to think with in terms of *ʿishq*’s conceptualization not only because of its canonical status, but also because of the fact that there is an ample amount of inherited Arabic material against which to compare its expressed novelty.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mohammed Arkoun, in a brief aside in his encyclopedia entry on *ʿishq*, notes that the “evolution of the pair *ʿishq* / *maḥabba* is not without echoes of *erôs* / *agapé*, but in Islam the relationship between the two ideas is complicated by the concurrent development of the ‘courtly’ and mystical tendencies.”[[10]](#footnote-10) I maintain that the concurrent rise of courtly discourse impacts subsequent conceptions of *ʿishq* that retain a sense of the erotic and the physical even as later authors amplify transcendental meanings associated with the term.

In this chapter, I show how Niẓāmī’s *Laylī o Majnūn* thinks about *ʿishq* against the backdrop of previous courtly discourses on love as well as the gendered dimensions of early Arabic material attributed to Majnun. In the first section I trace early Abbasid conceptions of love, highlighting the centrality of the *ʿudhrī* tradition for early Abbasid literati such as Jāḥiẓ (d. 868-9) and Ibn Dāwūd. From a web of different words for love that continue to be used in poetry, *ʿishq* is marked for further analysis both due to its circulation in contemporary medical literature and due to the recognizability of the figure of the suffering poet-lover (*ʿāshiq*) himself—a figure that maps onto the examples of *ʿudhrī* poet-lovers. Turning to literary analysis, I show how Majnun in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 889) *Kitāb al-Shi*ʿ*r wa al-Shu*ʿ*arāʾ* (Book of Poetry and Poets) and the *Dīwan* fits into this larger category of poet-lovers whose masculinity is primarily defined by rhetoricity alongside suffering undertaken on behalf of the beloved. Khan has discussed the ways in which this performance can be seen as “thwarting but not overturning the kinship system,” in its insistence on articulating forlorn romantic love as a loss suffered by individuals who do not assimilate into the marriage economy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Thinking with Khan’s work alongside approaches to homosociality, I maintain that the largely homosocial world of classical Arabic poetry often subsumes the question of whether the poet’s emotions are true.[[12]](#footnote-12) Instead, the evermore intricate ways in which love can be described serves as a kind of competition that underscores poet-lover masculinity that draws from the *ʿudhrī* tradition, a masculinity that gains momentum through its intrinsic transgression of social norms through speech acts.

Yet unlike the Arabic material on Majnun that uses *ʿishq* interchangeably with other words for love, I argue that *Laylī o Majnūn* explicitly thematizes *ʿishq* as a force that transforms bodies. I tease out the implications of this conception over three chapters. In this chapter, I first introduce Niẓāmī’s historical setting as well as how *Laylī o Majnūn* wrestles with its inheritances by claiming explicit fictionality and altering a dichotomous relationship between *ʿishq* and rationality (*ʿaql*) embedded in the Arabic material.[[13]](#footnote-13) I then dive into textual analysis of *Laylī o Majnūn,* offering a section on passages that show *ʿishq*’s conceptual work through its textual proximity to embodiment, power, and transferability. As a force that transforms bodies, *ʿishq* carries resonances of contemporary mystical discourse that I explore further in chapter three as well as ethical implications that I highlight in chapter four. I hold off on detailing these registers here due to the amount of material on *ʿishq* by the twelfth century as well as to the fact that it is against these mystical and ethical registers that I maintain *Laylī o Majnūn* proposes something new. In the remainder of this chapter, I return to focusing on the courtly register in order to highlight continuities of *Laylī o Majnūn* with the Arabic material, probing how Majnun enters Niẓāmī’s text with a certain set of predetermined characteristics and highlighting what is inscribed into his character.

Majnun’s perspective on *ʿishq* in the first half of *Laylī o Majnūn* employs a gendered vocabulary of love poetics inherited from the Arabic material, performing the role of the suffering poet-lover (*ʿāshiq*) while the text simultaneously highlights the pleasures attendant to this suffering when conceptualized as sacrifice. Majnun’s character initially frames *ʿishq* through bondage vocabulary, appealing to literal and metaphorical ropes (*rasan*), chains (*zanjīr*), and shackles (*band*) in a way that highlights his suffering due to his lifelong attachment to a beloved unobtainable through normative kinship relations. Alongside the gendered dimensions of Majnun’s self-proclaimed role, I argue that Majnun’s appeals to the binding force of *ʿishq* opens a textual pathway towards a vision of a different kind of world built on the logic of sacrifice. I analyze in depth two scenes wherein Majnun’s consent to bondage is placed on display—a trip to the Kaʿba with his father who attempts to cure Majnun of *ʿishq*, and Majnun’s placing himself willingly in the ropes and chains of an old woman.[[14]](#footnote-14) The textual highlighting of Majnun’s consent in these scenes brings forth the pleasures of his suffering that is depicted as willing sacrifice, which serves as the sanctified means through which Majnun overturns both the authority of his father and of the society that prohibits his expression of *ʿishq*.

1. **Early Abbasid Conceptions of Love**

In her survey of ninth-seventeenth century works, Lois Giffen argues that there exists a distinct genre that she calls a “theory of profane love” in classical Arabic literature that shares common content as well as historical or genetic relationships that can be traced.[[15]](#footnote-15) Describing the content or these works, Giffen states that their “theory” consists of two types of material: “(1) discussion of the essence, nature, names, causes, and kinds of love and the differences between them. (2) The ‘*aḥwāl*’ of the lovers, literally, their ‘circumstances.’”[[16]](#footnote-16) In what follows, I draw from Giffen’s broad framing in order to look more closely at three of the works she summarizes, Jāḥiẓ’s *Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisā’* (Treatise on *ʿishq* and women) and *Risāla al-Qiyān* (Treatise on Songstresses) and Ibn Dāwūd’s Kitab al-Zahra (Book of the Flower), as well as point to the significance of the *ʿudhrī* tradition in these works. In doing so, I aim to give some sense of the relationship of *ʿishq* to other words for love and desire used by these authors as well as to push Giffen’s description of these two parts of early Arabic love theory further by thinking about their interrelatedness. Often placed in a web of words such as love (*ḥubb, maḥabba*), passion (*hawā*), affinity (*mushākala*), intimacy (*ilf*), and yearning desire (*shawq*), *ʿishq* was further marked for these courtly authors by their general awareness of contemporary medical discourse as well as of their recognition of a suffering poet-lover type (*ʿāshiq*), a figure whose recognizability helped these courtly authors counter curative approaches.

A new way of speaking about love can be traced to a group of poets affiliated with the ʿ*udhrī* style, a purportedly Umayyad-era (661-750) group of poets who spoke *ghazals*, or short, monothematic poems often compared to the lyric. Possible etymologies of the term *ʿudhrī* include a relation to the *ʿudhra* family living in the Northwestern Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century and/or a thematic association with virginity (*ʿudhra)*, andcommon names associated with this style are Jamīl Buthayna, Kuthayyir *ʿ*Azza, and Majnun Laylā.[[17]](#footnote-17) Each of these poets became retroactively known by a name that places their name in a construct of possession by their beloved’s name (Jamīl of Buthayna, Majnun of Laylā)—a practice which reflects the persona of these poets as lovers defined by their lifelong devotion to a single beloved. Renate Jacobi has compared the ʿ*udhrī* ghazal with the *mu*ʿ*allaqāt* (“hanging odes,” associated with the pre-Islamic period) poet’s erotic prelude (*nasīb*), arguing that both depict a sense of love lost, and yet the *mu*ʿ*allaqāt* poet’s emotions are located definitively in the past, whereas the ʿ*udhrī* poet speaks of a present romantic relationship that he carries into the future.[[18]](#footnote-18) Although there are major historiographical issues surrounding these poets’ lives, Jacobi’s thematic analysis highlights how ʿ*udhrī* poetry introduced to the early Islamic milieu an entirely new way of thinking about love as melancholic devotion that need not be overcome and that extends unto death.[[19]](#footnote-19) Bracketing historiographical questions, I follow Suzanne Stetkevych’s approach and think of what is known about ʿ*udhrī* poets as “personae constructs of a mythic, folkloric, and archetypal nature.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Turning to the Abbasid period, the stories of these ʿ*udhrī* poets provided the material for some of the earliest conceptual thinking about *ʿishq*. Jaḥīz’s (d. 868-9) two treatises that elaborate on the subject—*Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisāʾ* (Treatise on *ʿishq* and women) and *Risāla al-Qiyān* (Treatise on Songstresses)—draw explicitly and implicitly from the ʿ*udhrī* tradition. The latter treatise, *Risāla al-Qiyān*, was written as a defense of owning songstresses (*qiyān*), a practice that was condemned by legal scholars of the time.[[21]](#footnote-21) Defending this practice as licit, Jaḥīz cites the story of Jamīl Buthayna as an authoritative source from the past that provides evidence for the permissibility of various kinds of non-sexual relations between the sexes by philologically defining Jamīl as a “visitor (*zīr*)” whose habit of visiting (*zīyara*) his beloved (married to another man) as normal for pre-Islamic times.[[22]](#footnote-22) Such a comment resonates with the ways in which many early Abbasid thinkers drew on a category of pre- and early Islamic *ʿarab,* a term whose usage more likely referred to “bedouins” than a clearly delineated ethnic category of Arabs, as authoritative sources and underscores how ʿ*udhrī* poets were associated with this category.[[23]](#footnote-23) Jāḥiẓ moreover obliquely refers to ʿ*udhrī* poets’ melancholic personae by alluding to the “happenings produced in lovers’ affairs in their hearts, livers, and intestines, and their moans, longing, going mad, and being infatuated, and when their tears make them happy or when the eye expresses depression,” all of which he claims to have anecdotally witnessed and about which he pontificates.[[24]](#footnote-24) These details replicate embodied behaviors associated with ʿ*udhrī* poet-lovers who serve as the raw material for his further conceptual thinking about *ʿishq*.

In addition to drawing on the ʿ*udhrī* tradition, Jāḥiẓ’s work on *ʿishq* responds directly to medical views of the time explored in the previous chapter. Agreeing with contemporary medical views that *ʿishq* is a disease (*dā​​ʾ*), Jāḥiẓ offers a definition of the term in *Risāla al-Qiyān* that reinforces its power over the body but that nevertheless differs from curative approaches*,* declaring that “*ʿishq* is a disease that cannot be fully controlled just as one cannot remove the impediments of various diseases except with a rigorous diet (*ḥimya*),”[[25]](#footnote-25) and adding two significant conditions that one should not abstain from eating entirely and that even if one takes control over one’s diet, one cannot be in control of “the harms caused by changes in weather and differences in water.”[[26]](#footnote-26) For Jāḥiẓ, even though *ʿishq* is an illness, one should neither abstain from it nor attempt to wholly control it, and this use of medical knowledge shows how for courtly elites the bodily effects of a lover serve instead as proof of a love that need not be cured. Moreover, Jāḥiẓ states that the disease of *ʿishq* has a particular pervasiveness because of its home in the heart, and he amplifies the effects of this pervasiveness by making recourse to a proverb, declaring, “the generally known proverb is that passion (*hawā*) makes a man blind and deaf, but *ʿishq* kills.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Such a comment foreshadows the emphasis on martyrdom being one if not the ultimate action of a suffering lover, an emphasis that can be seen in works composed on *ʿishq* from a wide range of Abbasid authors including Hanbali jurists, Sufis, and literati such as Jāḥiẓ.

Yet the fact that *ʿishq* may kill serves, for Jāḥiẓ, as an acknowledgement of *ʿishq*’s potency that makes recourse to contemporary medical knowledge in order to support his overarching argument for the pleasures that come hand-in-hand with its perils. Appealing to excessiveness by way of affirmation, Jāḥiẓ’s two treatises locate in *ʿishq* a kind of pleasure that is not necessarily encapsulated by other terms for love and that make its risks worthwhile. *Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisā’* opens with the declarative statement that “love (*ḥubb*) is that which is the root of passion (*hawā*) and passion is that from which branches *ʿishq* and *ʿishq* is that which causes man to wander in his ecstasy (*yahīma lahu ʿala wajhihi*) or die of grief on his bed,” a statement that again intertextually refrences ʿ*udhrī* poets’ archetypal behaviors as “wandering out of ecstasy” is often the precise words used to describe Majnun’s actions.[[28]](#footnote-28) *ʿIshq* is singled out from other ways of describing love by these actions, which backs up subsequent conceptual statements such as “*ʿIshq* is a name for what exceeds the scope of that which is called love (*ḥubb*),” and, in *Risāla al-Qiyān*, that *ḥubb* is an inadequate term to convey *ʿishq*, which is a “compound of love (*ḥubb*), passion (*hawā*), affinity (*mushākala*), and intimacy (*ilf*).”[[29]](#footnote-29) As a disease and as excess, Jāḥiẓ declares that “the pleasure of lovers (*mutaʿāshiqīn*) is tranquil unto eternity, persisting without transience,” a pleasure which he compares to listening to music, except that songs are inevitably transient.[[30]](#footnote-30) This pleasure helps explain Jāḥiẓ’s particular recourse to defining *ʿishq* in treatises on women and songstresses, other aspects of courtly life that for him bring pleasure, as well as the link between embodied suffering and pleasure underscoring a positive approach to *ʿishq* as excessive love.[[31]](#footnote-31) Overall, Jāḥiẓ’s work indicates that by the early Abbasid period the term *ʿishq* was in circulation and that the courtly register drew from the ʿ*udhrī* tradition as a way of affirming the embodied effects of *ʿishq*, effects which resonated with the medical views of the time but which, in courtly circles, were not subject to treatment.

