Reflections on Knowledge and Language
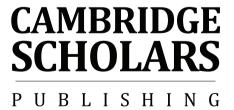# in Middle Eastern Societies

Reflections on Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies

Edited by

Bruno De Nicola, Yonatan Mendel and Husain Qutbuddin

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

To

Marta, with love

Ella, with love

My mother Sakina, with love and deepest gratitude

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section III: Knowledge, Language, Politics and Identity

FOREWORD

This volume is the product of an international symposium on 'Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies', which was held at the University of Cambridge, 18–19 October, 2008. The symposium was the initiative of graduate students in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Cambridge, in particular Bruno De Nicola, Husain Qutbuddin and Yoni Mendel, who are the editors of the volume. Bruno, Husain and Yoni were engaged in research for their PhD theses on diverse fields and periods, each with their own specialist thesis topic. With great perception, however, they recognised the light that could be cast on their particular specialism by taking a broader view of Middle Eastern culture. The contemporary Middle East cannot be fully understood without studying it with a diachronical perspective. Phenomena that relate to specific localities, religious communities or language communities of the Middle East are frequently elucidated by studying parallel phenomena in other localities, religious communities or language communities of the region. Nowadays the increasing specialism of research and the burgeoning disciplinary approaches to Middle Eastern Studies do not allow such a holistic perspective to be taken. Moreover, adherence to a particular discipline often results in researchers looking for insights in the application of their discipline to other geographical areas rather than in an inter-disciplinary approach with a focus on the area of the Middle East.

The symposium brought together presentations on a wide range of subjects and disciplines relating to language and knowledge in the Middle East. The speakers were a mixture of graduate students and established scholars from various parts of the world. The inter-disciplinary range of the papers and the interaction of speakers from differing stages of career made for an immensely creative atmosphere. All this was due to the enthusiasm and vision of the organizers, Bruno, Husain and Yoni, who have here produced a splendid volume containing a selection of the papers.

—Geoffrey Khan
University of Cambridge

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

BRUNO DE NICOLA, YONATAN MENDEL AND HUSAIN QUTBUDDIN

At a point in time when the academic status of area studies seems to be in question, the appearance of this book may seem something of an oddity to the reader. This attitude is, perhaps, partly a consequence of globalisation; the importance of an area as an entity seems to fade in light of the economic, social and cultural "fusion" of human societies. The concept is at a low particularly with regard to Middle Eastern Studies, where academic production tends to focus on a particular period, language or discipline and more or less neglects the commonalities that exist between the various approaches as a result of a shared cultural, historical, and sociological milieu. Unfortunately, this is generally the case even though the many branches of study relating to the Middle East are often grouped under one department in universities. This book attempts to reverse this trend by focussing upon these commonalities and by highlighting the benefits of inter–disciplinary exchange under the framework of a shared area of study, viz. the Middle East, and is the result of enriching and thought–provoking experiences during the First International Cambridge Symposium on Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies, University of Cambridge, 18–19 October, 2008.

Our selected speakers in the symposium were researchers from myriad fields in the area of the Middle East. Some were specialists in the study of religious traditions such as the Judaic, Christian, or Islamic, some devoted attention to particular languages, such as Hebrew, Arabic, or Turkish, some concentrated on aspects such as politics, identity, or linguistics; all of them worked on different periods of history, from antiquity to modernity, with focus on specific groups of people in diverse areas of the Middle East. Needless to say, there was a certain amount of initial apprehension as to whether the experiment would work. Much to our delight, the papers gelled remarkably well, and engendered a deep awareness in both the presenters and listeners of the vast areas of overlap between the seemingly distinct branches. There were frequent moments

where, for example, contemporary historians challenged linguists, and specialists in medieval Islamic philosophy engaged with researchers on contemporary political thought.

At a time when inter–disciplinary approaches are being encouraged in several fields, this book attempts to accelerate this process for the various branches of Middle Eastern Studies. It aspires, in a sense, to "rescue" area studies by nominating it as an appropriate umbrella under which specialists on different aspects of a specific area—in this case the Middle East—working in a variety of fields, with a multiplicity of frameworks and numerous timeframes, can interact, debate and contribute to each other's research.

In keeping with the spirit of the book, and in compliance with the structure of the symposium, the papers are classified and divided into sections that are based not upon a particular language, discipline or region of the Middle East, but upon broad subjects that allow the inclusion of articles that deal with similar general topics, yet focus on different languages, belief systems, regions, etc. This, we hope, will aid in highlighting the commonalities that exist across the various specialities, and contribute towards validating the approach of the book. Within each section, the papers are ordered chronologically according to the period of study.

