

The Oriental Sources of Courtly Love

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This paper singles out three key theoretical, oriental perspectives on love that have been, to a greater or lesser degree, recognized by scholars as sources for western courtly love notions: Ibn Hazm's *Tawq al-Hamama* (The Dove's Neck Ring), Ibn Sina's *Risala fi'l-'Ishq* (Treatise on Love), and the general Sufi outlook, particularly in the works of Ibn Al-Arabi and Rumi. While chivalry, the forms and features of Arabic music and Arabic poetry, Arabic poetic themes and specifically the expressions and concepts of love in poetry have long been studied as the main Arab/Islamic contributions to courtly love, no detailed study of this relationship at the theoretical level has so far been done. Such a study, particularly of the ideas of thinkers like Ibn Sina, Ibn Al-Arabi, and Rumi will serve to illuminate not only western works explicitly devoted to the topic, but also a key trend in the western conception of love generally, as well as the whole genre of tragic romance in modern western literature. (*)

In what may well be the pioneering study of courtly love in English literary studies, C. S. Lewis starts by pointing out that while it may seem natural to regard love as the great common theme of world literature, western notions of love were very far from being a natural state of affairs, and had very clear beginnings in time and place, namely eleventh century *Provence*. Such notions, indeed, would be incomprehensible, for example, to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul or the author of *Beowulf* (3). He then goes on to state categorically that:

French poets, in the eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were the first to express, that romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth. They affected a change which still has left no corner of our ethics or our daily life

untouched, and they erected impassable barriers between us and the classical past or the Oriental present. Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature. (4)

Lewis then goes on to explain that in ancient literature love seldom rose above merry sensuality or domestic comfort. As for Plato, he argues:

In the Symposium, no doubt, we find the conception of ladder, whereby the soul may ascend from human love to divine. But this is a ladder in the strictest sense; you reach the higher rungs by leaving the lower ones behind. The original object of human Love—who, incidentally, is not a woman—has simply fallen out of sight before the soul arrives at the spiritual object. (5)

Thus the so-called Renaissance Platonists, who imagined a unity to be achieved between their human, carnal love and divine, spiritual love, would be simply reading into Plato notions that they had acquired for being, like us, heirs to this medieval tradition. As for Ovid, presumably the other most influential classical figure in this field for western literature, “the very design of his *Art of Love* presupposes an audience to whom love is one of the minor peccadilloes of life, and the joke consists in treating it seriously—in writing a treatise, with rules and examples *en regle* for the nice conduct of illicit loves. It is funny, as the ritual solemnity of old gentlemen over their wine is funny. Food, drink, and sex are the oldest jokes in the world; and one familiar form of the joke is to be very serious about them. From this attitude the whole tone of the *Ars Amatoria* flows” (6).

For this reason, the formula Ovid misunderstood (11) is clearly inadequate for explaining our modern notions of love. Indeed, they are absent from the literature of the Dark Ages as from that of classical antiquity (9), because their favourite stories were not, like ours, stories of how a man married, or failed to marry, a woman. They preferred to hear how a holy man went to heaven or how a brave man went to battle (9).

From all this, Lewis concludes that there is no doubt that here we have a totally new thing on our hands: “Real changes in human sentiment are very rare -- there are perhaps three or four on record but I believe that they occur, and that this is one of them” (11). A new thing that, furthermore, he very modestly admits not to pretend to explain.

These pioneering remarks, in the context of English literary studies, have

now become commonplaces. In any encyclopedia or glossary of the medieval period, you may well find a statement like the following accepted as a matter of fact: "Most critics since the sixteenth century have shared the conviction that modern European poetry begins in twelfth-century *Provence* and that the troubadour concept of love is utterly different from that which was current in antiquity" (Loyn 667). You will also be likely to find many equivalents of such a balanced summing-up of the whole issue:

A phenomenon produced by the interaction of Latin and Moorish elements with the social conditions of *Provence*, courtly love existed mainly in a play world; the courts of love and the code of courtly love can best be understood as social and literary games. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of courtly love exerted a significant social and literary influence that persists to this day. One of its main tenets was that love could exist only between people who were free to choose their mates. In a society of arranged marriages based on property, this was a revolutionary idea, yet by the sixteenth century it began to be accepted as the basis for marriage. This social development was influenced by the conventions of courtly love, with their emphasis on free choice. In a world rife with antifeminism, it set forth the idea of woman as an elevating, ennobling force. The chivalric attitudes of the modern gentleman go back to those of the medieval knight. In the literary realm, many of the conventions of romantic love, love at first sight, secret love, the suffering of the lover, love as an illness or fever, the opposition between lovers and society were adopted from courtly love to lead a long life in lyric poetry, the novel, and the drama. Courtly love thus had a lasting influence on the concept of romantic love in Western life and literature (673).

What C. S. Lewis could not pretend to explain, and what conventional academic wisdom is gradually beginning to accept, had, of course, long been recognized, and in some cases, fully spelled out by the most prominent scholars in this field. Gustave E. von Grunebaum, for example, begins by re-affirming, first, the proper cultural framework within which such literary-cum-intellectual issues should be understood:

"Throughout the Middle ages, then, the very existence of the Islamic block was the most important single factor in the development of the West. . . . For as partial heirs to the Roman Empire, the foundations of both civilizations were essentially identical. Monotheism couched in terms of Greek thought was the religion of both worlds; many concepts of political administration were derived from a common

source; Western and Eastern art and literature preserved and elaborated certain stimuli received from the Greeks; science everywhere was cultivated along lines laid down by Classical scholarship. The salient peculiarities of the individual units notwithstanding, the essential cultural unity of Europe and the Near East never was destroyed" (139).

He, then, establishes *Tawq al-Hamama* (The Dove's Neck Ring) (1022) by the Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Hazm, "as the culmination of the type of amatory experience which slowly had taken shape during the preceding age and in which the delicacy of [the author's] understanding, the keenness of his dissection, are unmatched in Arabic literature" (144). With Ibn Hazm, Grunebaum concludes, "the level of subtilization is reached on which the best of the troubadours were to move, and the fund of psychological truths assembled with which they were to operate, and to develop further" (145).

In his summing-up, Grunebaum returns to the wider cultural frame within which we can see that "the Hellenistic achievement in the treatment of love had been perpetuated in two directions: hundreds of years after it had conquered Rome, it had been convincing enough to charm the Arab world" (148) and that "the ideas of love as an illness, of love as war, love as service, and love as an art -- all originating in Alexandrian poetry reached the Provençal bard through Eastern as well as Western channels" (148).

Grunebaum concludes, however, with these very important qualifications:

At this point, however, it becomes manifest that, at least as far as amatory poetry is concerned, the two strains did not join as equals. . . . There is no bridge leading from Ovid's attitude to the Provençal spiritualization of passion. . . . it is more than likely that it was the belief of the Arab poets in the elevating power of love which was adopted when an advanced erotic sensibility no longer found satisfaction in the sensual refinement which Ovid had preached, not without naivete (149).

In the end, this whole literary-cum-intellectual achievement that brought about what C. S. Lewis called real changes in human sentiment is summed up by Grunebaum as follows:

It may be suggested that both in the East and in the West, the reversal by poetry of the relations between the sexes as found in real life proved one

of the attractions of courtly minnesong. The coarse treatment of women in most circles on both shores of the Mediterranean, their legal inferiority, the low opinion of their moral capabilities voiced by most writers, in short, the prevailing emphasis on masculine superiority -- all this was cancelled out in the new poetry, compensated, perhaps over-compensated, by the attribution to the lady of the power over life and death of the lover, by her portrayal as a higher being, set apart by beauty, virtue, and one might say, preferred metaphysical standing (150).

His concluding sentences, however, go back once again to the unequivocally positive affirmation of the role of Arab/Islamic literature and thought in bringing about this transformation of outlook:

The heritage of the troubadours, with its belief in the dignity of woman, the transcendent significance of love and its ennobling power, continues to be reflected in our lives. And through this heritage, we still draw from the experience of those Arab lovers and poets who first uncovered unsuspected recesses of our hearts, which, but for them, might have remained unexplored (151).