A near contemporary of Jāḥiẓ in Baghdad, Ibn Dāwūd’s (d. 908-9) *Kitāb al-Zahra* (Book of the Flower) further highlights the popularity of ʿ*udhrī* poetry at the early Abbasid court and brings forth the gendered dimensions of courtly approaches to *ʿishq*. Thinking with Giffen’s two-fold division, this work is primarily an anthology of poetry with occasional forays into conceptual work, and its prioritizing of poetic citation indicates how courtly circles by the early Abbasid period used the poetic canon as a way of thinking about love. Ruqayya Khan and others have argued that this work served as a kind of manual of behavior for a group of “genteel-savants (*ẓarīf*, pl. *ẓurafā’*)” whose fascination with ʿ*udhrī* modes of idealizing the beloved served as a kind of male bonding.[[32]](#footnote-32) Indeed, such an ethos can be seen in the Hadith “one who loves and hides his love and stays chaste unto death, dies a martyr,” preserved and interpreted by Ibn Dāwūd, and explored in the introduction of this chapter.[[33]](#footnote-33) Martyrdom is moreover baked into the reception of this work as many biographers of Ibn Dāwūd claim that he died of unfilled desire for a male friend who may or may not have been his beloved.[[34]](#footnote-34) This appeal once again to martyrdom, regardless of its facticity, signals the coalescence of an understanding of the powerful, embodied effects of *ʿishq* in courtly culture.

Moreover, notions of martyrdom and the endurance of suffering underscore a code of behavior amongst this specific group of “genteel-savants” that amplified and emulated a masculinity embedded in the scripts of ʿ*udhrī* poetry. Though Jāḥiẓ, for example, articulates the ways in which *ʿishq* causes the lover to be submissive (*dhilla*) and to lose his manliness (*murū*ʾ*a*), Ibn Dāwūd’s manual shows how that submissiveness can be seen as a strength of the suffering poet-lover (*ʿāshiq*).[[35]](#footnote-35) Likewise drawing on contemporary medical knowledge, Ibn Dāwūd cites Galen when defining *ʿishq* as “an activity of the soul hidden in the brain, heart, and liver,” only to follow with the statement that “one cannot entirely be called a lover (*ʿāshiq*) unless and until one is separated from the one he loves.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Embedded in the courtly recuperation of a positive view towards *ʿishq* is the figure of the suffering lover who nobly endures separation.[[37]](#footnote-37)⁠ Thus in addition to Khan’s arguments about the masculinity of “genteel-savants,” I would add that the poetic tradition provides the figure of the suffering-lover as retaining a sense of masculine power that gives early Abbasid authors a way of countering medical definitions of *ʿishq*.

Yet the courtly tradition does not seem to have a systematic definition of *ʿishq* itself at this time, and different words for passion, love, and desire continuously surface in ways that mirror the multiplicity of the words used in poetry itself. The title of Ibn Dāwūd’s chapter that defines *ʿishq*—“Rationality is a prisoner to passion (*hawā*) and desire (*shawq*) is ruler of them both,”—signals a popular understanding of the proximity between these various terms.[[38]](#footnote-38) Indeed, the reception of early Abbasid courtly literature in al-Andalus, for example, seems to have placed a greater emphasis on yearning desire (*shawq*), as can be seen in the title of Ibn ‘Arabi’s famous collection of poems “Translator of Desires (*ashwāq*),” yet the poets of al-Andalus nevertheless made appeals to the *ʿudhrī* tradition.[[39]](#footnote-39) In the next chapter, I show how *ʿishq* became further emphasized as a central term in the Persianate world through mystical discourse, which has ramifications for its redeployment in poetic texts like *Laylī o Majnūn*. Now I want to turn briefly to the Arabic material on Majnun to further explore how this Abbasid courtly register informs his character and what is retained and transformed by Niẓāmī’s version.

**II. Majnun and Poet-Lover Masculinity**

Ibn Qutayba’s *Kitāb al-Shi*ʿ*r wa al-Shu*ʿ*arāʾ* (Book of Poetry and Poets) is the earliest source of Majnun’s poetry and the work utilizes the methodology of Islamic biographical literature (*ṭabaqāt*) for literary figures, generally aiming to consolidate its source material and to provide a coherent vision of an Arab-Islamic past.[[40]](#footnote-40) In chapter one, I explored aspects of Majnun’s madness and animality retained by this earliest source from its pre-Islamic setting, and in this chapter I focus on depictions of his role as a poet-lover. Unlike the entries of most of the other poets, the entry on Majnun presents a unified narrative—presenting us with most of the main plot points of later versions including the lovers-to-be meeting as children, Majnun’s going mad when Layla’s family blocks their union, the attempt to win her in battle with the help of local tax collector Nawfal b. Musahiq, an encounter with Layla, Majnun’s father attempt to “cure” Majnun of his love by taking him to the Kaʿba, and Majnun’s eventually permanent relocation to the desert and his death—as opposed to merely situating the various poetic citations.[[41]](#footnote-41) This suggests that it is the legend of the figure that was known and of interest to Ibn Qutayba’s audience.[[42]](#footnote-42) From the outset, Majnun’s nickname (*Majnun* meaning the madman, the one possessed by *jinn*) becomes a focal point, which is designated “because of the dwindling of his rationality due to the severity of his passion (*li-dhahābi* ʿ*aqli-hi bi-shiddati* ʿ*ishqi-hi*).”[[43]](#footnote-43) The juxtaposition of *ʿishq* against rationality (*ʿaql*) shows how this work, like its Abbasid contemporaries, sees *ʿishq* as a kind of disease that overcomes the mind and body.

In detailing the lovers’ meeting and separation, Ibn Qutayba’s entry signals Majnun’s power through the rhetoricity he employs as a poet-lover even as his rationality is threatened. This reflects the nature of the work itself as an anthology, and yet the narrative amplifies the power of his poesy. Detailing Layla and Majnun’s meeting in childhood, the entry offers and explains a few lines attributed to Majnun:

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| I fell in love with Layla when she was a heedless child  the size of her breasts had not yet appeared to companions  two youths we tended the lambs—would that it were that we  had never grown up, nor had the lambs grown old  Then he grew up and he was sitting with her and speaking with some of the people of his family, and he was beautiful and refined (*ẓarīf*) as he related poems and sweet conversation.[[44]](#footnote-44) | تعلقت ليلى وهي غر صغيرة  ولم يبد للأتراب من ثديها حجم  صغيرين نرعى البهم ياليت أننا  إلى اليوم لم نكبر ولم تكبر البهم  ثم نشأ وكان يجلس معها ويتحدث في ناس من قومه و كان جميلا ظريفا راوية للاشعار حلو الحديث |

Filled with a sense of pastoral nostalgia, these poetic lines dwell on a period already lost that foreshadows the lovers’ inevitable separation. The youthful lambs reinforce the lovers’ own youth as well as a purity that Majnun claims in his love that is not dependent on Layla’s physical qualities and that situates his style within the chaste mandates of the *ʿudhrī* tradition. Yet this youthful nostalgia does not seem to threaten his masculinity, a poet-lover’s masculinity that allows him to be both beautiful and refined—or as Khan translates “a genteel-savant” (*ẓarīf*)—as well as powerful by way of his rhetorical capacities. After a short poetic citation from Layla, the entry quickly glosses the lovers’ separation and Majnun’s subsequent wandering with the beasts, a detail that accompanies a repeated mention of the dwindling of his rationality (*dhahaba ʿaqli-hi*), which is further glossed by a comment that he “was not comprehending (*yaʿaqlu*) anything, except when Layla was recalled to him. Then he would come to his senses and speak about her without dropping a letter.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The fact that Majnun can compose beautiful verses on Layla whenever she is recalled facilitates a temporary recognition of his power, revealing a tension between masculine rhetoricity and what is characterized throughout the entry as animalistic behavior that is overcome when Majnun is heard as a poet-lover.

Moreover, the entry situates Majnun within the *ʿudhrī* tradition by referencing the poetry of Qays b. Darīḥ in a display of competitive rhetoricity that further underscores the masculinity of Majnun’s character. In the final, most extended anecdote of the entry, an anonymous speaker seeks the advice of a friend of Majnun’s on how to approach him after he has more permanently relocated to the desert and has become known for his unusual lifestyle and magnificent poetry.[[46]](#footnote-46) Majnun’s friend warns of Majnun’s potential violence and advises this speaker to recite a few lines from Qays b. Darīḥ in order to calm Majnun. Following this advice, the speaker recites a few lines, which leads to Majnun’s own poetic performance:

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| --- | --- |
| He wept for a while, then said, “By god, I am more poetic than him (*āshʿar minhu*) when I say  you brought me close until you captured me  by words that bring the flocks to the plains  you shunned me when I had no way out  leaving what you left between the ribs  Then a group of gazelles appeared, and he leapt up and followed them. I went away and when I returned the next morning, I did not find him… Then I returned the morning after with his brothers and family and we searched for him day and night and we still did not find him. When we returned the next morning, we looked down upon a valley full of stones and saw him dead, so we carried him back from the wilderness and buried him. [[47]](#footnote-47) | فبكى طويلا ثم قال انا والله اشعر منه حيث اقول  وأدنيتني حتى إذا ما سبيتني  بقول يحل العصم سهل الأباطح  تجافيت عني حين لا لي حيلة  وخليت ما خليت بين الجوانح  ثم عنت له ظباء فوثب في طلبها فانصرفت ثم عدت من الغد فلم اصبه… ثم غدوت بعد ذلك وغدا اخوته وأهل بيته فطلبناه يومنا وليلتنا فما اصبناه فلما اصبحنا اشرفنا على واد كثير الحجارة فإذا هو ميت بينها فاحتملوه ودفنوه. |

Stemming from a homosocial bond with fellow ʿ*udhrī* poet Qays ibn Darīḥ, Majnun declares his own value through his poetry which is subsequently reinforced by a kind of semi-miraculous event—the appearance of a group of gazelles that brings the anecdote to a close. The competitiveness of this bond highlights how masculinity for ʿ*udhrī* poets is constructed primarily through their rhetorical prowess even as they take on more gender-fluid forms of embodiment.[[48]](#footnote-48) The appearance of gazelles offers a literary solution to the problem of Majnun’s place in society as madman by making his life amongst animals appear not as a denigrated, violent lifestyle amongst beasts but rather as an alternative, peaceful communing with gazelles.[[49]](#footnote-49) Unlike later renditions such as Niẓāmī’s that expound on Majnun’s death, Majnun is simply found dead and the cause of death here remains muted. This anecdote’s recourse to Majnun’s own claim to a rhetorical prowess that surpasses his fellow poet-lover mirrors the masculine power others see in him when he speaks of Layla “without dropping a letter,” and his poetry provides the bridge for a temporary recognition of his masculine power.

The *Dīwan*, given its length, further fleshes out Majnun’s role as a poet-lover and the ways in which his masculinity is linked to his rhetoricity and capacity to endure suffering. There moreover seems to be some recognition of Majnun as a particular kind of lover (*ʿāshiq*) that thwarts the marriage economy as Layla’s father, in his rejection of Majnun’s father’s marriage proposal, states “by god, what the Arabs would relate if I married her to a lover (*ʿāshiq*).”[[50]](#footnote-50) This resembles the courtly deployment of the term in works such as Ibn Dāwūd’s and shows how it encapsulates the persona of *ʿudhrī* poets whose love is a kind of melancholic devotion unto death. Turning to the poetry itself, Majnun’s poems use a variety of words for love to engage in a mode of heightening devotion that imagines the lover-beloved relationship in ways similar to a religious understanding of the relationship between a devotee and the divine. This ennobles his suffering, an ennobling that most poignantly comes through in a poem he recites at the Kaʿba in order to reject his father’s advice of abandoning his love of Layla:

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| --- | --- |
| Pilgrims call to God seeking forgiveness  in Mecca, disheveled, so their sins could be erased  and I called out, oh most Merciful, my first concern  for my soul is Layla, and you are the sufficer of it  if you give me Layla, there is no repenting  of a servant to god that I would not repent  her nearness cools my eyes and the one who keeps her from me increases in me wonder  and how many speakers were saying, repent!  I resisted. That, by my life, is not a want that I have  the soul did not renounce you, Layla, because it  disliked you, but its fate was lessened from you  oh soul, by God, have patience–you are not the first  to have its lover vanish, so advise me [[51]](#footnote-51) | دعا المحرمون الله يستغفرونه  بمكة شعثا كي تمحى ذنوبها  وناديت يا رحمن أول سؤلتي  لنفسي ليلى ثم أنت حسيبها  فإن اعط ليلى في حياتي لم يتب  إلى الله عبد توبة لا أتوبها  يقر بعيني قربها ويزيدني  بها عجبا من كان عندي يعيبها  فكم قائل قد قال تب فعصيته  وتلك لعمري خلة لا أصيبها  وما هجرتك النفس يا ليل أنها  قلتك ولكن قل منك نصيبها  فيا نفس صبرا لست والله فاعلمي  بأول نفس غاب عنها حبيبها |

This poetic prayer compares Majnun’s devotion to Layla with a servant’s (*ʿabd*) relationship with the divine. Her nearness offers him solace, as he appeals to a Qurʾānic descriptor of her as cooling his eyes (*yaqarru bi-ʿaynī*).[[52]](#footnote-52) Even though Majnun claims a capacity to repent to a greater extent than a devotee’s repentance, he rejects others’ commands for repentance due to his claim of lifelong devotion. Although this rejection risks a kind of apostasy given the injunction to repent at the Kaʿba on hajj—an apostasy amplified in a subsequent poem wherein Majnun states he repents of all sins except “from passion of Layla and from my love of visiting her”—Majnun nevertheless ends this poem by situating his soul within a community of souls who suffer due to separation from their beloveds.[[53]](#footnote-53) For Majnun and for poet-lovers like him, the appeals to a religious register amplify rather than detract from the suffering they claim in a lifelong devotion to an unobtainable beloved.