The volume contains three sections dealing with the concepts of knowledge and language in Middle Eastern Societies: **Section I: Linguistics and Literary Analysis**; **Section II: Production, Classification and Transmission of Secular and Religious Ideas**; **Section III: Knowledge, Language, Politics and Identity**. The ideas discussed include: ways in which language and literature that are attributed to the divine and to human beings have been studied and analysed; the roles that have been suggested for religious and secular knowledge in human society; how such knowledge is produced, classified and transmitted; and the critical epistemic and linguistic dimensions of conflicts involving issues of politics and identity. It is recognised that the concepts mentioned in these ideas are not easily defined and are by no means divorced from each other; for example, the nature of knowledge as being religious or secular is in itself a classification thereof, and affects its production and transmission; the religiosity or secularity of a composition is judged by studying the language that is employed using linguistic and literary tools; language that influences perceptions of identity often has implications for politics, and conforms to the beliefs of the composer, be they religious, secular, or a mix of both.

The assignment of each article to a section, while acknowledging its complexities, is based upon that which seems to be its main focus. The reader may, however, come to conclusions that are different from our own. The difficulty of this task illustrates to some extent the fundamentality of the concepts of knowledge and language to our very existence as human beings. This, in turn, emphasises the importance of studying such concepts especially in the spirit that this book propagates; i.e. under the mantle of area studies, with the view that specialists in "different" fields can learn from each others' approaches by realising the commonalities that exist between the various ideas that they study, as well as between the diverse methodologies that they employ in their study.

A description of each section and its articles follows with the aim of introducing their subject matter in more detail and highlighting their commonalities.

Section I: Linguistics and Literary Analysis

The first section of this book examines ways in which language and literature that are attributed to both the divine and to human beings have been studied and analysed. It illustrates human preoccupation with the standards that define outstanding compositions, especially those that are ascribed to the divine and generally placed on the highest pedestal of linguistic and literary achievement. Some of the articles discuss the features found in scriptures such as the Torah and the Qur'an, which render them unmatched by any other human writing. These range from their being absolutely truthful, to being delivered in a particular mode of communication, to containing deep oceans of meaning that convey the very essence of human existence and the created worlds. Other articles examine works that are attributed to human beings and are appreciated for their conciseness and ability to convey vast amounts of information in a few words. Celebrated works are studied and rewritten time and again to forward various personal goals and aims, one article observes, while another probes the problems of pedagogy that accompany a language that is considered "sacred." Overall, the studies underline the human endeavour for perfection in that which essentially defines them; their knowledge and language.

The section begins with a journey into the captivating realm of medieval Persian literature. Christine van Ruymbeke, in her article "A Thrice–Pierced Pearl: Three Re-Writings of the Story of Khosrow and Shīrīn," presents an engrossing analysis of the story of Shīrīn and Khosrow in Ferdūsī's celebrated *ShāhNāma*, its rewriting in the 11th

century Neẓāmī's *masnavīs*, and based on Neẓāmī's rendition, in Amīr Khosrow Dehlavī's *Khamsa*. She presents a synopsis of each of the stories and highlights the main structural differences, comparing and contrasting the particular rewritings in order to point out their techniques and aims. Exploring the attitude that lies behind the works, she examines whether the acts of rewriting imply admiration or criticism, and whether the ambition was to equal or surpass compositions by famous predecessors. The triad of works is seen as a manifestation of a rewriting phenomenon that is not limited to the medieval Persian literary world

From the study of rewritings of works acknowledged for their inspirational qualities, we move towards considerations of the attributes that render a work outstanding, particularly one that is believed to be of divine origin. Alexander Key, in his article "Language and Literature in al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī" highlights how an influential 5th/11th century Muslim thinker understood superlative language. Unlike many of his predecessors and contemporaries, al-Rāghib saw the most important aspect of language and rhetoric as the quality of being truthful. Unlike the others, therefore, he did not see the inimitability of the Qur'an as stemming from its excellence of rhetoric and eloquence, but from its attribute of being wholly true. The Qur'an's unique form, which did not conform to any of the established genres, also contributes to its inimitability, although it could have been reproduced if not for the doctrine of *ṣarfa* (dissuasion). Key discusses these views in the context of other contemporary discourses, and in the process provides a valuable survey of al-Rāghib's thoughts regarding poetry, *majāz* (non–literal expression) and *ḥaqīqa* (literal expression), contradictions in poetry and rhetoric, and syntactic structure. The conclusion argues for a view that is seldom stated explicitly in the Islamic tradition: the language of poetry can be of the same supreme standard as that of the Qur'an.