It is worth remembering here that the recognition of the Arabic/Islamic contribution to the creation of romance, in English literary studies, goes back to Thomas Warton, the very first English literary historian, who wrote that "that peculiar and arbitrary species of Fiction which we commonly call Romantic was entirely unknown to the writers of Greece and Rome. It appears to have been imported into Europe by a people, whose modes of thinking, and habits of invention, are not natural to that country. It is generally supposed to have been borrowed from the Arabians" (Metlitzki 241) and went on to explain that, contrary to common belief, this heritage was not communicated to the West through the Crusades, but much earlier, in the eighth century, by way of Spain. Later, in the early years of the nineteenth century, the troubadours, and through them the whole oriental heritage, were proclaimed the forerunners of Romanticism (Boase 118) which, as a general European literary movement, began to acquire an essential, oriental component (see Al-Dabbagh). In addition to *The Dove's Neck Ring* by Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), scholars of courtly love of a later generation also pointed to the *Treatise on Love* by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d. 1037) as a key theoretical text that expresses an aesthetic amatory doctrine analogous to that of the troubadours and prefiguring the Neoplatonism of Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano* [among] the works on courtly or profane love [that] constituted a distinct Arabic literary genre (Boase 124).

In more recent scholarship, Bernard O'Donnoghue, for example, concludes that while it is certainly useful and informative to study the structures of troubadour society, the latter would not account for their theories of love because the poetry seems to be sufficiently explained by reference to other schools of love poetry (10). In fact, he focuses specifically on *Tawq al-Hamama*, as the most likely influence on courtly love concepts, includes excerpts from it in his book, and sums up the supporting views of other scholars in this field, such as P. Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the Love Lyric* (1965), and Roger Boase. He specifically endorses the views of A. R. Nykl, Ibn Hazm's translator and editor, on this decisively Andalusian-Arabic influence. He also refers to the deeply-researched articles of A. J. Denomy, later collected in his *The Heresy of Courtly Love* (1947), of which he chooses to make this very relevant summary:

Denomy's argument, in brief, is that whereas most of the traditional features of courtly love are to be found in the classics, medieval Latin and Arabic (description of nature in the opening; personification of love as a god; love as sickness, fear of loss of beloved; capriciousness of beloved; need of secrecy; the danger of talebearers, and so on), there are three new features in the love of the troubadours: first, the ennobling nature of human love; second, the elevation of the beloved to a position superior to the lover; third, love as ever-unsatisfied, ever-increasing desire. Denomy says these three characteristics can be found neither in any of the literatures mentioned nor in Albigensianism, but only in Arabic philosophy (not Arabic poetry) (O'Donnoghue 11-12).

Earlier, Lois Anita Giffen had traced the Martyrs of Love, both as a conception and a literary genre, in classical Arabic literature, and approvingly cited the results of von Grunebaum's scholarly research to the effect that "the conception of the martyrs of love constitutes an original contribution of Arabic poetry"(106). She regarded her own pioneering study as "only a first step in a fascinating investigation of matters awaiting further research and discussion, particularly those concerned with the relations between the theory of profane love and the ideas of the Muslim mystics on divine love, as well as the points of agreement or contrast between the theories of the Arabs and those of medieval and Renaissance European writers" (121).

Indeed, it is Islamic Sufism to which we must inevitably return as the

ultimate source of the new, modern notion of love, regarded as such a uniquely path-breaking conception in the development of human sentiment by C. S. Lewis, not only for the Arab/Islamic world, but eventually for the whole of the Western world, too.

As Robert Graves (1980) has aptly pointed out:

Sufism exercised a great influence on mediaeval Celtic literature one of the main tap-roots of English poetry. And Chaucer, through his patron John of Gaunt, came under the direct influence of the Persian Sufi poets Rumi and Attar; it was from Attar that he borrowed his Pardoner's Tale. The Sufic way of thought has never been confined to -- Moslems. There have been many famous Christian and Jewish Sufis -- among the former Friar Roger Bacon, England's greatest mediaeval philosopher, physicist and chemist (1214-1294) (15).