As in Ibn Qutayba’s short entry, the *Dīwan* likewise references other *ʿudhrī* poet-lovers as a way of highlighting Majnun’s rhetorical prowess. One remarkable section describes a meeting between the fifth Umayyad Caliph, ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Marwān, and the legendary *ʿudhrī* poet Kuthayyir ʿAzza. ʿAbd al-Malik prompts Kuthayyir ʿAzza into a tale about his meeting Majnun in the desert by asking the question, “have you seen anyone who had more *ʿishq* than you (*āʿshaq minka*)?”[[54]](#footnote-54) Kuthayyir says yes, an affirmation which ʿAbd al-Malik contests by reciting a few of Kuthayyir’s lines on his own endurance of suffering, which leads Kuthayyir into explaining how he allegedly met Majnun in the desert and Majnun’s appearance caused Kuthayyir to question Majnun’s humanity.[[55]](#footnote-55) After this questioning, Kuthayyir proceeds to watch Majnun catch a gazelle and speak poetry to it:

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| --- | --- |
| So I watched him as he hunted a gazelle that was the most beautiful gazelle, then he grasped its horn and began looking at the beauty of its face and said,  “Oh semblance of Layla, do not fear me  today I am a friend from amongst the beasts  your eyes are her eyes and your neck is her neck  though her leg is more delicate than yours.”  Then he set her free and started looking at her traces and said,  “I say as I have released her from her shackles  if you say thanks, it is because of Layla you are freed.”[[56]](#footnote-56) | فأقمت عليه حتى اقتنص ظبية كأحسن ما تكون من الظباء ثم قبض على قرنها وأقبل ينظر في محاسن وجهها ويقول  أيا شبه ليلى لا تراعي فإنني  لك اليوم من بين الوحوش صديق  فعيناش عيناها وجيدش جيدها  سوى أن عظم الساق منش دقيق  ثم أطلقها وجعل ينظر في أثرها ويقول  أقول وقد أطلقتها من وثاقها  فأنت لليلى إن شكرت طليق |

Majnun’s likening of the gazelle to Layla reflects a porous boundary between humans and animals that I explored more thoroughly in the previous chapter. I raise this anecdote again here in order to show how Kuthayyir’s reciting of Majnun’s poetry places him within a coterie of poet-lovers whose intricate ways of describing love underscores their masculine power. The first couplets enter a descriptive mode (*waṣf*) by comparing the gazelle’s individual body parts to Layla’s, only to turn, in the second couplet, to a deployment of bondage imagery that makes use of paronomasia (*jinās*) in order to suggest that Majnun frees the gazelle (*aṭlaqaha*), who is a freed thing (*ṭalīq*) due to its semblance to Layla.[[57]](#footnote-57) Moreover, this anecdote repeats this process two more times as Majnun catches and releases two more gazelles, offering further evidence of his rhetorical prowess by giving more examples of his deployment of this simile.[[58]](#footnote-58) The tale comes to a close when Kuthayyir, hungry, breaks the ankles of the final entrapped gazelle, leading to Majnun’s tears and Kuthayyir’s subsequent declaration to ‘Abd al-Malik that “And that, by god, is someone with more *ʿishq* than me.” The use of the comparative to describe Majnun’s *ʿishq* (*āʿshaq minī*) recalls Majnun’s own usage of it when comparing his poetry to Qays b. Darīḥ’s in Ibn Qutayba’s entry—“ I am more poetic than him” (*āshʿar minhu*)—and here it is further made clear the ways in which Majnun’s non-normative behavior additionally amplifies his *ʿishq*. Kuthayyir continues this anecdote by stating to ‘Abd al-Malik that Majnun is “more poetic than him (*āshʿar minī*)” and reciting five more poems attributed to Majnun.[[59]](#footnote-59) Together, these early Arabic materials suggest that Majnun not only fits into a masculinity of suffering poet-lovers, but that his poetry was recognized as exemplary of their mode of heightening the level of their suffering and devotion through evermore intricate speech.

**III. Niẓāmī and Inheritance**

Niẓāmī completed *Laylī o Majnūn* (c. 1192) at a time when the Abbasid caliphate was in definite decline, the Seljuks had gained control of much of Anatolia, and small, local dynasties staked their own claims to legitimacy often through the adoption of new Persian as a language of literary prestige and administrative force. In this fragmented world, the Shirvanshahs rose as a dynasty that maintained local rule as a vassal state over what corresponds largely to modern-day Azerbaijan from the mid-ninth through the early sixteenth centuries.[[60]](#footnote-60) This dynasty traced its lineage to the Sassanid King Bahram Chubin, a lineage that likely contributed to the preservation of pre-Islamic Iranian lore in the region, and its borders with Georgian and Armenian dynasties led to a rich overlapping of cultural and literary influences. Nizāmī’s work reflects engagement with this wide range of influences as well as the relative autonomy he enjoyed as a poet who sought patronage from rulers of different dynasties including the Shirvanshahs and Seljuks, seemingly resentful of courtly life and working in a way that we might describe as freelancing.[[61]](#footnote-61)

One of the most significant innovations of Niẓāmī’s works are the lengthy introductions that offer paratextual commentary on the stories themselves. In a stylized account of why he wrote *Laylī o Majnūn*, Niẓāmī relates that his patron, King Akhistan I of the Shirvanshahs, requested that he write the story after having seen his prior work *Khosrow o Shīrīn*, suggesting that he turn to “the king of love stories.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Niẓāmī disagrees with the King’s assessment, claiming that the story is intrinsically depressing, which leads to a conversation with his own son on whether or not he should take up the task. Declaring that the story’s setting is narrow (*tang*) and that its exposition might therefore be maimed (*lang*), Niẓāmī further explicates his own aesthetic views:

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| --- | --- |
| The arena of speech should be ample  with the temperament of mounted riders.  Even though this verse is famous  lively exegesis is far from it.  Exalted speech is lively, amorous  indeed speech hangs onto these two things  and as for mania and binds and chains  speech on these things becomes naked, constrained.[[63]](#footnote-63) | میدان سخن فراخ باید  تا طبع سواریی نماید  این آیت اگر چه هست مشهور  تفسیر نشاط هست ازو دور  آفراز سخن نشاط و نازست  زین هر دو سخن بهانه سازست  بر شیفتگی و بند و زنجیر  باشد سخن برهنه دلگیر |

Discourse or speech (*sukhan*) according to Niẓāmī is best when it is lively, showing the disposition of cavalrymen—characteristics easily seen in the vast setting of *Khosrow o Shīrīn* as well as in Persian epic poetry prior to the twelfth century. In contrast, Niẓāmī employs religious vocabulary to describe the story of Layla and Majnun as a verse (*aya*) whose exegesis (*tafsīr*) is far from being lively. Signaling the story’s weightiness, such religious terms not only imply respect of the story’s content, but also how its themes may be unusual for an audience whose expectations were informed by Persian epic poetry of the time. As a forewarning, Niẓāmī lists the story’s themes—mania, binds, and chains—that he seemingly laments, yet the characterization of speech on these themes as “naked” draws precisely from the vocabulary used to describe Majnun and his speech itself. Instead of taking this complaint only at face value, I suggest that it likewise serves to shift readerly expectations by preparing us for the weighty themes to come.

Moreover, Niẓāmī’s complaint also signals the ways in which his text alters and plays with the prior Arabic material. Agreeing to write the story, Niẓāmī states that he hopes that it could turn his patron into a lover (ʿ*āshiq*), adding that he inserted into it “a pearl from reason (*ʿaql*).”[[64]](#footnote-64) This statement undoes the dichotomy between *ʿishq* and rationality (*ʿaql*) posed by Ibn Qutayba’s initial depiction of Majnun and suggests how Niẓāmī’s text reframes his character. Instead of recreating a battle between Arabic and Persian aesthetics, I suggest that we read Niẓāmī’s prefatory comments as marking fictionality by placing distance from received source-material and using this distance as an opportunity to reimagine the story as well as its central theme, *ʿishq*.

Yet as an inherited figure, Majnun enters Niẓāmī’s text with certain predetermined characteristics: he goes mad, dies for love, and is associated with being a suffering lover (ʿ*āshiq*) that I explored in the previous sections. Although Niẓāmī’s text preserves such inheritances, its thematization of *ʿishq* itself suggests something new. I maintain that this thematization occurs in tandem with the fictionality of Niẓāmī’s text, which allows both for direct narratorial commentary on the main action and an open altering of prior motifs. As a metadiegetic commentator, the narrator occasionally speaks directly in the first-person, drawing attention to both inheritance and active intervention.[[65]](#footnote-65) These first-person asides typically occur in tandem with explication of the term *ʿishq* itself, such as in this passage that occurs after Majnun has given his second long soliloquy on his forsaken love after Layla’s father denies Majnun’s father’s request of marriage between Layla and Majnun:

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| --- | --- |
| *ʿishq* that is not *ʿishq* of eternity  is a plaything of youthful desire  for *ʿishq* is that which cannot be made less  such that it remains persisting, unchanged  it is not *ʿishq* but vain imagining  if its eternity is declining.  Majnun is the illustrious name of *ʿishq*  from his acquaintance, all of what *ʿishq* is  bearing *ʿishq* all while he was alive  he thrived like a rose by the breeze of *ʿishq*.  And now that his rose went on its journey  a drop from him as rosewater remains  me too from that sweet-scented rosewater  make my own water sweet in this river.[[66]](#footnote-66) | عشقی که نه عشق جاودانیست  بازیچه شهوت جوانیست  عشق آن باشد که کم نگردد  تا باشد از آن قدم نگردد  آن عشق نه سرسری خیالست  کاو را ابدالابد زوالست  مجنون که بلند نام عشقست  از معرفت تمام عشقست  تا زنده به عشق بارکش بود  چون گل به نسیم عشق خوش بود  و اکنون که گلش رحیل یاب است  آن قطره که ماند ازو گلاب است  من نیز بدان گلاب خوشبوی  خوش می کنم آب خود درین جوی |

The beginning of this passage shows how the narrator defines *ʿishq* in proximity to eternality, and contrasts it to desire (*shahwat*), which is associated with youth. Unlike how the prior Arabic material attributed to Majnun often uses *ʿishq* as synonymous with other terms for love, the text here clearly encapsulates its meaning and indicates that Majnun is exemplary of it. Yet the image of the rose and rosewater likewise signals a temporal as well as thematic shift—the narrator, though claiming to inherit an aspect of the eternality of *ʿishq* from Majnun, speaks of the sweetening of his “own water,” signaling the different material or intellectual circumstances of his own time. Instead of reading this narrator as Niẓāmī’s authorial voice, I suggest that the narrator be understood as a character internal to the text, offering articulations of *ʿishq*’s thematization and it is to the framing of *ʿishq* that I now turn.

**IV. Conceptualizing *ʿishq* in *Laylī o Majnūn***

Though *Laylī o Majnūn* occasionally employs other terms for love, *ʿishq* is by far the most prominent and is often emphasized repetitively in passages that suggest definitional work.[[67]](#footnote-67) In the preceding section, I analyzed one such passage that locates *ʿishq* in proximity to eternality, an association that gestures to the overarching Neoplatonic currents of the Persianate world at the time.[[68]](#footnote-68) Indeed, repeated associations of *ʿishq* with a world of forms—signaled through references to the world of *ʿishq* (ʿ*ālam-i ʿishq*)—that lies beyond the temporal world affirm Neoplatonic undertones.[[69]](#footnote-69) I attempt to encapsulate this metaphysical aspect by characterizing *ʿishq* as a force, a force that may have no beginning or end, although this is only a part of the text’s conceptualization.

Despite Neoplatonic associations, *Laylī o Majnūn* positively associates *ʿishq* with embodiment from the beginning of the story onwards. Immediately after the lovers meet at school—a meeting place that itself marks a shift away from the Arabic versions—the text comments upon how their subsequent behavior differs from their classmates. Staging a juxtaposition between these two groups, the text elaborates on how the lovers’ subject of study (*ʿishq*) differs from that of their classmates (*ʿilm*):

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| --- | --- |
| Friends were studying to acquire knowledge  while they spoke kindly to one another.  Friends were creating their speech from language  while they wrote in another language.  Friends were chattering away in their speech  while they spoke only accounting their states.  Friends were reading from knowledge’s pages  while they, a pair, exhaled a breath in *ʿishq*.  Friends sat in tandem in a great number  while they were together in their own way.[[70]](#footnote-70) | یاران به حساب علم خوانی  و ایشان به حدیث مهربانی  یاران سخن از لغت سرشتند  ایشان لغتی دگر نوشتند  یاران صفت مقال گفتند  ایشان همه حسب حال گفتند  یاران ورقی ز علم خواندند  ایشان نفسی به عشق راندند  یاران از شمار بیش بودند  وایشان به شمار خویش بودند |

Knowlege (*ʿilm*) here consists of learning forms of speech and reading from books, modes which differ from the lovers’ forms of communication that do not depend on language and instead consist in recalling internal states (*ḥāl*). This reference to states may signal the highly descriptive compilations of psychological moods written by Sufis from the ninth century onwards, which typically detail a Sufi’s state upon encounter with the divine.[[71]](#footnote-71) Alluding to this in passing, the text affirms *ʿishq*’s proximity to embodiment by clarifying that lovers primarily communicate through sighs. Notably, these repeatedly apposed lines never contrast *ʿishq* with intelligence (*ʿaql*), again signaling the text’s thematic shift away from the inherited Arabic material. Instead, both Layla and Majnun are set up as lovers who express *ʿishq* through their bodies and who learn it by means other than the knowledge (*ʿilm*) acquired through formal education, means which leave a lingering eroticism in place.

*Laylī o Majnūn* likewise describes *ʿishq* with metaphors from natural imagery as well as from forms of bondage associated with love poetics. These metaphors emphasize the role of bodies as the means through which *ʿishq* finds expression. During the lovers’ time together in youth just as their affection is revealed, the text describes them by mixing these metaphors in a way that shows how it is weaving together multiple registers:

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| --- | --- |
| Although they were patient such that they tried  to clothe that naked *ʿishq* and make it hide  being patient in *ʿishq* is to what end?  The sun should not be overlaid with clay  an eye that winks a thousand times is like  a secret hidden from the accuser  a ringlet whose rings are a thousand chains  other than being ensnared, what’s the aim? | کردند شکیب تا بکوشند  و آن عشق برهنه را بپوشند  در عشق شکیب کی کند سود  خورشید به گل نشاید اندود  چشمی به هزار غمزه غماز  در پرده نهفته چون بود راز  زلفی به هزار حلقه زنجیر  جز شیفته بودنش چه تدبیر‌‌ |

*ʿIshq* here is equated to a series of objects—the sun, an eye, a secret, a ringlet—that create a sense of it as a kind of amorphous yet tangible thing. The metaphors of a winking eye or hidden secret are common tropes employed across languages of medieval Islamic love poetry, most commonly known due to Ibn Ḥazm’s (d. 1064) *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah* (Ring of the Dove) that describes in detail how vision sustains and perpetuates desire and that some scholars claim contributed to the rise of courtly love in Europe.[[72]](#footnote-72) Yet the final metaphor shifts from such pleasant, natural imagery as the narrator compares *ʿishq* to a ringlet (*zulf*), a highly conventional feature of the ideal beloved’s hair in the Persianate world, which then is comprised of chains that inevitably ensnare the lover.[[73]](#footnote-73) Appealing directly to the nakedness and mania (*shīfti*) that Niẓāmī forewarned in the introduction, this passage gives way to an idea of the raw power of *ʿishq* that overwhelms and ensnares, for better or worse.