Aziz Qutbuddin's article "A Literary Analysis of *Taḥmīd*: A Relational Approach for Studying the Arabic-Islamic Laudatory Preamble," continues the examination of the features that raise the literary calibre of a work in the eyes of its audience. Qutbuddin proposes a potentially ground-breaking method for analysing the Arabic–Islamic laudatory preamble that commonly occurs at the beginning of literary and oratorical compositions, and is referred to as *taḥmīd*. Previously considered in scholarship as basically a customary formality without much bearing on the "real" message and substance of the text or speech, Qutbuddin puts forward an alternative view for the preamble as a locus for highlighting pieces of information crucial to the purpose of the overall composition. He proposes the relational approach, which discovers in the concise and formal

structure of the preamble—comprising amongst other things praise of God and His Prophet—a network of relations that potentially express an individual's entire worldview. The approach is illustrated using preambles from classical and medieval Arabic writers such as Ibrāhīm b. al-ʿAbbās and ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. al-Athīr, and from the Fatimid chancery.

With Elke Morlok's article "Integrative Hermeneutics via Language and Ritual in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," and her valuable insight into an influential sphere of 13th century Kabbalistic thought, we return to reflections upon the aspects that set scripture apart from all human compositions. Morlok examines the approach of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla to the Torah. Gikatilla saw the scripture as a "woven tapestry" of hierarchical sacred names that are interconnected to each other, reflect the higher wisdom in the created worlds, and eventually lead, via appropriate "signs," to the higher Sefirotic world and the true essence of YHWH. In addition to the importance of the linguistic aspect for this mystical journey, he considered the ritual and performative elements as essential. Morlok presents an intriguing comparison of Gikatilla's views with those of ancient classical sources and medieval Jewish writers on the one hand, and especially of modern theorists of language, such as Harold Bloom, George Steiner, Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida on the other.

In the final article of the section, Zeinab Ibrahim and Mohab Attia highlight the consequences of diglossia that can beset a language for which, it is believed, the perfect example has already been set by the divine in scripture. In their article "'Egyptian Native Speakers' Awareness on the Relatedness of Varieties: The Case of Arabic," they argue for improving the Egyptian education system for teaching the two varieties of the diglossic Arabic language, namely Modern Standard and Egyptian Colloquial. They conduct a survey of three groups: 1. University students specialising in Arabic, 2. University students not specialising in Arabic but whose language of instruction is Arabic, and 3. Middle–aged Egyptian graduates of Egyptian national universities, in order to demonstrate the lack of awareness in these groups of the common vocabulary that exists between the two varieties. The authors conclude that this is precisely because the education system does not highlight such common ground, thereby making the task of acquiring the languages more difficult. The study is important not only for its suggestions for improving the pedagogy of Arabic in Egypt, but also for its potential to instigate similar studies in other diglossic situations.

Section II: Production, Classification and Transmission of Religious and Secular Ideas

The second section of this book takes us from the study of the ways in which divine and human language and literature are studied, analysed and differentiated, to an examination of the roles that are assigned to religious and secular knowledge in societies. The investigation is conducted by exploring the ways in which these two types of knowledge interact in the processes of production, classification and transmission. It is often argued that concepts such as "religious" and "secular" are more or less mutually exclusive, to the extent that they may even be irreconcilable. The articles in this section challenge the distinction between "religious" and "secular" and demonstrate that both types of knowledge are more often than not intertwined, and in most cases tend to complement and even promote each other. The articles cover various periods and areas of the Middle East including the Arabian Peninsula in Late Antiquity, Islamic thought in the 10th and 11th centuries, literature in modern Turkey, and the evolution of Sufi music in Tunisia during the 20th century.