Earlier in the twentieth century, Denis de Rougemont (1939), in one of the pioneering and path-breaking works of western scholarship in this field, had explained:

There occurred during the twelfth century in Languedoc and in the Limousin one of the most extraordinary spiritual confluences of history. On the one hand, a strong Manichaean religious current, which had taken its rise in Persia, flowed through Asia Minor and the Balkans as far as Italy and France, bearing the esoteric doctrines of Maria Sophia and of love for the Form of Light. On the one hand, a highly refined rhetoric, with its set forms, themes and characters, its ambiguities invariably recurring in the same places, and indeed its symbolism, pushes out from Irak and the Sufis, who were inclined alike to Platonism and Manichaenism, and reaches Arabic Spain, then, leaping over the Pyrenees, it comes in the south of France upon a society that seems to have but awaited its arrival in order to state what it had not dared and had not been able to avow either in the clerical tongue or in the common vernacular. Courtly lyrical poetry was the offspring of that encounter (107).

For Sufism is not only the first comprehensive philosophic-cum-spiritual outlook and way of life that places love at its very center, it is the first such philosophy that would ascribe its very existence totally and essentially to it. Love and the renunciation of everything else is the heart of Sufism and the Sufi has been defined in this way: "The one who is purified with love is pure and the one who is absorbed in the Beloved and has renounced everything else, is a Sufi" (Vitray-Meyerovitch 79).

In the last analysis, everything is founded on love, which for Sufism is indeed the soul of the universe. It is by way of love that man can dissociate himself from worldly attachments and go back to the source of things and become one with the harmony and rhythm of the universe, with music and dance, the gyration of stars and the movement of the atoms. And it is through love that he starts the ascent of life on the scale of being, from stone to plant, from animal to man, to the angel and beyond (101). Thus we see that nearly all the great Sufis were not only ascetic men, but also great poets of love, like Ibn Al-Arabi and Rumi, Hallaj and Dhunnun Al-Masri, Ibn Al-Faridh, Attar and Jami, and last, but not least, the woman Sufi, Rabia Al-Adawiya (151).

Some of the famous Sufi pronouncements on this subject may include Sumnun, a Baghdad Sufi around 900, who said that: "A thing can be explained only by what is more subtle than itself: there is nothing subtler than love -- by what, then, shall love be explained" (Schimmel 1982, 16-17) and Hallaj, who said, "I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I" (32) and Ibn Al-Arabi's famous lines:

My heart is capable of every form,
A cloister for the monk, a fane for idols,
A pasture for gazelles, the pilgrim s Ka'aba,
The Tables of the Torah, the Koran.
Love is the faith I hold: wherever turn
His camels, still the one true faith is mine.' (38-39).

Finally, it is in the poetry of Rumi, the supreme Sufi of the Persian language, that we find some of the greatest images and explanations of love. (Schimmel 1982, 105-120). Rumi is fond of images from daily life, as when he likens love to a school creating from it an elaborately extended metaphor (105), and of images from nature, particularly describing love as wind (105) or fire (106) or light (107) or water (108), again creating elaborate figures and conceits. Love is also often seen as a garden (110-2) leading to yet another extended and elaborately developed image. What might be called the pangs and pains of love are described through the images of cruelty associated with animals, with imprisonment and bondage and with bleeding (112-4). Finally, from the human world, love is seen as the Sultan or the Shah, as the true fighter for faith, as a shield-maker to protect man, as a cook, a weaver or a tailor, as a sorcerer and as a physician (114-20). Most significantly, in Rumi the

essential Sufi link of love to universalism achieves its greatest expression:

Abandon your selfish identity and settle in universal
Love and unity, forever;

.....
What is to be done, O Moslems, for I do not recognize
Myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Zoroastrian, nor
Moslem.

I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land,
Nor of the sea;

I am not of nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens,
I am not of the earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire;

I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust nor of existence, nor of entity.

I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor
Of Sagsin;

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise
Nor of Hell;

I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan.

My place is the placeless, my trace is the traceless;

Tis neither body nor soul, but I belong to the soul of
The beloved (Quoted in Fatemi 51).

As another Sufi poet, Abu Yazid Bastami, expresses it, love becomes the supreme miracle of life:

You walk on the water, so does a piece of wood,
You fly in the air, do does a bird,
You travel to the Kaaba in a single night, so does a conjurer,
The true man attaches his heart to non but Love (Fatemi 47).