This raw power is often exemplified throughout the text by a personification of *ʿishq* as a subject itself in the repeated refrain, “*ʿishq* came (*ʿishq amād*).” At times, this usage highlights the violence that ensues from *ʿishq*, such as a line from this same section on the lovers’ love being revealed that states, “*ʿishq* came and emptied out the dwelling place / taking up the indiscriminate sword.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Such sweeping slaughter foreshadows the lovers’ immediate and eventual demise. And yet, this sense of *ʿishq*’s raw power is also appealed to in order to show its capacity to overturn relational hierarchies, such as a line that quips at the many times Majnun’s father attempts to advise him (“advice even when it is quite worthwhile / when *ʿishq* came what is the place of advice”), or a line with a slightly altered construction that underscores Layla’s reliance upon *ʿishq* against patriarchal circumstances (“since *ʿishq* was mixed up in her soul’s essence / what fear was there of father or husband.”)[[75]](#footnote-75) Not a feeling, *ʿishq*’s personification throughout the text frames it as a kind of substance that acts on bodies.

Though this personification may lead to the idea that *ʿishq* is wholly external, the last line cited above gestures to interiority, as *ʿishq* emanates from Layla’s soul or essence (*gūhar*). Instead of locating *ʿishq* as external or internal to individuals, the text repeatedly alludes to its transferability as seen in the previous section with the image of the rose and rosewater. A significant example of this transferability comes with the introduction of Majnun’s character at the beginning of the story, as the narrator explicates that he becomes exemplary of *ʿishq* through suckling breastmilk:

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| --- | --- |
| In his term in wet nursery’s degree  he was nourished in affectionate milk  with each drop of milk they mixed on his lip  they wrote a sign of devotion on him  with the essence that they gave for his food  they ensured kindliness on him accrued  with each blue line they drew upon his face  they blew the magic of the heart on him…  the gardener was watering his *ʿishq*  making the essence of *ʿishq* glow by him.[[76]](#footnote-76) | دورانش به حکم دایگانی  پرورد به شیر مهربانی  هر شیر که در لبش سرشتند  حرفی ز وفا برو نوشتند  هر مایه که از غذاش دادند  دل دوستیی درو نهادند  هر نیل که بر رخش کشیدند  افسون دلی درو دمیدند  عشقش به دو دستی آب می داد  زو گوهر عشق تاب می داد |

Not only does Majnun have multiple wet-nurses that supply him with the traits of devotion (*vafā*) and kindliness (*dil dūstī-ī*) that come to define his character, but also he is directly nourished in *ʿishq* by an ambiguous third-person singular subject—likely implying the divine, which I have alluded to as “the gardener.” Through milk kinship (*riḍāʿ*), Majnun gains the traits that destine him for exemplarity, transferred from both natural and supernatural actors.[[77]](#footnote-77) It is through such relations that whatever exists of *ʿishq* in Majnun’s self is cultivated, emanating from his own body as well.

These factors of *ʿishq*’s potency and transferability place Majnun in a curious position of limited power as its exemplar. In a fairly dense passage that describes Majnun after he has grown up yet before Layla’s father’s refusal of him, the narrator indicates how Majnun is both empowered and overpowered by *ʿishq* in a series of epithets:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sultan of the throne of morning risers  Commander of the army of criers  Concealed one of the path of kindliness  Captive of the alley of righteousness  Instrument of the singers of Baghdad  Merchant selling to the howling traders  Drummer of the cry of an iron drum  Head monk of the convent of Ephesus  Hidden magician and apparent *dīv*  Harut of the lustful desiring ones  Kay Khosrow without a crown or a throne  Delighter of a thousand naked ones  Land-granter to a militia of ants  Graceful rider on the back of asses  Straw shield of the castles of whisperings  Guard keeper of the unguarded convent[[78]](#footnote-78) | سلطان سریر صبح خیزان  سرخیل سپاه اشک ریزان  متواری راه دلنوازی  زنجیری کوی پاکبازی  قانون مغنیان بغداد  بیاع معاملان فریاد  طبال نفیر آهنین کوس  رهبان کلیسیای افسوس  جادوی نهفته دیو پیدا  هاروت مهوسان شیدا  کیخسرو بی کلاه بی تخت  دل خوش کن صد هزار بی رخت  اقطاع ده سپاه موران  اورنگ نشین پشت گوران  دراجه قلعه های وسواس  دارنده پاس دیر بی پاس |

Ironically, these martial metaphors that depict Majnun as commander show how his army of ants and criers might not be the most successful in actually waging war. His power has magical qualities that the narrator describes with a certain ambivalence—he is both like the fallen angel Hārūt who falls into temptation and teaches illicit magic, and the head monk of the cave of sleepers at Ephesus who, according to the Qurʾān and prophetic lore, sleep for a miraculously long time to escape religious persecution.[[79]](#footnote-79) Both of these senses, however, indicate that Majnun transfers something of the potency of *ʿishq* to others, reinforced through the metaphor of his being an instrument to Baghdad’s singers, singers who historically transmitted his story and who are fictionally alluded to in *Laylī o Majnūn* in the character of Salam Baghdadi who seeks to be an apprentice to Majnun and who brings his poems from the wilderness back to Baghdad.[[80]](#footnote-80) Lacking the typical adornments of sovereignty such as a crown or throne, Majnun nevertheless exudes power over those who, like him, are susceptible to *ʿishq’s* potency.

These factors of *ʿishq*’s proximity to embodiment, its power, and its transferability lead me to my basic definition of *ʿishq* as a force that transforms bodies in *Laylī o Majnūn*. Rather than classifying *Laylī o Majnūn*’s approach to *ʿishq* according to one of the historical discourses of the time, I suggest that the text’s explicit thematization of it plays with multiple registers in order to propose something new. Different characters have different perspectives on *ʿishq*, and often this playing with multiple registers happens through dialogic encounter. Given Majnun’s inherited position as exemplary, I now turn to how his character initially frames *ʿishq* through the bondage vocabulary of contemporary love poetics, which opens the textual pathway for his channeling of *ʿishq* towards a vision of a different kind of world.

**V. Suffering Lovers and Powerful Beloveds: Majnun’s Perspective**

Majnun’s framing of *ʿishq* in the first part of the text is dominated by appeals to bondage through references to the ropes (*rasan*), chains (*zanjīr*), and shackles (*band*). His descriptions likewise make use of highly defined roles for the lover and beloved, which leads to Majnun, as lover, seeing his own suffering behavior as living up to ideals of contemporary love poetics. Majnun’s flights to the wilderness often serve as moments in which he more fully articulates his views, such as in the passage I analyze below from his first flight after Layla’s father has refused Majnun’s father’s request for her in marriage. In a direct appeal to Layla herself, Majnun utilizes the logic of bondage in order to state his position as a lover:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I am mad in manners and character  why then are there chains upon your collar?  Do not throw a rope around your own neck  I am better with a rope on my neck.  Your lock punctured all that the heart had sewn  who has taught you this tearing of clothes?  The heart stealing of your lock is not far  not off like a Hindu, and time is blind.  Do something, oh dear sign of my being  bring me up from what has made me go down  either take my hand from this my lament  or give a hand such that I may kiss it.[[81]](#footnote-81) | دیوانه منم به رای و تدبیر  در گردن تو چراست زنجیر  در گردن خود رسن میفگن  من به باشم رسن به گردن  زلف تو درید هر چه دل دوخت  این جامه دری ورا که آموخت  دل ببردن زلف تو نه زور است  هندو نه که روزگار کور است  کاری بکن ای نشان کارم  زین چه که فرو شدم برآرم  یا دست بگیر ازین فسوسم  یا دست بدار تا ببوسم |

Claiming his own madness, Majnun evokes chains and ropes in order to reimagine the lovers’ roles through bondage imagery. Although Layla has been more directly bound to her home by her father, Majnun insists that she alone has power and that he is the one who is bound, his own madness serving as a kind of confirmation for his request for the literal constrains of chains. Her lock (*zulf*) resembles the lock of *ʿishq* seen in the previous section insofar as it is the locus of her power, and its circularity metonymically confirms his bondage to her. The only way Majnun claims he can be freed from this bondage is with Layla’s permission, and becoming united with the one who holds mastery over his being. By evoking Layla as a sign (*nishān*) of his being, Majnun encapsulates her as the desired object of his speech, and distance from her allows him to perpetuate this logic of bondage. Thus even as Majnun positions himself on the lowly end of this lover-beloved hierarchy, his self-proclaimed role as a suffering lover highlights his own worth in terms of striving for what he claims as ideal.

Majnun not only articulates these ideals, but also performs them with his body. At the end of this speech, Majnun gestures to how his suffering as a lover has already affected his body by causing it to bend and twist in odd ways:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| My foot like two *lams* is accepting bend  My hand like two *yes* is twisted on end  your name as such also bears upon me  for it has two *lams* and two *yes*, Layli.  your *ʿishq* from my heart cannot be taken  and no one can reveal this secret.  With milk this secret came to the body  with life it will be taken back from me.”[[82]](#footnote-82) | پایم چو دو لام خم پذیرست  دستم چو دو یا شکنج گیرست  نام تو مرا چو نام دارد  کاو نیز دو یا دو لام دارد  عشق تو ز دل نهادنی نیست  وین راز به کس گشادنی نیست  با شیر به تن در آمد این راز  با جان به درآید از تنم باز |

Like the Arabic characters *lam* ( ل ) and *ye* ( ي ) that comprise Layla’s name ( ليلى ), Majnun’s foot and hand are bent by his bondage to her. This lettrist appeal shows how Majnun imagines Layla’s power as literally branding him, and how his appearance as a suffering lover lends him the feminized characteristics typical of ʿ*udhrī* lovers. Moreover, this passage highlights how Majnun imagines the suffering role of a lover as something that extends until and culminates in death, which brings the end of his body that acts as the vessel for his expression of *ʿishq*. This foreshadows how Majnun’s perspective on *ʿishq* culminates in ideas of sacrifice and martyrdom similar to early Abbasid conceptions.

Though seemingly giving her power, Majnun’s perspective on *ʿishq* harms Layla by scripting her role as beloved in a way that does not allow for recognition of her own suffering. I explore how the text positions Layla as a fellow, suffering lover in chapter four, and here I simply want to note the demands placed on Layla as beloved by Majnun’s initial perspective on *ʿishq*, a perspective that relies upon the gendered dimensions of courtly approaches inherited from the early Abbasid environment. Several times Majnun’s speech articulates the power dynamics of the lover-beloved relationship through the employment of sharp dualities in lines that alternate between detailing his role and hers.[[83]](#footnote-83) In one notable example shortly after Layla’s perspective is introduced in the text, Layla hears someone saying a poem of Majnun’s from her date garden. This poem repeatedly construes her role as gleeful in contrast to Majnun’s suffering:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Majnun is amidst a wave of blood  And how is Layla, in what condition?  Majnun is always chafing from inside  Layla takes the salt of strength from who?  Majnun is pierced by the white arrow’s thorn  Layla sleeps with such a softness, adorned  Majnun weeps and cries in a thousand laments  Layla contemplates in such cheerfulness  Majnun is branded and has only pain  Layla has spring and roses to her name  Majnun girds himself with necessity  Layla has a face that laughs frequently  Majnun’s heart is pained by separation  Layla is calmed by some other reason[[84]](#footnote-84) | مجنون به میان موج خونست  لیلی به حساب کار چونست  مجنون جگری همی خراشد  لیلی نمک از که می تراشد  مجنون به خدنگ خار سفته ست  لیلی به کدام ناز خفته ست  مجنون به هزار نوحه نالد  لیلی چه نشاط می سگالد  مجنون همه داغ و درد دارد  لیلی چه بهار و ورد دارد  مجنون کمر نیاز بندد  لیلی به رخ که باز خندد  مجنون ز فراق دل رمیده ست  لیلی به چه حجت آرمیده ست |

Majnun’s poem employs a series of images that contrast his brands and pain to Layla’s spring and roses in order to repeatedly emphasize how she, as beloved, does not suffer as he does. The fact that he chafes from inside, here specifically from his liver (*jigar*), while she displays a salty strength conjures up the idea that perhaps it is she who is pouring salt on his wounds. The final line of these harsh contrasts sonically plays with a certain sense of similarity in difference as he describes himself as pained (*ramīde*) while she is calmed (*ārmīde*), gesturing to the reader something of the construction of such harsh dualities. Layla’s quiet tears in response to hearing this poem signals to the reader how she does not embody the role of powerful, gleeful beloved that Majnun assigns her.[[85]](#footnote-85) Majnun’s emphasis on his own suffering alongside his understanding of the lover-beloved relationship results in an inability to comprehend Layla’s position as fellow, suffering lover, a position which remains concealed to him yet exposed to the reader throughout the remainder of the text.