The first article by Angelika Neuwirth is a contextual analysis of the Muslim scripture, the Qur'an. It calls attention to a significant aspect of the Book that has been more or less neglected to date in Western academia: the religious and secular oral and textual traditions of Late Antiquity in which it was revealed, and which in turn it often dialectically addresses. In order to support her arguments, the author first provides an overview of the highs and lows of modern critical Qur'anic scholarship, and then moves on to explore the audiences to which the Qur'an was addressed during the 20 odd years of its revelation. She points out and studies the commonalities between and references to the Judeo−Christian scriptures and other writings in the Qur'an, and concludes that it was revealed in a specific context of Late Antiquity, addressing an audience versed not only in Biblical beliefs but also in pre−Islamic Hellenistic philosophy. The Qur'an, Neuwirth observes, has an exegetical dimension vis-à-vis both of these traditions, the religious (Biblical) and the secular (Hellenistic), and the Prophet Muḥammad, in this sense, can be considered as an interpreter of them.

The dual framework of secular and religious knowledge is continued in the article by Nuha al-Shaʿar, although moving away from notions of production and transmission of knowledge to that of its classification. Analysing the theory of classification that is contained in the *Risāla fī al-ʿUlūm* of the 10th century Muslim philosopher Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, al-Shaʿar first describes the contents of the epistle and then places it in its

socio–political and cultural context. She points out that al-Tawḥīdī's composition seems to draw upon early and contemporary philosophical works. This, and the fact that he argues for the complementarity of religion and philosophy, indicate, she asserts, that in the mind of this medieval philosopher, there exists no conflict in the interaction between religious and secular knowledge. The article goes on to explain how al-Tawḥīdī deals with and classifies different sciences, in order to explain their value for human society. Al-Tawḥīdī, the author concludes, offers a shift in the way knowledge was deemed as valid. Moving away from categories of the revealed versus the non–revealed, al-Tawḥīdī advocates a basis in the moral function of knowledge. He stresses that both religion and philosophy can lead to truth and contribute to the well–being of the community.

The third article by Petr Kučera emphasises the importance and role of perceptions of what is religious and what is secular in the context of literary production in modern Turkey. Drawing attention to Turkish prose literature produced during the Kemalist modernisation project of the 1920's and 1930's, the article highlights concepts such as "secular religion" and "prophets of modernisation" that were introduced under its agenda. The focus is on works of two prominent Turkish writers of the period: Yakup Kadri (d. 1974), a contemporary of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who was actively involved in the Kemalist language reform that introduced Modern Turkish to the Republic, and Nurullah Ataç (d. 1957), an essayist strongly committed to the "purification" of Turkish. Kučera analyses their borrowings from and links with the Western Imperial novel of the 19th century, especially as regards its treatment of power and domination. He scrutinises the language used by these writers to show that there was a deliberate effort to "cleanse" the Turkish in which they wrote their novels from words originating from foreign languages such as Persian and Arabic. The writers, observes Kučera, reflect the Kemalist agenda of a new and modern Turkey, which is not only "Western" and secular but cleansed from its "Eastern" religious component. The works of these writers constitute a manifestation of the paradoxes and anxieties in the search for identity in Kemalist Turkey.

Continuing in the 20th century, Taoufik Ben Amor examines the amalgamation of religious traditions into secular institutions by tracing the evolution of the Tunisian Andalusian *mālūf* repertoire in the 20th century. He begins by noting the efforts of the French Orientalist d'Erlanger, who tried to systematise and preserve this genre of Sufi music by introducing European scientific notation. The incorporation of Western notation and instruments in *mālūf* music, however, provoked an outcome opposite to

the one sought by d'Erlanger. Prior to his undertaking, *mālūf* was a "living music," whereas the new notation, Ben Amor argues, made it static and accessible only to a few. The traditional channels of transmission such as Sufi shrines, cafés and private homes, gave way to newer outlets of dissemination, such as schools, youth clubs and conservatories. Yet another systematisation process was undertaken by the Ministry of Culture in their search for a "national" music after Tunisia gained independence in 1956. The repertoires moved from the streets of working class neighbourhoods to concert halls, festivals, and the national radio and television, from the Sufi *zawāyā* to national conservatories and music institutes, and from popular consumption to the ivory tower of *la musique savante*, art music patronised by the elite. In this way, this once religious music was forever transformed, stratified, institutionalised and secularised.

