


man in the act of reading a letter to a friend whose visage is actually depicted on a proximate pillow. Babayan interprets this as a visual representation of the act of *takhyil* (image evocation), which effectively defines the ontology of letter-writing and the mechanics of friendship.

The last chapter focuses on a particular anthology compiled in Isfahan by a famous family of administrators—the Urdubadis—in 1697, but which was subsequently re-organized, re-ordered, and re-bound on various occasions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries after being relocated to the family home of Urdubad (in the modern-day region of Nakhjavan). This chapter is arguably the most heterogeneous in terms of structure and theme, not surprising given the nature of this anthology and its assembly of an impossibly wide spectrum of material: diplomatic letters, short notes, poems, petitions, “wish-lists,” endowment deeds, and prefaces (*dibachas*). Babayan discovers and focuses here on a rare female voice in the form of a poem by an unnamed Urduabadi widow describing her travels (in the late 1690s?) from Isfahan to her family estates in Urdubad and on to Mecca. This poem, autobiographical in perspective, describes an intimate friendship with another woman in Isfahan that created such a flurry of gossip and suspicion that her paramour moved away. The widow’s later decision to perform *hajj* seems motivated more by alienation from her family in Isfahan; indeed, she directly compares herself to the tragic literary character Majnun, whose father dispatched him to the Kàba to prevent him seeing his beloved Layla. Babayan translates portions of this fascinating poetic text and we are drawn to the scene of the reunion between the widow and her Isfahani lover in the town of Urdubad: “Forty houses they placed between us/And inflicted separation between two bodies/For our hearts no cure save constraint/In separation, both of us have waited a century” (p. 189).

Babayan’s conclusion (“The Erotics of Urbanity”) reminds us of the centrality of *ishq*—especially with regard to mystical notions of eros—when understanding textual and visual representations of friendship and sociability in seventeenth-century Isfahan. Initially drawn to anthologies as a methodology to tell a social history of Isfahan, Babayan encountered in *majmu’ahs* and *muraqq’as* a discursive world that allowed for a new reading of social interaction and intimacy in the early modern Persianate urban environment. *The City as Anthology*, although slightly unwieldy at times as it shifts from detailed case study to detailed case study, is nonetheless extremely effective in its careful approach to a unique and complicated genre of archival material; the implications of these innovative readings are, in turn, powerfully conveyed by Babayan in an intricate prose and style of argumentation. In addition to introducing and rehabilitating this genre of anthologies, this study provides a “fresh take” and effectively re-aligns how we understand and interpret the constructs of gender and sexuality in Safavid Iran.

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Talattof, Kamran. *Nezami Ganjavi and Classical Persian Literature: Demystifying the Mystic*, Palgrave MacMillan, Switzerland, 2022, ISBN 978-3-030-97989-8, 284 pp.

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Was the prominent Persian poet Nezāmi Ganjavi (d. about 1209) a pious Muslim or a mystic? Or, as Talattof argues, was he “mystified” by scholars and literary critics, who interpreted his

poetry through the lens of Islam or Islamic mysticism? Talattof's newly published book attempts to contextualize Nezāmi's poetry within the tradition of Persian classical literature and revise Nezāmi's established image as a mystic poet who promoted Islamic or Sufi teachings. For scholars, researchers, and students of Persian culture and classical literature, this book opens a new window into the creative world of Nezāmi's mind, and it does so by analyzing excerpts from his masterpiece, *Panj Ganj* (*Five Treasures*), otherwise known as *Khamseh* (*Quintet*). Through meticulous analysis of Nezāmi's poetry, Talattof tries to reorient the readers' attention to the poet's "métier as a Sakhon writer and romancer" (p. 11). Reintroducing Nezāmi as a humanist master of rhetoric, this book is a roadmap to understanding the complexities of Nezāmi's allegorical narratives.

Following Ritter's seminal monograph on Nezāmi's metaphors, *Über die Bildersprache Nizāmīs* (1927), Talattof provides a new scholarly effort investigating this poet's main purpose for writing poetry as aesthetic art. With this fresh look at the subject, Talattof invites his readers to appreciate Nezāmi's uniquely inventive mind. He suggests exploring Nezāmi's mastery in creating eloquent speech, which he describes by using the Persian term *sakhon* (also pronounced as "sokhan"), meaning "discourse" or "eloquent speech." To substantiate this argument, Talattof contextualizes Nezāmi's *sakhon* within the Persian classical literary tradition, comparing the application of the term *sakhon* in masterpieces by prominent figures such as Ferdowsi, Jāmi, and Rudaki, among others. This investigation is Talattof's means of conceptualizing what *sakhon* meant to Nezāmi: the "most essential element in existence" or that which "created not only the world but the soul, too" (p. 28). Distinguishing between spirituality and religion, Talattof asserts that in Nezāmi's mind, "poets have nearly divine status and a highly sacrilegious attitude" (p. 4-5). However, a poet's main occupation, namely creating *sakhon*, was not a religious matter for Nezāmi. Instead, it had a material value. *Sakhon* was a means to prosperity, a legacy, a life challenge, and a means of living. Talattof highlights the fact that among "Nezāmi's approximately 30,000 verses, more than 2,500 deal with issues of language, aesthetics, and rhetoric" (p. 40). For Nezāmi, *sakhon* was the vessel, and his themes or subjects were merely the ingredients. Love, wine, women, health and medicine, peace, justice, behavior, kings, homeland, identity, and religion (Islam or Zoroastrianism) were among the plethora of themes and subjects Nezāmi used to create what Talattof calls "Nezamian pictorial allegory."