Nevertheless, Majnun’s framing of *ʿishq* critiques societal expectations of ideal masculine behavior in a way that has larger ramifications for imagining a different kind of society writ large. His embodiment of suffering not only places him at odds with associations of masculinity and strength, but also highlights the problematic ways that masculine strength undergirds normative kinship structures. A poignant example of this critique occurs after the local nobleman Nawfal befriends Majnun in the wilderness and offers to help him win Layla back after she has been betrothed to Ibn Salam. The two new friends subsequently engage in battle with Layla’s family, yet Majnun on the battlefield wanders about mourning the losses of the opposing side. When someone asks him about his odd behavior in battle, Majnun explains:

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| --- | --- |
| “When the enemy is the beloved  what is it that my sword could even do?  With an enemy one can fight in blood  with the beloved, how can there be fighting?  From battles come wounds and lacerations  but here all that comes is a calming scent–  when the beloved sends the scent of life  the lover in recompense sends his back.  She sends kohl for anointing me from dust  while I, hitting rocks, what power do I have?  She gave honey to me by her promise  I cannot give vinegar back to her.  From that side comes the hand of the beloved  how could anyone go, passing it by?  The inclination of my heart is there  my heart is there because my life is there.  Dying for the beloved is a duty  she is taking life and I am giving.[[86]](#footnote-86) | گفتا که چو خصم یار باشد  با تیغ مرا چه کار باشد  با خصم نبرد خون توان کرد  با یار نبرد چون توان کرد  از معرکه ها جراحت آید  اینجا همه بوی راحت آید  معشوقه چو بوی جان فرستد  عاشق به عوض همان فرستد  او سرمه فرستد از غبارم  من سنگ زدن چه زهره دارم  او داده به وعده انگبینم  من سرکه دهم روا نبینم  آن جانب دست یار دارد  کس جانب یار چون گذارد  میل دل مهربانم آنجاست  آنجاست دلم که جانم آنجاست  شرطست به پیش یار مردن  زو جان ستدن زمن سپردن |

For Majnun, winning over the beloved in battle is an idea that does not make sense due to his proclamations on her power as well as on the necessity of giving to her rather than taking from her. This implies a critique of a kinship system wherein women are taken by force and/or used for strategic alliance, a system which is most prominently upheld in the text by Layla’s father who subsequently proclaims to Nawfal that he would rather have his daughter put to death than marry a madman who will only hurt his family’s honor. Majnun’s perspective underscores a certain absurdity built into this system and points instead to an imagining of a different kind of relationship between lover and beloved that implies reciprocity (here through the exchange of good scents and honey) even as it gives way to another set of clearly defined roles—the beloved takes life and the lover gives it, and the force of what’s required (*sharṭ*) is redirected inwards.

Yet Majnun’s perspective on *ʿishq* not only critiques these societal structures, but also inspires others to begin to think otherwise. In response to Majnun’s speech on the battlefield, the questioner cries while Majnun dances, signaling both how Majnun’s perspective seriously affects this questioner and how, despite an emphasis on pain, Majnun’s suffering carries an attendant pleasure. This pleasure comes into full view only after Majnun has been questioned, a questioning that shows how his worldview grates against what is normatively expected. Despite its negative effects on Layla, the bondage imagery that Majnun employs in the first half of the text allows for an understanding of the pleasure attendant to his self-proclaimed role of suffering lover to come into view, especially insofar as his position critiques other perspectives on *ʿishq* through dialogue.

**VI. The Power and Pleasures of Sacrifice**

I now turn to two episodes in which Majnun embodies the ideals of a suffering lover. In both episodes, Majnun appeals to bondage as a way of countering what is expected of him and in dialogue escalates these appeals to a desire for martyrdom and sacrifice. The dialogic mode of the narrative poem allows for the reader to see how Majnun consents to bondage, a consent which underscores the pleasures of sacrifice as a way of altering the power dynamics of normative social relations.

Bondage serves as the means through which Majnun rejects his own father’s advice, which overturns one of the most central relationships in the text, that of father and son.[[87]](#footnote-87) Perhaps the most poignant moment of this occurs when Majnun’s father takes him to the Kaʿba to cure him of *ʿishq*, an episode that also prominently features bondage imagery in the *Dīwan* and is one of the main plot points that recurs across different versions of the story. In *Laylī o Majnūn*, this episode occurs after Layla’s father has refused Majnun’s father’s marriage proposal. After consulting his family, Majnun’s father decides that a visit to the Kaʿba might correct his son’s increasingly erratic behavior, and upon their reaching the Kaʿba he states:

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| --- | --- |
| He said, “Son, this is not a place of play  make haste for it is a place of prudence  in circling the Kaʿba grasp its round stone  so that by it you may escape your groans  and say, “Oh god from this foolish matter  grant me success by your salvation.  be merciful and bring me protection  from this ravishment, bring me to the path!  The calamity of *ʿishq* is on me  oh god, from the blight of *ʿishq* make me free!”[[88]](#footnote-88) | گفت ای پسر این نه جای بازیست  بشتاب که جای چاره سازیست  در حلقه کعبه حلقه کن دست  کز حلقه غم بدو توان رست  گو یا رب ازین گزاف کاری  توفیق دهم به رستگاری  رحمت کن و در پناهم آور  زین شیفتگی به راهم آور  دریاب که مبتلای عشقم  آزاد کن از بلای عشقم |

Majnun’s father offers a perspective on *ʿishq* similar to the medical views that I explored in chapter one, with the caveat being that he appeals to religion as the means through which Majnun might be cured of *ʿishq*’s calamity. This request introduces the vocabulary of bondage to the episode through the circling (*ḥalqi*) of the Kaʿba and the grasping of its stone, the second of which is likely a metaphor for comprehending what Majnun’s father perceives as a religious commandment to eschew *ʿishq*. Instructing Majnun with a series of commands, Majnun’s father advises his son according to views that were dominant at the time.

Majnun responds to his father’s demands with laughter, as well as his own, alternative approach. Instead of seeing *ʿishq* as a calamity, Majnun employs the vocabulary of bondage to describe the ways in which *ʿishq* nourishes him:

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| --- | --- |
| Majnun when he heard this speech about *ʿishq*  at first cried and then he laughed about it.  He jumped from his place like an uncoiled snake  hitting the coil of the Kaʿba’s ringlet  while grasping the ring of the Kaʿba’s door  he said, “Today I am the door knocker  I sell my soul in servitude of *ʿishq*  may my ear never be without its ring!  They say go, separate yourself from *ʿishq*  this is not a familiar path to me  I am nourished by *ʿishq* from which I gain strength  if *ʿishq* were to die then I die as well.  My temperament was nourished by *ʿishq* –  may my fortune never be without it![[89]](#footnote-89) | مجنون چون حدیث عشق بشنید  اول بگریست پس بخندید  از جای چو مار حلقه بر جست  در حلقه زلف کعبه زد دست  می گفت گرفته حلقه در بر  کامروز منم چو حلقه بر در  در حلقه عشق جان فروشم  بی حلقه او مباد گوشم  گویند از عشق کن جدایی  این نیست طریق آشنایی  من قوت ز عشق می پذیرم  گر میرد عشق من بمیرم  پرورده عشق شد سرشتم  بی عشق مباد سرنوشتم |

As in the *Dīwan*, Majnun appeals to the similarity between the religious register of being a worshipping servant (*ʿabd*) of the divine, yet here his character clearly articulates *ʿishq* as the word used to describe his loving devotion as well as the thing which has nourished him. Inverting his father’s command, Majnun likens *ʿishq* to the Kaʿba itself in having its own need for circling (*ḥalqi*), which he amplifies through the image of an enslaved person’s earring (*ḥalqi-yi gūsh*).[[90]](#footnote-90) The Kaʿba is likewise compared to a human beloved, signaled through its having a ringlet (*zulf*), and so by analogy Majnun rejects his father’s juxtaposition of *ʿishq* against religion by repeatedly gesturing to their similarities as things that bind.[[91]](#footnote-91) These similarities facilitate Majnun’s own understanding of *ʿishq* as nourishing and strengthening, which resonate with the text’s overarching depiction of it as powerful and transferable.

Majnun then expands upon his own understanding of *ʿishq* in a prayer. Requesting instead that the divine grant him *ʿishq* “at its extremes (*bi ghāyatī*),” Majnun appeals to sacrifice on behalf of the beloved as the next step in showing his devotion and servitude:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| From my life whatever exists of it  take and give to her life as you see fit  if I have become a hair out of grief  I still do not want one hair less from her  May my respectful ear not be freed of  her punishing ring in subjugation  may my cup never be without her wine  may my repute not be without her coin  may my soul be ransomed for her beauty  if she drinks my blood may it be halal  though from anguish I burn like a candle  may my days never be without anguish  may *ʿishq* that is as such I have described  be for me a hundred times multiplied!”[[92]](#footnote-92) | از عمر من آنچه هست برجای  بستان و به عمر او درافزای  گر چه شده ام چو مویی از غم  یک موی نخواهم از سرش کم  از حلقه او به گوشمالی  گوش ادبم مباد خالی  بی باده او مباد جمام  بی سکه او مباد نامم  جانم فدی جمال بادش  گر خون خوردم حلال بادش  گرچه ز غمش چو شمع سوزم  هم بی غم او مباد روزم  عشقی که چنین به جای خود باد  چندانکه بود یکی به صد باد |

As before, Majnun explicates that as a lowly, suffering lover it is his duty to give on behalf of his powerful beloved who is here likened to a sovereign who has control over material goods such as wine and coinage. Appealing to his own anguish, Majnun again references an enslaved person’s earring as well as to the more shocking image of the beloved drinking his own blood that he maintains is halal, signaling her absolute power over him as well as his own yearning for a kind of suffering that gives way to sacrifice. Such acts entail using his body according to his own understanding of *ʿishq*, which he requests to only be multiplied.

Although these appeals clearly gesture towards Majnun’s victimhood, Majnun nevertheless maintains power through regaining control of the definition of *ʿishq*. This happens through a rejection of his father’s curative view—who subsequently proclaims that Majnun is a “a chain of detached bind” (*silsili-yī ki band bigusast*)—and it is through religious metaphors that Majnun articulates the meaning of his own actions and desires. Sacrifice, here coded as a kind of heightened version of willing submission (*islām*), serves as the sanctified means through which Majnun overturns both the authority of his father and of curative approaches to *ʿishq* itself.

In the second episode that I analyze, consent further underscores Majnun’s empowerment through his appeals to sacrifice. This episode begins with Majnun coming across an old woman who parades a poor man about in chains as a way for them both to make money. Much later in the text than the Kaʿba episode, Majnun has by now begun more frequent flights to the wilderness after Nawfal’s attempts to win Layla in battle have failed. Notably, this episode is preceded by two episodes wherein Majnun frees animals from their traps to the chagrin of hunters, which facilitates readerly identification of Majnun with prey as he offers himself as a substitute for the man in chains to the old woman:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Majnun being of utmost broken wings  fell at the old woman’s foot for awhile  “This cord of rope on his neck and those chains  take from this friend and put them onto me  For we are the enraptured and bizarre  He is not deserving of shackles, we are  Make me into a shameful one, disgraceful  here and everywhere that you wish to pull.  Whatever arises from this matter  is for your taking without me as partner.”[[93]](#footnote-93) | مجنون ز سر شکسته بالی  در پای زن اوفتاد حالی  کاین سلسله طناب و زنجیر  بر من نه ازین رفیق برگیر  کآشفته و مستمند ماییم  او نیست سزای بند ماییم  می گردانم به روسیاهی  اینجا و به هر کجا که خواهی  هرچ آن به هم آید از چنین شکاری  بی شرکت من تراست بردار |

More than a rhetorical appeal, Majnun sees the old woman’s material ropes and chains as an opportunity for embodying the suffering required of a lover according to his views. Through a series of reversals, Majnun’s speech encapsulates how this for him is an ennobling act as he claims, in the first-person plural, to be deserving of such shackles. Embedded within what may look disgraceful Majnun claims grandeur, a grandeur that is amplified by his refusal to accept his portion of their earnings. This request likewise highlights reversals in typical social hierarchies, as Majnun, a wealthy, young man, desires to be bound by an old, poor woman, all factors which amplify the degree to which Majnun enacts his ideal of suffering.

The text subsequently reveals how the act of binding is pleasurable for Majnun, even if it is not witnessed as such by all:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| When the old woman saw this such a prey⁠  she became happy at this accounting  and so she removed from that poor friend  the shackle and rope that were tied on him.  She gratified⁠ him in tying him up  transporting the rope around his neck cuffed  clasping and by the shackles freeing him  she was leading him from place to place.  In every place that she reached men saw  some cried looking at him, others guffawed –  the person who was oblivious laughed  the person who was intelligent cried.  Majnun acquiesced to being wounded  with chain on foot and a fetter on neck  when he was reaching the door of a tent  he was bringing out a drunken lament  he was saying “Layla,” falling down on rocks  and while falling on rocks, he was dancing.[[94]](#footnote-94) | چون دید زن این چنین شکاری  شد شاد به این چنین شماری  زآن یار بداشت در زمان دست  آن بند و رسن همه درو بست  بنواخت به بند کردن اورا  می برد رسن به گردن اورا  می بست و ز بند می رهاندش  وز حله به حله می دواندش  هر جا که رسید مردمان دید  بگریست یکی یکی بخندید  خندید کسی که بود غافل  بگریست کسی که بود عاقل  او داده رضا به زخم خوردن  زنجیر به پای و غل به گردن  چون بر در خیمه ای رسیدی  مستانه سرود بر کشیدی  لیلی گفتی و سنگ خوردی  در خوردن سنگ رقص کردی |

Mirroring the preceding episodes’ hunters, the old woman sees Majnun as prey, yet the narrator indicates Majnun’s own satisfaction in being shackled—the old woman “gratified” (*navākht*) him by tying him up, and the shackles set him free. Despite the pain of the chains and of falling on rocks, Majnun’s dancing signals the attendant pleasure of his state. As with his laughter at his father, this dancing occurs precisely at the moment when there is a temporary shift in normative roles. Rather than winning the beloved in battle with Nawfal, Majnun here actively consents to a passive position, a position which replays over and over the moment of separation. This positionality leads to pleasure, here in the form of dancing, as Majnun is briefly removed from the pressures of linear time.[[95]](#footnote-95) By embodying his ideal, Majnun temporarily alters societal pressures to “grow up” and be otherwise, and experiences pleasure in returning to the pain of the moment of separation. Given the societal constraints that led to separation, Majnun’s temporary pleasure moreover alludes to the promise of a society structured otherwise.