Section III: Knowledge, Language, Politics and Identity

Following from the investigation of ways in which language and literature that are attributed to both the divine and human beings have been analysed, and of the roles that are envisioned for religious and secular knowledge, the third section offers a fascinating collection of essays that examine the critical involvement of knowledge and language in past and contemporary conflicts involving issues of politics and identity. Language in particular is seen in this context not as a mere messenger or mediator, but as a message in itself. A 9th century Abbasid letter and a 21st century newspaper from the United States of America are analysed to demonstrate the influence that choice of language holds in political affairs, such as in creating and affirming alliances or hostilities, and putting forward imagined and even deliberately false façades and propaganda. The treatment highlights the strengths and depths of language and its far–reaching consequences in human history. Other articles in the section deal with issues in Israel and Palestine, in Turkey as well as Azerbaijan, to point out the inherent role that choice of language plays in human self–definition and identity. Considerations relevant to questions of identity range from the different socio–political values that are assigned to particular languages, to the use of language as a shield or a sword, to the nexus between literacy and alphabet, to the notions of pride, creativity and knowledge production. Overall, the essays touch upon matters regarding the role of knowledge and language that usually receive marginal attention in the field of socio–political studies.

The section starts with a stimulating article regarding the place of language in wartime diplomacy, and its potential power and influence

during such times, especially when linked with religious parlance. Vanessa De Gifis' "Piety and Partisanship: the Believer–Disbeliever Dichotomy in al-Ma'mūn's Civil War Rhetoric" takes us to the 9th century to uncover an engrossing mixture of wisdom, talent and wittiness in al-Ma'mūn's letter to the chief military advisor of his brother and adversary. In an effort to justify his claim to the Abbasid Caliphate, and gain the support of his addressee, al-Ma'mūn extensively and ingeniously quotes verses from the Qur'an. The deliberate blurring between the words of God and al-Ma'mūn, De Gifis observes, works to the latter's advantage by delivering an altogether powerful and convincing message. Al-Ma'mūn, through such clever and manipulative use of language, limits the advisor to one of two options: to obey him and be a believer, or to disobey and become a disbeliever. The article not only sheds light on the power of language, but in its demonstration of the frequent overlap between religious and political motives draws parallels with political affairs of our time and their connection to language.

Liora Halperin's "Other Tongues: The Place of *Lo'azit* in Hebrew Culture" is an intriguing study that sheds light on another aspect of language-in-conflict, in this case, the status within the Zionist movement of a set of non–Jewish European languages. Known collectively as *Lo'azit*, this set of languages was spread in Palestine during the *Yishuv* period, alongside Arabic, Hebrew, and specifically Jewish languages such as Yiddish. Elucidating the role of ideology, politics and power in negotiating languages, Halperin identifies the ambivalent feelings Zionists had towards European languages, which, on the one hand, represented prestige and cosmopolitanism, and on the other, were found to be in opposition to specific Zionist–Hebrew principles. Her original observation that there is an "overlapping diglossia" between *Lo'azit* and Hebrew contributes to our understanding of the connection between language, and cultural and political values. It augments perceptions of the Zionist movement as one with a desire for prestige, influence and power.

Continuing in the region of Israel and Palestine, but later in time, "Evacuating Gaza from Two Sides of the Atlantic: Comparing Frames of Representation in the Print News Media" presents yet another aspect of language-in-conflict. Luke Peterson's article is an important contemporary study of the manner in which the Israeli Disengagement Plan of August 2005 was covered in the US and UK print media. The reporting of the plan under which the Israeli government unilaterally withdrew its settlements from the Gaza Strip can be analysed, Peterson claims, using frames of representation that are "semantic or cognitive parameters within which contemporary news stories are related by the news media to the consuming

public." Interestingly, he observes that the UK print media offered a wide range of opposing political views in a more or less balanced portrayal of the story. By contrast, the US print media was skewed in favour of Israel; it represented Israeli society as lawful and moral, whereas the Palestinian side was depicted as inherently violent, barbaric, factional and tribal. The study leaves the reader to question at large the political knowledge and understanding of the electorate of the world's only superpower.

In the fourth article, the section moves from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to the ongoing Turkish–Kurdish tensions. Nesrin Uçarlar's "How Happy is the one who Speaks Turkish!" analyses the ways in which the politics of language have identified speakers of Kurdish as potential enemies of the Turkish Republic. Examining the Turkish nation–state building project, Uçarlar highlights its effects on the Kurdish population, and the manner in which the binary contrast of majority–minority served this goal via political and language prisms. This absorbing study, in its engagement with both theoretical matters as well as political realities, provides a meaningful contribution to the research of the place of language in issues of identity and majority–minority political relations.