How does Talattof convince his readers to question and rethink Nezāmi's image as a poet who advocated for Islam or Islamic mysticism? Building on his pivotal argument that Nezāmi was a master of poetry, Talattof conceptualizes this art as a play of pictorial allegory, defining Nezamian pictorial allegory as "a short, structured and interconnected passage with a surface story constructed using descriptions of science, religion, religious references, nature, space, man-made gardens, and animals and a second level story focused on his character or events" (p. 175). Talattof postulates that such allegories "do not promote any particular religion, but rather serve to move along his story in an eloquent way to showcase his mastery of the language" (p. 175).

The story of the prophet of Islam's ascension in Nezāmi's *Panj Ganj* is an example of such a pictorial allegory. Talattof suggests that the ascension story in Nezāmi's work can be read as "a self-generating system of literary techniques and configuration" (p. 108). In his analysis of this system, Talattof shows that Nezāmi's primary concern was with language itself, rather than "messaging." He argues that Nezāmi used an exceptionally religious story but rendered it in several different versions featuring fantastic and "non-ideological" elements. Talattof uses Nezāmi's renditions of the ascension story to elaborate on the poet's "concepts of rhetoric and poesy rather than his faith" (p. 108). Other scholars have used the story as evidence of Nezāmi's ideological beliefs. Talattof contends that this story is merely another "pictorial allegory," among others, that gave Nezāmi a "premium theme for his poetic process of imagination and the expression of his cosmic knowledge" (p. 109). For Talattof, Nezāmi's story of ascension can be used to question his faith. As Talattof states:

I will not go as far as to say that Nezāmi was a heretic, but perhaps a somewhat secular (to the extent that the twelfth century could allow) poet. However, I can say with confidence that Quranic verses were simply other sources of reference to him and sometimes he could be subversive toward them. (p. 129)

What Talattof regards as a “subversive” attitude toward Quranic verses is shown by Nezāmi’s intense focus on the fields of astrology and horoscopes in the ascension story, because discussing these subjects was deemed punishable in Islam.

Nezāmi’s characterization of women in love stories and their relationships with men in *Panj Ganj* gives plausible reason for seeing Nezāmi as a progressive, humanist poet. In terms of literary context, Talattof locates Nezāmi in an interesting sequence: the poetry of Ferdowsi (who inspired Nezāmi) and the poetry of Jāmi (who was inspired by Nezāmi). Talattof believes that, unlike Ferdowsi (writing two centuries before him) or Jāmi (writing three centuries after him), Nezāmi represented women in a diverse variety of roles unusual in the patriarchal Iranian society of the twelfth century. In the “unique, humanistic, and eloquent” (p. 59) representation of women in *Panj Ganj*, Talattof finds traces of Nezāmi’s awareness of both women’s status in pre-Islamic Iran and Zoroastrian principles. In one example, Nezāmi depicted women as equal to men, or even superior, in ruling a country, as shown in his romance *Khosrow o Shirin*, which he referred to “as *shahvat-nama*, the book of concupiscent” (p. 65). In this narrative, Shirin’s aunt Mahin Bānu is depicted as the wise and rational ruler of Armenia, who teaches Shirin to be sensible and judicious in her life and relationships with men. Talattof reasons that Ferdowsi and Jāmi’s representations of women were influenced by two elements: the genre and historical context. Ferdowsi was more engaged with the spirit of epic poetry when nationalism was the major focus of his poetry. Jāmi was influenced by the Sufi ideology of favoring homosexual eroticism over love for women, indicating that women were to be avoided for the sake of preserving piety. Nezāmi, however, due to his expansive worldview and range of experience, represented women in a humanist, liberal light. Partly for this reason, Talattof writes: “I do challenge the view that Nezami was an advocate of Islam, as a mystic and the views that see his poetry as Sufi poetry” (p. 229).