The reference to two different groups of onlookers moreover shows how the text pauses and attempts to guide the reader into one response over another. While underscoring a kind of absurdity to Majnun’s appearance, the text urges a sympathetic response through highlighting those who cried in response to this sight as intelligent (*ʿāqil*). Though this response indicates some kind of deeper consideration of Majnun’s state, it likewise makes him into a kind of object of pity. I examine in more detail how the employment of multiple perspectives draws Majnun’s exemplarity into question in the next chapter, bringing it to attention here to show how the text works dialogically and does not merely affirm Majnun’s approach to *ʿishq* as the only or best approach.

Still bound, Majnun and the old woman approach Layla’s homeland, a place which inspires a long soliloquy from Majnun about his suffering. Now that he is able to show his beloved his embodied bondage in a way that manifests dedication to his ideals, Majnun expounds on sacrifice and martyrdom as their ultimate and proper manifestation. Addressing Layla, he states:

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| --- | --- |
| I bear the orders, you the commander  I am disciplined by what you confer.  Do not look at me in combat with swords  before you I am like a prisoner…  Do not send me mercy for a long life  a hand upon my head do not alight  in this martyrdom my hope is for this –  you bring a hand on my head in pretense.  If you bring down the sword upon this head  you make a sacrifice by this fortune.  I consider myself like Ishmael  Ishmael’s follower for its my star.  Since the candle of my heart is aglow  if you behead me there is no sorrow  a candle burns its head in utmost pain  it’s calmed when its head is cut off again. | من حکم کش و تو حکم رانی  تأدیب کنم چنانک دانی  منگر به مصاف و تیغ و تیرم  در پیش تو بین که چون اسیرم  در زندگیم درود نآری  دستی به سرم فرود نآری  در کشنگیم امید آن هست  کآری به بهانه بر سرم دست  گر تیغ روان کنی برین سر  قربان خودم کنی بدین در  اسماعیلی ز خود بسنجم  اسماعیلیم اگر برنجم  چون شمع دلم فروغناکست  گر باز بری سرم چه باکست  شمع از سر درد سر کشیدن  آساید وقت سر بریدن |

Consent undergirds this performance of bondage, which Majnun affirms by referencing an Islamic understanding of Ishmael’s consent to being sacrificed in the Abraham parable. Like Ishmael, Majnun indicates his willingness to use his body by whatever means necessary. Sacrifice gives way to martyrdom, which affirms Majnun’s desire to embody his ideals even in death. Notably, despite the fact that Majnun claims to be commanded by Layla, in this passage he commands her on how to act, once again showing how his ideals require a certain behavior from her as well as how he maintains power rhetorically. His use of his body moreover empowers him even as he is the sacrificial victim by showing the extent to which he embraces the ideals of a suffering lover.

This episode concludes with an external attestation to Majnun’s position of power as he tears off the chains and flees back to the Najd wilderness, a shocking conclusion that the text processes through a few different perspectives:

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| --- | --- |
| He spoke, then darted forth like an arrow  becoming insane, he ripped off the chains⁠  he took dignity from grief’s onsalught  an abounding wave he went to the wild.  He came to the Najd and he was wailing  casting forth an arrow upon himself.  His people when they heard the news of him  went out and then saw the unseeable.  Both mother and father in seeing thus  became truly hopeless for him at once  he did not become calm with anyone  deciding on this they left him alone.  He, in both broken and blooming places,  only remembered Layla’s sign and name.  When anyone spoke to him other things  he hit himself, fled, or he was fainting. | این کفت و زجای جست چون تیر  دیوانه شد و برید زنجیر  از کوهه غم شکوه بگرفت  چون کوهه گرفت کوه بگرفت  بر نجد شد و نفیر می زد  بر خود ز طپانچه تیر می زد  خویشان که ازو خبر شنیدند  رفتند و ندیدنی بدیدند  هم مادر و هم پدر در آن کار  نومید شدند ازو به یکبار  با کس چو نمی شد آرمیده  گفتند به ترک آن رمیده  او را شده در خراب و آباد  جز نام ونشان لیلی از یاد  هر کس که جز این سخن بدو گفت  یا تن زد یا گریخت یا خفت |

Supplied with a kind of mad super-strength, Majnun’s ripping of the chains not only highlights the performative quality of his self-debasing but also signals the metamorphosis of his character. Instead of living within societal constraints, Majnun flees to the wilderness wherein his desire for a different kind of world will be recast amongst the animals. With this metamorphosis, the narrative takes time to comment on a variety of reactions—his people stand in awe as they marvel at the wondrous and unseen (*nadīdanī*) whereas his mother and father succumb to a state of more permanent hopelessness. This holds out the potential for the reader that there is something yet to learn from Majnun even as his behavior eschews parental concerns, which, as we have seen, are informed by a very different understanding of *ʿishq* than his own.

In this chapter, I have shown how Majnun enacts bondage as a way of performing a heightened level of commitment to his ideals. As an inherited figure, Majnun’s initial perspective in *Laylī o Majnūn* redeploys the gendered dimensions of courtly approaches to love that ascribe highly differentiated roles to a suffering poet-lover and his beloved.[[96]](#footnote-96) Yet despite its negative effects on Layla, Majnun’s enactment of this role critiques expectations of ideal masculine behavior and points towards a reimagining of kinship relations through the logic of sacrifice. *Laylī o Majnūn* further amplifies the pleasures of this reimagining by highlighting Majnun’s consent to sacrifice, both through an Islamic understanding of the Abraham parable as well as in his choice to become literally bound by an old woman. Laughing and dancing, Majnun evades his father’s and his society’s expectations to assimilate to the marriage economy, and instead enacts embodied forms of bondage that allow for a return to the moment of separation and for a pause in the expectation for him to “grow up” and be otherwise. For Majnun, sacrifice articulates a different way of being bound to others than familial expectations of him as a young man.

As a force that transforms bodies, *ʿishq* moreover transforms Majnun himself. Ripping the chains, Majnun’s escape from the old woman’s bondage is mirrored, textually, by his more permanently relocation to the Najd desert to pursue a life amongst the animals—a move the text explores by describing Majnun as wild (*waḥsh*) and as a loosened rope (*rasan gusasti*). Outside society, Majnun breaks with bondage vocabulary as the primary way of describing *ʿishq*, and instead begins to redefine *ʿishq* as a substance that lies beyond dualities. This new perspective resonates with contemporary Persianate mystical discourse, and in the next chapter I analyze how *Laylī o Majnūn* plays with transcendental meanings of *ʿishq* only to come back to an emphasis on the significance of an approach to *ʿishq* that is not so dyadic for the material world. Alongside his animal companions, Majnun creates a society that reimagines kinship relations, yet which marks him as definitively cut-off from human interaction. His self-enacted suffering continues to the point of death, a moment which looms behind the appeals to martyrdom seen in this chapter and which I explore in the next by analyzing what happens when Majnun as his bonds to society loosen and, eventually, snap.

1. . Ibn Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Zahra, edited by* A. R. Nykl and Ibrahim Tuqan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932) 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . There I discuss how ideas from Galenic medicine made their way into medieval Islamic treatises on love. It is worth reiterating Joseph Bell’s comment that “since most writers on love were not professional philosophers, Greek influence reached them rather indirectly, often after considerable distortion of the original ideas.” See Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . Possible etymologies of the term *ʿudhrī* include a relation to the *‘Udhra* family and/or a thematic association with virginity (*‘udhra)*.Common names associated with this style are Jamīl Buthayna, Kuthayyir ‘Azza, and Majnun Laylā. Given that there is no historical evidence of these poets’ lives, Ruqayya Khan and Renate Jacobi have detailed the ways in which *al-ḥubb al-‘uḍhrī* (*ʿudhrī* love) represents a later Abbasid imagining of Bedouin society. See Khan, *Bedouin and ‘Abbāsid Cultural Identities: The Arabic Majnun Laylā Story* (New York: Routledge, 2020) 49-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Drawing on the work of Beatrice Greundler and others, Khan argues that the early Abbasids fashioned “the Bedouin” as a literary type that carried “three predominant traits: Arabic or Arab; nomadic or of the desert; and ‘rustically pure’ and/or ‘playfully wily or wise’ with the latter also at times polemically shading into the ‘pagan’ and ‘irreligious.’” Though I agree with this prevalence of characterizing a “Bedouin” type, I am not as convinced that Abbasid literati always or primarily related to this type in a ludic fashion, as it seems their appeals to ʿudhrī lovers additionally offer an authoritative source-base that helped counter a growing corpus of medical literature based on Galenic medicine. See Khan, 12-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . The *Dīwan Ash*ʿ*ār Majnun Banī* ʿ*Amr Ma*ʿ*a Ba*ʿ*ḍ-i Aḥwāl-ihi* (*The collection of poems of Majnun of the family of ‘Amr and some of his states*, referred to as Dīwan for short) is roughly twice the size of the section on Majnun in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs) of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967), and is a bit of a misnomer as it contains much prose that contextualizes poetic citations. Although the earliest manuscript of the Dīwan is relatively late (1263), As’ad Khairallah has argued that its transmitter al-Walībī may likewise be fictitious given internal textual anachronisms. I follow Khairallah’s approach of thinking of the Dīwan’s “universality and popular appeal,” maintaining that the edition based on the earliest manuscripts represents a collection that was likely continuously added to over time and that reflects the breadth of popularly circulating material. See Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry: An Interpretation of the Maǧnūn Legend* (Beirut, Wiesbaden: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1980) 57-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . With the rise of Persian local dynasties such as the Buyyids, Taherids, and Samanids and the decline of actual power held by the Abbasid caliphal seat in Baghdad, Persian was slowly adopted as the language of the courts. The major impetus came with Ismail Samani whose widespread empire used Persian as a form of self-legitimization, and patronized the earliest Persian court poets. When the Turkic Ghaznavid empire took over and extended much of its territory, they continued the practice of patronizing Persian letters, which became standard for many Turkic dynasties that followed and was employed at Seljuk, Shirvanshah, Khwarazmshah, and Ghurid courts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Dick Davis, Bo Utas, and Thomas Hägg have argued that long-standing contact between Greek and Persian literary spheres created a domain of shared motifs that can been seen in Greek novels and many new Persian romances. ʿOnṣūrī’s (d. 1039) Vāmiq o ʿAdhrā is exemplary of this exchange, though only partially preserved. While recognition of this broader network is important for reorganizing literary history, I likewise think it is valuable to recognize religio-cultural discourses on love that inform each work’s linguistic universe. For more on Greek-Persian exchanges, see Utas and Hägg, *The Virgin and Her Lover: Fragments of an Ancient Greek Novel and a Persian Epic Poem* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 1-22 and Davis, *Panthea’s Children: Hellenistic Novels and medieval Persian romances* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2002) 7-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . Cross points to a shared “grammar” or “intellectual superstructure” of “the transregional networks of northern Europe, the Mediterranean basin, the Levant and Mesopotamia, the Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa, Anatolia and the Caucuses, Iran and Afghanistan, the northern Indian subcontinent, and Transoxania” that contributes to romance’s rise as a genre that makes use of Helleno-Abrahamic thought to probe the boundaries of the self and the Other. See Cross, *Love at a Crux: The New Persian Romance in a Global Middle Ages,*  forthcoming, 16-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . Evidence of material for stories set in pre-Islamic Iran, such as Vīs o Ramīn or Niẓāmī’s Khusraw o Shīrīn prior to Firdawsī’s Shahnama remains scant. Moreover, I maintain that *Laylī o Majnūn* serves as a central cultural narrative for many Islamic societies due to its harkening back to the formative period of Islam. For more information on pre-Islamic Iranian source material see Davis, “The Problem of Ferdowsī’s Sources,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 116, no. 1, 48-58. For more on the reception history of Laylī o Majnūn see A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, “Leyli o Majnun,” *Encyclopedia Iranica,* online edition, 2009, available at https://iranicaonline.org/articles/leyli-o-Majnun-narrative-poem (accessed on 16 October 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . M. Arkoun, “ʿIs̲h̲ḳ”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ddited by: P. Bearman et al. Consulted online on 17 August 2021 <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\_islam\_SIM\_3623> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Khan describes the ways in which Majnun’s character flaunts social norms associated with honor by combining love poetry (*tashbīb*) with satire (*hijā’*), arguing that the poetry comments upon rather than overturns the marital system. See Khan, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . Eve Sedgewick highlights how homosociality exists on a historically variable continuum with homoeroticism, and that male homosexual desire does not have “a primary or necessary relationship to misogyny,” an argument which she flags as homophobic. In discussing *ʿudhrī* poetry’s homosocial dimensions, I do not mean to imply that one form of desire replaces another but rather that *ʿudhrī* poetry gives evidence of a concomitant form of male bonding through poetic rivalry. See Sedgewick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . As detailed in the introduction, I draw from Julie Orlemanski’s “hermeneutic conception of fictionality” that “assumes its determination in encountering the record of past thought and action.” In Niẓāmī’s case, I maintain that his introductory comments to Laylī o Majnūn serve as a deliberate undermining of his sources in a way akin to Arabic authors’ deliberate undermining of the isnād (chain of transmission). Though this is not the only marker of Laylī o Majnūn’s fictionality (others might include the perspectives of narratorial onlookers, dream accounts, and character interiority), it highlights inventiveness and indifference to accurate recollection. See Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages,” in *New Literary History* Volume 50, Number 2 (Spring 2019): 143-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . Historically, there have been different interpretations of the Qurʾānic version of the Abraham parable. Q 37:100-112 leaves it ambiguous as to which son (Ishmael or Isaac) was to be sacrificed by Abraham. My emphasis on consent is based on Majnun’s appeals to Ishmael (Ismail) as well as the fact that in the Qurʾān, unlike in Genesis 22, Abraham has a conversation with his son about the impending sacrifice. For a comparative discussion, see M. Shahid Alam, “Ishmael and Isaac: An Essay on the Divergent Moral Economies of the Qurʾān and Torah,” in *Islamic Studies* Vol. 51, no. 2 (summer 2012): 139-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971) xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . Giffen discusses how theory is not a term the authors use themselves, but argues that a loose application of it (modeled on Nelson’s *Renaissance Theory of Love*) is more accurate to describe these works in totality than “philosophy” or “art” of love, terms which she claims too readily describe the content as either conceptual or practical in nature. See Giffen, xv-xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . See footnote 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . Renate Jacobi, “Time and Reality in Nasīb and Ghazal,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 16 (1985): 16-17. Certainly there are exceptions to such generalizations, and poets such as Dhu al-Rūmma (c. 735), dwell in remembering the beloved in ways that Michael Sells has likened to ʿ*udhrī* poetry, and whose work is in fact cited by Ibn Qutayba as similar to Majnun’s.See Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classical Arabian Odes by* ʿ*Alqama, Shanfarā, Labīd,* ʿ*Antara, al-A*ʿ*sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989) 68 and Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Shiʻr wa al-Shu’arāʼ aw Tạbaqāt Al-Shuʻarāʼ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʻIlmīyah, 1985) 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . The *muʿallaqāt* (suspended odes) are traditionally regarded to have been winning poems of an annual poetic contest held near Mecca, subsequently embroidered on cloth and suspended from the Kaʿba*,* and scholars such as J. Monroe have implemented the Parry-Lord theory of oral-formulaic composition as an alternative approach. Historiographical issues continue for poetry retroactively dated to the Umayyad period (661-750) due to a scarcity of texts. On issues of attribution of the *muʿallaqāt,* see Abdulla el-Tayib, “Pre-Islamic Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 111-113 and J. Monroe, “Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 3 (1972): 1-53. On the fragmented reception of Umayyad texts, see Khan,34. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . Stetkeyvch highlights how the genre of Arabic literary biography combined anecdotes (*akhbār*) and genealogies (*ansāb*) along with excerpts of poetry to construct these personae. Though debates about authenticity continue to varying degrees, Stetkevych notes how attributions often rely more on the popular and literary imagination as evidenced by the genre of literary biographies. See Stetkeyvch, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1993) 124-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. . Jāḥiẓ refers to a group of legal scholars called the “Ḥashwīya,” (from *ḥashw*, common people) who have historically been associated with traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) that opposed Muʿtazili doctrine and who share with the Hanbalis an insistence on a literal interpretation of the sacred text. For more on the Ḥashwīya, see A. S. Halkin, “Hashwiya,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 54, No 1 (Mar 1934), 1–29. Giffen also notes that the *qiyān* were also a popular subject for other ninth-century authors such as al-Washshā*ʾ* and al-Sarakhsī. See Giffen, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. . ويسمَّى المولع بذلك من الرجال الزِّير المشتَّق من الزيارة‏.‏