The last article in this section takes us just outside the borders of the contemporary Middle East to Azerbaijan, presenting a case that historically and thematically comes within the scope of the book. Alison Mandaville's "Four Alphabets in 100 Years: Politics and Aesthetics of Written Language in Contemporary Azerbaijan" studies the political, psychological and aesthetical repercussions of new systems of alphabet introduced in Azerbaijan. With the help of extensive fieldwork and interviews, as well as analyses of the role of various political circumstances and events, the author exposes the conflicts of identity and the negative emotions evoked in young Azerbaijanis by their new forms of written language. Examining the future of literary output in Azerbaijan, Mandaville questions whether younger Azerbaijanis will be able to revitalise a creative knowledge–making aesthetic in the only form of written language to which many of them will soon have access.

Concluding Remarks

The collection of articles in this volume study various languages, from Arabic to Turkish, and Hebrew to Persian, in diverse regions, from the Arabian Peninsula to Azerbaijan, and Turkey to Israel and Palestine, within multiple traditions, from Hellenism to Judaism, and Christianity to Islam, while focussing on a variety of periods, from the classical to the medieval to the modern. By presenting them together, we hope to

highlight the considerable similarities that exist between the respective approaches and fields. The essays demonstrate that knowledge and language are in many ways fundamental to human beings, and issues regarding them materialise in innumerable facets of human existence. What is more, these issues are substantially similar in many respects: in the considerations of the attributes that render knowledge and language, especially that which is believed to be of divine origin, outstanding and worthy of admiration; in the preoccupations regarding the usefulness and interaction of religious and secular knowledge; and in the role of knowledge and language in areas of conflict and tension in affirming or negating political agendas and self–identities. It is to be keenly desired therefore—and we emphasise this as the crux of our book—that academics who engage in different branches of research in the area of the Middle East avail of one another's scholarship, learn from each other's methodologies, and collectively build upon a body of knowledge that should never be seen as dissociated.

Note: The articles that are included in this volume have undergone several stages of preparation. After the initial papers were orally delivered in the symposium in October 2008, their authors were given a year's time to develop them into publishable articles. These were then sent to peers in the field for review. The articles were then revised and finalised by their authors for publication.

SECTION I:

LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY ANALYSIS

A Thrice-pierced Pearl: Three Re-writings of the Story of Khosrow and Shīrīn[1]

Christine van Ruymbeke

Several of Ferdūsī's characters and episodes were the source of inspiration for Neẓāmī's eleventh–century *masnavī*s. About a century later, Amīr Khosrow Dehlavī wrote his own version of Neẓāmī's work, followed in this by several later authors in the Persian, Central Asian, Indian and Ottoman–Turkish worlds. The present paper is a brief attempt to analyse the urge in this medieval Persianate world, as exemplified by these three poets, to rewrite episodes taken from predecessors' works. What attitude lies behind these rewritings? Admiration for the older work, or implied criticism? How far did these Persian authors aspire to equal or surpass what had already been written by famous predecessors? How similar or different were their aims and techniques? And finally, how comparable are these attitudes to the re-writing phenomenon in other world–literatures?

The episode under scrutiny here is the story of Shīrīn and Khosrow. The *ShāhNāma* passage is itself a rewriting, as Ferdūsī indicates in the introduction to the *Dāstān-e Khosrow o Shirin*. Neẓāmī took over the story, mentioning the *ShāhNāma* as a source, but refuting that his work is a re-writing. I am not aware of arguments showing that Amīr Khosrow Dehlavī did or did not look back to the *ShāhNāma*. However, from the fact that he composed a *Khamsa*, recasting each of Neẓāmī's *masnavī*s, boasting that "the star of his poetry has risen high and has made Nizami

---

tremble in his grave,"[2] we may consider that he did relate to Neẓāmī rather than Ferdūsī when he wrote his *Shīrīn o Khosrow masnavī*. Thus, in his case, we are presented with the guarantee of filial certainty. However, the significant intertextual resemblances found in Amir Khosrow's poem provide us with different rhetorical re-writing strategies than in the two earlier works.

I propose to first look at the synopsis of the story in Ferdūsī's, in Neẓāmī's and finally in Amīr Khosrow Dehlavī's works, highlighting structural differences and briefly pinpointing examples of their rewriting techniques and probable aims.[3] Widening the debate, I will then briefly consider these as manifestations of a phenomenon which is not limited to the medieval Persian literary world. The present comparative essay has no higher ambition than to illustrate the general phenomenon of re-writing by musing on three Persian authors' approaches, using established scholarship on these works (to which I will only refer in a limited and cursory manner in order to highlight particularly relevant details).