To conclude, it is apt to remember the words of R. A. Nicholson, one of the best students of Sufism in the West, who calls love the supreme principle in Sufi ethics, and describes it as "the emotional element in religion, the rapture of the seer, the courage of the martyr, the faith of the saint, the only basis of moral perfection and spiritual knowledge. Practically, it is self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all possessions -- wealth, honour, will, life, and whatever else men value -- for the Beloved's sake without any thought of reward." (107). He then underlines the great importance of this Sufi theme for poetry and for the whole literary imagination:

All the love-romances and allegories of Sufi poetry -- the tales of Layla and Majnun, Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaykha, Salaman and Absal, the Moth and the Candle, the Nightingale and the Rose -- are shadow-pictures of the soul's passionate longing to be re-united with God. The soul is likened to a moaning dove that has lost her mate; to a reed torn from its bed and made into a flute whose plaintive music fills the eye with tears; to a falcon summoned by the fowler's whistle to perch again upon his wrist; to snow melting in the sun and mounting as vapour to the sky; to a frenzied camel swiftly plunging through the desert by night; to a caged parrot, a fish on dry land, a pawn that seeks to become a king. (116-117).

Indeed, it is not only the tradition of the tragic oriental romance that is imbued with the spirit of Sufism, but the whole of the Romantic conception of love, the origin of which C. S. Lewis was investigating, in the Western world. If that seems too wild an assertion to some, and one that this paper is not really the place to discuss at length, I would like merely to point to the relevant discussion of someone like M. H. Abrams when he describes the English Romantic poets as "primarily poets of love", and defines the views of love of figures like Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats in the light of their peculiar affinities with Sufi ideas on the subject, and to the work of someone like Bernard Blackstone on Byron's interest in Sufism and his influence by Sufi tradition (quoted in Oueijan, 2000: 259).

Unlike any other philosophic/spiritual outlook, Sufism is centered totally around love. Most scholars have recognized that this is where the heart and the distinguishing nature of Sufism lies. As Annemarie Schimmel says, "in the widest sense [Sufism] may be defined as the consciousness of the One Reality--be it called Wisdom, Light, Love or Nothing," and then she goes on to explain: "Mysticism can be defined as love of the Absolute, for the power that separates true mysticism from mere asceticism is love. Divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing, even of enjoying, all the pains and afflictions that God showers upon him in order to test him and to purify his soul" (Schimmel 1975, 4). Schimmel rightly singles out Rabia Al-Adawiya as "the person who introduced the element of selfless love into the austere teachings of the early ascetics and gave Sufism the hue of true mysticism," and recounts the most illustrative anecdote of the essence of her outlook: "Once, in the streets of Basra, she was asked why she was carrying a torch in one hand and a ewer in the other, and she answered: I want to throw fire into paradise and pour water into Hell so that these two veils disappear, and it becomes

clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of Hell or hope of Paradise" (38-9).

A word must, finally, be said about the richness of the medieval Islamic heritage of philosophic and spiritual exploration of love, one that in turn created a complex system of terms, gradations and stages. While the Sufi perspective and model, through its numerous figures, exerted the greatest influence and set the basic guidelines, Arabic poetry from pre-Islamic times and for some five hundred years (nearly a thousand years, if we include non-Arabic, Islamic poetry) was the other, major defining force in the field. And while the works of Ibn Hazm and Ibn Sina that were mentioned in this paper have later become the best known, there was a host of other treatises on love by writers and philosophers as renowned as Jahiz, Al-Kindi, Farabi and Ikhwan Al-Safa, in addition to less known figures like Ibn Dawood, the author of *Kitab Al-Zuhra* (The Book of Venus), a widely read treatise in its time. Western notions and practices of love poetry, as they first appeared in the poems of the Troubadours of the South of France in the twelfth century, owe their existence to this rich heritage. It would be idle to single out one figure (e.g. Ibn Hazm or Ibn Sina), or one literary or cultural trend (e.g. Arabic poetry or Islamic Sufism) as the sole source. The recognition of the diverse nature of the influence conforms better to the understanding of East/west intellectual relations of this epoch as more of a symbiotic unity than of a merely mechanical borrowing.

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