Do Talattof’s arguments provide sufficient evidence that Nezāmi saw religion, particularly Islam, as nothing more than another theme for his creative art rather than a source of inspiration or personal predilection? Talattof emphasizes that religion was simply one of the many themes (such as wine, women, love, etc.) about which Nezāmi wrote. Talattof uses what he considers Nezāmi’s references to women’s status in pre-Islamic Iran to introduce him as a progressive humanist with liberal views about sexuality and male-female relationships, stating: “Nezami’s interest in ancient Iranian culture and in philosophy, and his peculiar interpretation of Zoroastrian teachings ... may further explain his liberal approach to women and sexuality” (p. 72). Therefore, Talattof advises, “we should not assume that all Nezami’s verses and fictional figures necessarily reflect his own beliefs” (p. 8). If we agree with this suggestion, then we should ask whether Nezāmi’s poetry can be used as evidence of his secular or liberal beliefs. The proposition that Nezāmi’s unique purpose for writing poetry was to create aesthetic art can also imply that his non-religious or non-Islamic ideas were likewise merely themes for his poetry and not necessarily representative of his beliefs.

Nezami Ganjavi and Classical Persian Literature: Demystifying the Mystic is a brilliant attempt to adopt a systematic, analytical approach for interpreting Nezāmi. Through meticulous analysis of poems from Nezāmi’s *Panj Ganj*, and through the literary contextualization of his work, Talattof argues that Nezāmi’s main purpose as an artist was “the representation of the world through Sakhon writing” (p. 237). In considering the religious, political, and social context of the twelfth century, Talattof shows his awareness of the need for a thorough investigation into why Nezāmi, a well-educated poet, is assumed to be part of a Sufi movement or order. He soundly argues: “reading a passage of Nezami as solely a Sufi expression is

tantamount to ignoring the enormity of Nezami's conceptualization of human sensibility and his creative imagination" (p. 78). However, detaching Nezāmi from his Islamic context for the sake of "demystification" can also obscure important aspects of his art. Overall, the book makes thought-provoking arguments and is organized in well-designed chapters. One minor criticism is that a final edit to improve the cohesion between chapters and remove the almost inevitable repetitions and occasional typos could have improved the book's flow of discussion.

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Iranian Cities and Persian Fiction (Bibliotheca Iranica: Literature, 18) M. R. Ghanoonparvar Mazda Pub (January 28, 2022). 362 pages \$35.00 ISBN-13: 978-1568593937

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In this original and engaging book, M. R. Ghanoonparvar seeks to "understand how creative artists have shown cities in the mirror of their fiction." The main part of the book consists of seven chapters, each devoted to a single city in Iran. Each chapter begins with the author's personal reminiscences from his youth, then moves to a discussion of a range of fiction published from the early twentieth century through to the present. Most of the works discussed are novels and short stories by well-known writers such as Sadeq Hedayat, Jalal Ale-Ahmad, Ebrahim Golestan, Goli Taraghi, Moniro Ravanipour, and Sharnush Parsipour, but a few are also poems, films, and the works of lesser-known authors such as A. M. Afghani from Kermanshah and Asghar Abdollahi from Abadan.

Each city, we learn, has a unique identity evident in the selected texts, most of which are relatively bleak. The majority of the almost thirty works in the chapter on Tehran portray the capital city as gloomy, dismal, and chaotic, beset by class contradictions such as the huge gap (captured for Ghanoonparvar in a 1969 poem by Esmail Khoi) between the impoverished southern neighborhoods and the wealthy northern ones. Recent migrants from smaller provincial towns feel alienated and lost. Their dislocation, according to many of the works of the 1970s, give Tehran a lack of "cohesive structure." For writers such as Nader Ebrahimi and Ebrahim Rahbar, the city is "strange and alienating," "incomprehensible." In a 1967 story that became the 1975 film *Ashghalduni*, Gholamhoseyn Sa'edi called the city a "dump." Only Mahshid Amirshahi's *Suri* stories depict Tehran of the 1970s as a pleasant and interesting place. In later works, however, she describes a "city of riots, confusion, filth, fear, killings, death and lawlessness" in the run-up to the 1979 revolution (p. 22). Similarly, a few works produced in the 1980s and 1990s, such as those by Goli Taraghi and Moniro Ravanipour, highlight nostalgia for the pleasant and tranquil experiences of the capital city but decry its contemporary circumstances. Such works suggest that the historical circumstances of political upheaval and uncertainty, rather than any essential nature, make the city dark. But perhaps not: as a character in Ghazaleh Alizadeh's 1999 novel *Shabha-ye Tehran* (The Nights of Tehran), set in the 1960s and 1970s, declares, "Tehran is such an ugly city devoid of personality." The class revolution that Khoi's poem called for, according to works like Amirshahi's *Dar Hazar* (At Home, 1987), has not improved the city; in fact, it has done the opposite. Further criticism appears in stories by Shahrnush Parsipour, which suggest Tehran is not welcoming to