Structure of the stories of Shīrīn and Khosrow

I have elsewhere analysed the story presented by Ferdūsī.[4] The *ShāhNāma* deals with Shīrīn's story only briefly.[5] Careful close–reading of the episode yields a picture which is surprisingly at odds with the accepted

---

[2] Cited in Mirza, M. V. "The Life and Works of Amir Khusrau" (PhD diss., University of London, 1929; reprint Dehli, 1974), 191.

[3] An abridged outline of each plot is mentioned in the Appendix. The re-writing of the Khosrow o Shirin story has been discussed in detail by Duda, H. W. *Ferhad und Schirin. Die Literarische Geschichte eines Persischen Sagenstoffes* (Praha/Paris/Leipzig: Orientální ústav, 1933). I revisit here certain aspects of Duda's essay and hopefully bring some up-to-date elements into the debate.

[4] van Ruymbeke, C. "Firdausi's Dastan-i Khusrau va Shīrīn: Not Much of a Love Story!" in *Proceedings of the Shah Nama Conference held in Cambridge, November 2003*, ed. Melville, C. (Cambridge: Pembroke Papers 5, 2006), 125–47.

[5] In Mohl's edition of the *ShāhNāma*, Khosrow Parvīz's reign counts 4,201 lines (*beyt*). The last 720 of these are gathered under the heading *Dāstān-i Khosrow o Shīrīn* (ll. 3481-4201). However, only 152 *beyts* deal with the actual story of Shīrīn's recapture of the king's heart and of the various consequences this has on the Shah's life. Shīrīn also features prominently in the next reign, that of Khosrow's son Shīrūye, now Shah Qobād, which lasts a mere seven months according to Ferdūsī and fills 604 lines, mostly devoted to Khosrow's condemnation and assassination. The last 123 lines of these (481–604) are gathered in Mohl's edition under the heading *Dāstān-e Shīrūye bā Shīrīn, zan-e Khosrow Parvīz va koshta shodan-e Shīrūye.*

image we have of the story. It is with disapproval, sometimes stern and austere, sometimes amused, that Ferdūsī depicts Shīrīn as a scheming, ambitious courtesan, whose origin remains obscure, and whose beauty ensnares the besotted Khosrow, inspiring him to inglorious, un-kingly attitudes. The whole scandalous episode must have rocked Iranian society and Sassanian monarchy quite a bit and this must have been the reason for Ferdūsī's inclusion of the story in his chronicle of Khosrow's reign. As it unfolds, we are given to see that even when she becomes one of the monarch's wives, Shīrīn's position remains in jeopardy for many years. Briefly referring to the Sassanian social system, Ferdūsī alludes to how she is only a low–class, second or third–rate wife, who is neither honoured by husband nor by society, whose sons will not attain high offices, let alone ever hope to climb on the throne and who will not—perhaps the most important aspect for ambitious Shīrīn—inherit anything if the king pre–deceases her. As author of a historical epic, Ferdūsī's interest lies not with romantic love stories, but with the legal, social and political resonance of the king's love affairs.[6]

Any attempt to analyse Ferdūsī's rewriting of the story is doomed by our ignorance of his source(s). There is a general consensus amongst scholars to consider that he used both oral and written sources to compose the different parts of his *ShāhNāma*. We know of at least four older—now lost but for a passage attributed to Daqīqī—verse or prose *ShāhNāmas*, one of which probably is the "Old Book" Ferdūsī repeatedly mentions.[7] As to the sources used for the particular episode under scrutiny here, we only have his brief admission in the introduction of the *Dāstān-e Khosrow o Shīrīn*, that he has culled the tale, retelling an "old story," taken from an "antiquated book [*nāme-ye bāstān*]." He proposes to bring the story up to date. His work, "dispeller of misery," is to serve as "a memorial of the proud ones."[8]

We are unable to contrast his work with this unidentified older source and can only take his introductory remark at face value. This then, is a rewriting of "an old–fashioned story," with the implication of criticism for

---

[6] The whole episode is anecdotal and is not considered relevant to the *ShāhNāma*'s progression line of Sassanian history. For example J. S. Meisami does not mention Shīrīn in her description of Khosrow Parvīz's reign in Ferdūsī's *ShāhNāma*; Meisami, J. S. *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 39.