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    “Someone mad in love (*mūla*ʿ) as such from amongst men was called a visitor (*zīr*), which is derived from the visit (*zīyāra*).” Jāḥiẓ, “Kitāb al-Qīyān,” in *Rasāʼil Al-Jāḥiẓ* vol. 1*,* edited by Muhammad Basil ʻUyun al-Sud and ʻUbayd Allah ibn Hassan (Beirut: Manshūrāt Muḥammad ʻAlī Bayḍūn, Dār al-Kutub al- ʻIlmīyah, 2000) 114. I have at times referenced the translation in Colville, *Sobriety and Mirth: A Selection of the Shorter Writings of al-Jāḥiẓ* (London: Kegan Paul Limited, 2002) 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. . Khan points to historical conflations between the terms *ʿarab* and *bādiya* (steppe/desert), such as Ibn Khaldūn’s (d. 1406) definition that “the ʿarab are a section of… the people of the *bādiya*, characterized by the importance of genealogical relations.” See Khan, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. . الاحاديث المولدة في شأن العشاق في القلوب والاكباد والاحشاء والزفرات والحنين وفي التدليه والتوليه ومتى تسعد الدمعة ومتى يورب العين الجمود

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    Jāḥiẓ, “*Risāla fi al-*ʿ*ishq wa al-Nisā*ʾ,” in *Majmūʻat Rasāʼil*. al-Ṭabʻah 1. (Cairo: Maṭbaʻat al-Taqaddum, 1906) 167. Another version of this kind of empirical observation in the Kitāb al-Qiyān:

    فلم نر أحداً منهم يسقم بدنه ولا تتلف روحه من حبّ بلده ولا ولده وإن كان قد يصيبه عند الفراق لوعةٌ واحتراق‏.‏ وقد رأينا وبلغنا عن كثير ممن تلف وطال جُهده وضناه بداء العشق‏.‏

    —

    “We did not see anyone among them becoming ill in his body nor being destroyed in his spirit from love of his country or son even if lovesickness and burning pierces him at the time of separation. And we have seen and given an account of many of those who are destroyed by the disease of *ʿishq* after long strife and grief.” Jāḥiẓ, “Kitāb al-Qīyān,” 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. . والعشق داءٌ لا يملك دفعه كما لا يستطاع دفع عوارض الأدواء إلاّ بالحمية

    Jāḥiẓ, “Kitāb al-Qīyān,” 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. . ولو ملك أيضاً صرف الأغذية واحترس بالحمية لم يملك ضرر تغيرُّ الهواء ولا اختلاف الماء

    —

    “And even if he took control over rationing food and guarded his diet, he still would not be in control of the harms caused by changes in weather and differences of water.” Jāḥiẓ, “Kitāb al-Qīyān,” 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. . والمثل السائر ان الهوى يعمى و يصم فالعشق يقتل

    —

    Jāḥiẓ, “*Risāla fi al-*ʿ*ishq wa al-Nisā*ʾ,”166.

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    وداء العشق وعمومه في جميع البدن بحسب منزلة القلب من أعضاء الجسم‏.‏‏

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    “The disease of ʿ*ishq* and its pervasiveness in all of the body is due to the home of the heart in respect to the limbs of the body.” See Jāḥiẓ, “Risāla al-Qiyān,” 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. . الحب الذي هو أصل الهوى والهوى الذي يتفرع منه العشق والعشق الذي يهيم له الانسان على وجهه أو يموت كمدا على فراشه

    —

    Khan discusses similarities between hāma and the idea of errancy as this phrase is repeatedly deployed in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*; Jāḥiẓ moreover repeats this sentiment by stating that the “lover is the one who wanders for his beloved (*al-ʿāshiq al-hāʾim bi-ʿashīqatihi*). See Jāḥiẓ, “Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisāʾ,” 161-163 and Khan, 131-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. . وانما العشق اسم لما فضل عن المقدار الذي اسمه حب وليس كل حب يسمى عشقا

    —

    *“*ʿ*Ishq* is a name for what exceeds the scope of that which is called love and not all kinds of love are called ʿ*ishq*.” Jāḥiẓ references two comparisons for thinking about ʿ*ishq*’s excess, stating that the relationship between ʿishq and ḥubb is similar to that between extravagance *(saraf)* and generosity *(jūd*), as well as between avarice (*bukhl*) and thriftiness (*iqtiṣād*). See “Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisāʾ,” 161-162.

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    فالعشق يتركب من الحبّ والهوى والمشاكلة والإلف

    —

    Jāḥiẓ, “Risāla al-Qiyān,” 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. . ولذة المتعاشقين راكدة للأبد مقيمة غير ظاعنة

    —

    Jāḥiẓ, “Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisāʾ,” 163. This usage of dual active participle to describe lovers (*mutaʿāshiqīn)* is rare to my knowledge, and seems to correspond with Jāḥiẓ’s discussion in *Kitāb al-Qiyān* that *ʿishq* affects the beloved too, but that it rarely affects both parties equally. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. . Although he writes in the defense of women and describes the learned disposition of qiyān in particular, Jāḥiẓ nevertheless makes recourse to what he claims as inherent weakness and jealousy of women in ways that further preclude their inclusion from the category of suffering lovers. See Colville, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. . Khan draws on the work of Willem Raven to argue for the popularity of this work due to the evidence of Greek inscriptions from it on insignia rings. Giffen moreover records that there are a number of literary traditions describing how Ibn Dāwūd was asked by someone in the street about a line or verse included in the Kitāb al-Zahra. See Khan, 14-15, and Giffen, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. . Ibn Dāwūd, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. . Jennifer Tobkin has argued that Ibn Dāwūd’s poetry is not about erotic love, but brotherhood (*ikhāʾ*), casting doubt on the biographical tradition which she claims has overshadowed the poetry. For my purposes, the biographical tradition amplifies the theme of martyrdom present in *Kitāb al-Zahra* and the plausibility of Ibn Dāwūd’s beloved being a male friend remains open, resonating with early modern tendencies to write of male-male love in Islamic milieus. See Tobkin, “Literary Themes of the Poetry of Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣfahānī in Kitāb al-Zahra,” (The Catholic University of America, 2011) 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. . أول ذلك ادخال الضيم على مروءته و استشعار الذلة لمن أطاف بعشيقته

    —

    “The first thing *ʿishq* does is cause damage to a man’s honor (*murū*ʾ*a* ) and make him feel submissive as he encircles his beloved.”

    Suzanne Stetkevych, Stefan Sperl, and others have explored the ways in which the *mu*ʿ*allaqāt* poet’s masculinity hinges upon embodying a communalist ethos of *murūʾa* (manliness)—a term akin to the Latin *virtus* as it combines manliness with the ability to provide for a kinship group, which is often associated with the final boast (*fakhr*) of an ode (*qaṣīda*). Sperl highlights how an “anthropocentric worldview internalized by the tribal ethos of *murū*ʾ*a* (manliness) is countered by the Qurʾān’s own ethos of hospitality, which rearticulates the actions of the generous hero (*karīm*) as winning reward in the afterlife, while Stetkevych describes the articulation of *murū*ʾ*a* as built into the bipartite or tripartite structure of the *qaṣīda* itself, which ritually allows the speaker to undertake a kind of rite of passage as he sacrifices lost love for the greater good of the collective. See Jāḥiẓ, “Risāla fi al-ʿishq wa al-Nisāʾ,” 161; Sperl, “The Qurʾān and Arabic Poetry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qurʾānic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 402-403 and Stetkevych, 4-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. . قال جالينوس العشق من فعل النفس وهي كامنة في الدماغ والقلب والكبد وفي الدماغ ثلاثة مساكن التخييل وهو في مقدم الرأس والفكر وهو في وسطه والذكر وهو في موخره وليس يكمل لأحد اسم عاشق إلا حتى اذا فارق من يعشقه.

    —

    “Galen said that *ʿishq* is an activity of the soul and it is hidden in the brain and heart and liver and in the brain it has three imaginary homes: in the front of the head, ideas that are in the middle, and memory that is in the back, and one cannot entirely be called an *ʿ*āshiq unless and until one is separated from the one he loves.” See Ibn Dāwūd, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. . Ibn Dāwūd’s twenty-sixth chapter, for example, is titled “what is created by separation except for the punishment of the lovers (*mā khuliqa al-firāq ilā li-taʿdhīb al-ʿushshāq*). The figure of the suffering lover (*ʿāshiq*, pl. *ʿushshāq*) moreover stays relevant in later treatises, such as Jaʿfar ibn Aḥmad al-Sarraj’s (d. 1106) *Maṣāriʿ al-ʿushshāq* (The Destruction of the Lovers) and works modeled on it. See Ibn Dāwūd, 2 and Giffen 25-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. . العقل عند الهوى أسير والشوق عليهما أمير

    —

    Ibn Dāwūd, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. . Khan has discussed how Ibn Ḥazm employs a mixture of words to declare that the only kind of love that lasts is “the love of true passion (*maḥabbat al-*ʿ*ishq al-ṣaḥīḥ).* In regards to Ibn ‘Arabī’s collection, he mentions pairs of ʿudhrī lovers three times throughout, most notably at the end of poem eleven after a proclamation of universal love that heightens their symbolic value:

    أدين بدين الحب أني توجهت

    ركايبه فالدين ديني وإيماني

    لنا أشوة في بشر هند و أختها

    و قيس و ليلى ثم مى و غيلان

    —

    “I profess the religion of love my heart betakes  
    Wherever love’s caravan turns, that is my religion and my faith

    We have a pattern in Bishr and Hind and her sister

    And Qays and Lubná, Mayya and Ghaylán”

    See Khan, 70 and Ibn al-ʻArabī, *Tarjumān Al-ashwāq* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlá, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. . Of Ibn Qutayba’s sixteen extant works, the *Kitāb al-Shi‘r wa al-Shu‘arā* is one of the earliest attempts at using the methodology of Islamic biographical literature (*ṭabaqāt*) for literary figures. This work is a chronologically arranged poetic anthology that covers over two hundred poets, from the pre-Islamic period through the ninth century and it includes the earliest historical documentation of anecdotes surrounding the story of Laylā and Majnun. Entries are sorted according to the poet’s name and within each entry snippets of poetry are recorded alongside reports (*akhbār*) from various chains of reliable narrators (*isnād*). This *isnād*-style of recording poetry was methodologically similar to *ḥadīth* literature (collections of sayings of the prophet Muhammad) in its desire to maintain a sense of historicity and authenticity attached to the reports, although the content of the reports themselves were not as legally binding and often adopted a literary sensibility. For more on Ibn Qutayba, see Lowry, “Ibn Qutayba,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Volume 311: Arabic Literary Culture*, ed. Michael Cooperson, Shawkat M. Toora and Roger Allen (Detroit: Gale Research Inc, 2005) 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. . Notably, an anonymous speaker’s encounter with Layla in this earliest source includes poetic attributions to her as well. Yet unlike Majnun, her speech is cut short by the speaker’s questioning of her own non-normative behavior of crying and fainting as the speaker asks “do you not fear God (*mā ta-taqīna Āllah*)?” Although Layla’s position as a fellow poet-lover is thus represented, it is not thoroughly explored. See Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Shiʻr wa al-Shu’arāʼ aw Tạbaqāt Al-Shuʻarāʼ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʻIlmīyah, 1985) 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. . The only exception in terms of length is the entry on Kuthayyir ʿAzza, which Asad Khairallah notes includes panegyrics and political poetry in addition to love poetry. See Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry: An Interpretation of the Majnun Legend* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländishen Gesellschaft, 1980) 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. . Ibn Qutayba, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. . Ibn Qutayba, 374. These couplets are consistent across the Arabic material and can be found in the *Dīwan*, 52-53 and in al-Isḅahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Muʼassasah al-Misrīyah al-ʻĀmmah lil-Taʼlīf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Tibāʻah wa-al-Nashr, 1963) 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. . ولا يعقل شيئا الا ان تذكر له ليلى فاذا ذكرت ثاب وتحدث عنها ولا يسقط حرفا

    —

    A similar anecdote occurs as the anonymous speaker who meets Layla describes Majnun to her-

    —

    يهيم في تلك الفيافي ويكون مع الوحش لا يعقل ولا يفهم الا أن تذكر له ليلى فيبكي وينشد أشعاراً يقولها فيها

    —

    “He wanders in that desert with the beasts not comprehending or understanding anything except when Layla is recalled to him and then he cries and recites poetry recalling her in it.” See Ibn Qutayba, 374-375. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. . Majnun’s friend is described as “a youth from the tribe (*fatā min al ḥayy*),” indicating a similarity in age that likely reflects a similarity in disposition. See Ibn Qutayba, 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. . Ibn Qutayba, 378-379. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. . Eve Sedgwick notes how homosocial bonds, when developed within a world of heterosexuality, often resemble not brotherhood but instead a form of rivalry that results in relationships of mastery and subordination. Given the gendered breakdown of lovers as masculine and beloved as feminine, classical *ʿudhrī* poetry builds a world based on implicit heterosexuality wherein such competitive homosocial bonds thrive. See Sedgewick, 45-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. . The gazelle in Arabic and Persian poetry is often compared to the beloved, and can symbolize both graceful and powerful aspects of beauty. On poetic examples of this comparison, see J.C. Bürgel, “The Lady Gazelle and Her Murderous Glances,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 20, no. 1 (March, 1989): 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. . وقال : والله لا حدثت العرب أني زوجت عاشقاً

    —

    Majnun Laylā and Abū Bakr Wālabī, *Dīwān Ashʻār Majnun Banī ʻĀmir Maʻa Baʻḍ Aḥwālih*. edited by and Huda Waʼil Amir (Beirut: al-Muʼassasah al-ʻArabīyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2011) 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. . Dīwān, 56-57. The first three couplets are also quoted, nearly verbatim, in Ibn Qutayba, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. . See Q 25:74 and 32:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. . أتوب إليك يا رحمن مما

    علمت فقد تظاهرت الذنوب

    فأما من هوى ليلى وحبي

    زيارتها فإني لا أتوب

    —

    “I repent to you oh Rahman from what

    I did and sins were a lot

    But from passion of Layla and my love

    Of visiting her indeed I do not repent.”

    This slightly altered iteration of Majnun’s speech at the Kaʿba likewise shows the various words used for passion (hawā) and love (ḥubb). See Dīwān, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. . دخل كثير بن عبد الرحمن على عبد الملك بن مروان وقد قعد للشرب فقال له يا كثير هل رأيت أعشق منك

    —

    “Kuthayyir ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥman entered ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān’s residence and sat for drinking. ʿAbd al-Malik then said to him, ‘Oh Kuthayyir, have you seen anyone who had more ʿ*ishq* than you (*ā*ʿ*shaqa minka*)?’” See Dīwān, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. . فيا عز لو أشكو الذي قد أصابني

    إلى ميت في قبره لبكى ليا

    ويا عز لو أشكو الذي قد أصابني

    إلى جبل صعب الذرى لانحنى ليا

    قال: أخبرك يا أمير المؤمنين بينما أسير في بعض البوادي في يوم شديد الحر إذ رفع لي شخص في مفازة ليس بها أنيس فذعرت منه ثم دنوت منه فإذا أنا بإنسان حسن الوجه جعد الشعر فقلت له إنسي أنت أم جني؟ فقال بل إنسي.

    —

     Oh ‘Azza if I complain of that which wounds me

    Even a dead man in his grave cries for me

    Oh ‘Azza if I complain of that which wounds me

    Even a mountain of difficult top inclines to me

    Kuthayyir said, “Oh commander of the believers, one day when I was walking at midday on a very hot day, a person appeared to me in the desert who did not seem sociable (*anīs*) and so I was frightened of him. Then I neared him and by god the beauty of his face and curls of his hair! I said to him, “Are you a human or a jinn?” And he said, “I am a man.” See Dīwān, 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. . Dīwān, 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. . Description (*waṣf*) is a mode of Arabic poetry that typically served as part of an ode (*qaṣīda*), but that also existed as a genre in its own right. On the usage of waṣf in love poetry, see Stephen P. Hopkins, “Extravagent Beholding: Love, Ideal Bodies, and Particularity,” in *History of Religions,* Vol. 47, No. 1 (August 2007) 20-32; as a genre of its own, see Sumi, Motoyoshi Sumi, *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry: Waṣf, Ekphrasis, and Interarts Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. . Dīwān, 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. . Dīwān, 101-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. . Willem Floor and Hasan Javadi, The Heavenly Rose Garden: A History of Shirvan and Daghestan (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2009) 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. . Matthew Holtham notes that, despite there being little biographical information on Niẓāmī’s life, “the fact that he spent his life in his hometown of Ganja, as well as his practice of 40-day seclusions are cited as reasons for his inclusion in Sufi tabaqat literature, such as Jami’s Nafahat al-uns,” and that he is well regarded amongst the Chisti order in India. See Holtham, “Seeing God with Both Eyes: Asceticism, Ascension, and Poetry in the Makhzan al-Asrar of Niẓāmī Ganjavi (d. 1209),” PhD diss., (The University of North Carolina, 2009) 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. . This is part of a lengthy exchange wherein King Akhistan I purportedly tells Niẓāmī that “Turk-like speech is not agreeable to us (*tukāni sukhan sazā-yi mā nīst*)” and that those who are born of “high lineage (*nasab-i buland*)” should stick to “high speech (*sukhan-i buland*).” Other than speaking to the Shirvanshah’s local rivalry with the Seljuks, these comments suggest the privileging of *Laylī o Majnūn* due to its genealogical origins and the desire to connect this small, local dynasty to an Islamic cultural reference point. See Sarvatiyan, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. . Sarvatiyan, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. . Sarvatiyan, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. . There is no current consensus on the levels of the text’s narratorial discourse, presented in the present tense, and its story, narrated in the past. Meisami argued that Neẓāmī’s fictional narrator should generally be viewed as unreliable, acquiring “the status of another character, providing yet another perspective on the action in the poem,” while Seyed-Gohrab asserted that Neẓāmī’s narrator is “external,” while noting shifts between first and third person as he states “The narrator uses the first and the third person to narrate his story. The commentator’s first-person commentaries and monologues give the poem a more direct tenor and dramatic effect, whereas most events are narrated in the third person. To create more attachment between the reader and specific characters such as Majnun, the narrator gives him many chances to express his feelings in direct speech. The narrator has full control of the narrative and directs the reader in whatever direction he wishes.” Instead of viewing the narrator as external or internal, I think of the narrator as a fictional character that has limited omniscience and that offers metadiegetic commentary. See Meisami, 178 and Seyed-Gohrab, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. . Sarvatiyan, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. . *ʿIshq* is used at the end of the lengthy introduction to Laylī o Majnūn, as well as seven times in its concluding section indicating it as a major theme throughout. Other than the passages I have cited here, there is also an emphatic passage that I analyze in chapter three on the narrator’s deployment of *ʿishq* during the lovers’ final meeting. *Havas* (passion) is also occasionally a term of use but seems to be relegated to negative connotations, such as Majnun’s fathers usage of it against him or the narrator’s deployment of it in Majnun’s death. Moreover, even though Niẓāmī refers to Khosrow o Shīrīn as a “haves-name,” there is an entire introductory section dedicated to *ʿishq.* See Sarvatiyan, 74, 265-266, 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. . For example, Shihāb al-Dīn Yahya Suhrawardī (d. 1191) received and further developed Ibn Sīnā’s neo-platonic cosmology and angelology, as well as rejected his more Peripatetic tendency toward Aristotelian definition. This greatly impacted later philosophical writing in Persianate lands. For careful analysis of how this shift impacts discourse around the imaginal world (*‘alām al-mithāl*) see See Fazlur Rahman, “Dream, Imagination and ‘Alam al-Mithal,” *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1964): 167-80 and Marcotte, “Suhrawardi’s Realm of the Imaginal,” in *Ishrāq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook 2* (Moscow, 2011), 68-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. . Majnun himself is described as a captive (*shahrband*) in the world of ʿ*ishq* (ʿ*ālam-i* ʿ*ishq*), and the text also plays with Neoplatonic and/or Sufi dimensions by describing that happiness in ʿ*ishq* is found sleep or in the imaginary(*khayāl*) as well as referencing a school of ʿ*ishq* (*madhdhab-i* ʿ*ishq)* that in modern scholarship is more often associated with Sufism. See Sarvatiyan, 68, 169, and 198 and Safi, *Radical Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) xx-xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. . Sarvatiyan, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. . Dhu al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 859) outlined the distinction between states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) that contributed it the later deployment of states as a technical term in Sufism. A state differs from a station insofar as a state requires an encounter with the divine, but it still requires a sense of self-activation, the agency of which is further underscored in the description of stations. See L. Gardet, “Ḥāl,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam, second edition*, edited by P. Bearman et al (Brill online) <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\_islam\_COM\_0254> [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. . For a discussion of this claim, see Lois A. Giffen, “Ibn Ḥazm and the Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain,* edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 420-442. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. . Annemarie Schimmel has discussed how this feature accompanies the rhetorical reference point in classical Persian poetry for the beloved being the “desirable,” light-skinned Turk whose opposite was the “undesirable” Hindu. See Schimmel, “Turk and Hindu: A Poetical Image and Its Application to Historical Fact,” Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages: 4th Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference, Univ of Calif, Los Angeles, May 1973, (Wiesbaden, 1975) 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. . عشق آمد و خانه کرد خالی

    برداشته تیغ لاابالی

    —

    Sarvatiyan, 80. *ʿIshq* is also personified as the *sāqī* (cupbearer):

    —

    عشق آمد و خام جام در داد

    جامی به دو خوی خام در داد

    —

    “*ʿishq* came and gave the raw wine of the glass / gave a glass to the two raw ones.” Sarvatiyan, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. . The latter citation moreover comes after Layla slaps Ibn Salam after her father marries her to him. See Sarvatiyan 88, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. . Sarvatiyan, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. . Rachel Schine has discussed how milk kinship (*riḍāʿ*) appears in many medieval Arabic popular epics as a way of indicating how a hero absorbs specific qualities. It is noteworthy, per her discussion on such scenes as empowering feminine actors, that Majnun has not only multiple wet nurses (perhaps adding to his femininity) and yet their significance is placed within the greater significance of a divine actor. See Schine, “Nourishing the Noble: Breastfeeding and Hero-Making in Medieval Arabic Popular Literature” in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 27 (2019): 178-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. . Sarvatiyan, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. . I follow Sarvatiyan (372) in reading this as “ephsūs” rather than “ephsos” for meter. It is moreover interesting to note these comparisons given the ways in which madness and magic are recognized as proximate categories in the Qurʾān. Riffing on the motif of Moses’ staff transforming into a snake, Sūra al-Dhāriyāt (Q 51:39 and 52) quotes the accusation made by Pharaoh of Moses of being “a magician or a madman (*sāḥirun aw Majnunun*)” before gesturing to Muhammad’s similar situation by stating that “similarly, there came not to those before them any messenger except that they said, ‘a magician or a madman.’” See Sarvatiayn, 362; G. Vajda, “Hārūt wa Mārūt,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam, second edition*, edited by P. Bearman et al (Brill online) <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\_islam\_SIM\_2750> [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. . Salam Baghdadi seems to be a character of Niẓāmī’s invention as he is not mentioned in the prior Arabic material. He comes to visit Majnun twice in the desert, the second time just before Majnun’s death which allows him to bring his final poems to Baghdad. See Sarvatiyan, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. . Sarvatiyan, 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. . Sarvatiyan, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. . In other examples, the text uses Majnun’s direct speech and casts this dichotomy in lines that alternate with “me” (man) / “you” (tu). See Sarvatiyan, 166 and 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. . Sarvatiyan, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. . Sarvatiyan, 119-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. . Sarvatiyan, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. . Dick Davis has discussed the centrality of father-son relationships, typically gone wrong, in the *Shāhnāma*. A similar tension can be seen throughout Laylī o Majnūn, as the story begins with Majnun’s father praying (wrongfully, as the narrator underscores his greed) for a son, as well as in their long, extended dialogue before the father’s inevitable death. See Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh* (Washington DC: Mage Publishers, 2006) 6-15 and Sarvatiyan, 75-77 and 170-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. . Sarvatiyan, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. . Sarvatiyan, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. . My thanks to Frank Lewis for pointing out the context of this image. For more on slavery and material culture in early Islam, see Matthew Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. . In a letter to Layla, Majnun writes about her face’s beauty being his Kaʿba. See Sarvatiyan, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. . Sarvatiyan, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. . Sarvatiayn, 152-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. . Sarvatiyan, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. . I draw loosely from Elizabeth Freeman’s discussion of the body in sadomasochistic ritual as a means of invoking history. Though the kinds of pasts that Freeman discusses differ from that which is invoked in Laylī o Majnūn, her discussion of sadomasochism as a set of practices that “self-consciously manipulates time” especially in it terms of a “future anterior” to imagine what “will have been” has helped me think through the pleasure that ensues from Majnun’s bondage. See Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 137-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. . Despite the heteronormativity of *Laylī o Majnūn*, I want to emphasize recent scholarship that has acknowledged the gender ambiguity of many beloveds. For an overview of social dynamics in a slightly later time period as well as a nuanced discussion of gender implications, see Andrews and Kalpakli, *Age of the Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 32-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)