[7] See for example the entry on Ferdūsī in de Blois, F. *Persian Literature: A Bio-bibliographical Survey. Volume V, Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period* (London/New York: Routlegde Curzon, 2004), 107–10.

[8] Ferdūsī, *ShahNama*, ed. Mohl, J., book 4/7 lines 3481–3.

the older, "antiquated" book. Thus, Ferdūsī considers his version a modern work, which he naturally hopes will be attractive to his target audience. He adds that this is a feel–good, uplifting story. The adjective he uses, *ghamkesār*, is often used to qualify wine. The allusion puts us in the frame of a story perhaps read out in a *majles* which will have a similar uplifting effect as wine. Also, Ferdūsī writes with an eye to serving the memory of the kings. Does that mean that he remains true to his historical source text whatever its contents or, on the contrary, that he amends and emends any element which might, according to him, soil the memory of the kings?

Handicapped as we are to globally judge the way and technique of Ferdūsī's rewriting, let us restrict our scrutiny to just two elements which derive from established points in *ShāhNāma* scholarship. The structural elements of the episode as told in al-Tha'alibi's Arabic version—although less detailed—agree with those in Ferdūsī's story. Tha'alibi's comments regarding Shīrīn, however, are enthusiastically positive[9] and lack Ferdūsī's refined, delicate psychological analysis and critique revealed by my close–reading of the episode. Thus, interestingly, considering that he means "to serve the memory of the kings," Ferdūsī is shown here to have exercised a choice in the existing sources and to have followed the tradition which was critical of Shīrīn's influence on the kings. He was not concerned with creating a dreamlike heroine, and rather than considering the romantic potential of the relationship, he focussed on its jeopardising impact on the reigns of two kings, who opposed their council of nobles, for the sake of a dissolute passion.

The second element I consider briefly here is the possibility that Shīrīn was a Christian.[10] We must contrast this widespread rumour in older

---

[9] See his remark that Shīrīn was an extremely beautiful woman, endowed with every possible charm and till that day still cited as a paragon of beauty and perfection; Tha'alibi, A. *Histoire des Rois des Perses par Abou Mansour 'Abd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad ibn Isma'il al-Tha'alibi* (Paris: Impr. Nationale, 1900), 691–4; (I have consulted the French translation of this passage).

[10] According to Noldeke, T. *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden. Aus der Arabischen Chronik des Tabari ubersetzt und met ausfuhrlichen Erlauterungen und Erganzungen versehen von Th. Noldeke* (Leiden: Brill, 1879), 282 note 2, this information stems from Greek sources. Noldeke also mentions in connection with Khosrow Parvīz's reign, a Saint Shīrīn, different from the beautiful courtisane (Ibid., 288). See also Christensen's unreferenced remark (though he probably means that he found the information in the tradition of the Arabic translations of the *Khvadaynamagh*) to the same effect, adding that Shīrīn influenced the king's attitude towards Christians in his kingdom; Christensen, A. *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1944), 446, 451; see also below Bal'amī's description of Shīrīn as a "Rumi slavegirl."

sources, with the fact that Ferdūsī remains silent on Shīrīn's origin and religion. This may mean that he had no knowledge of the rumour. A second and more intriguing hypothesis would be that the poet chose to suppress this information. In that case, the presentation of Shīrīn without family background or religious inclinations stresses and explains her character's lawlessness and non–eligibility for matrimony as well as her ensuing lack of moral elegance and noble scruples. That the Christian background was not synonymous for Ferdūsī with social rejection is evident from the fact that Khosrow's queen was the Christian daughter of the Byzantine emperor. Ferdūsī describes several times how she kept her faith, nevertheless playing a positive, if back–stage, role in Khosrow's reign.[11]

Two centuries separate the *ShāhNāma masnavī* from Neẓāmī's work. The date for his *Khosrow o Shīrīn masnavī* is 1180–1. While Ferdūsī wrote in the epic *motaqareb* meter (v--/v--/v--/v-), Neẓāmī chose the *hezāj* meter (v---/v---//v-), and composed about 6500 *beyt*s, against a mere 275 *beyt*s specifically devoted by Ferdūsī to Shīrīn's interaction with the two shahs. Neẓāmī transformed this rather sordid episode in the Sassanian dynastic history into a radiant, gripping and romantic love–story, describing Shīrīn, the chaste, charming, almost too-perfect-to-be-true Armenian princess as the *anima*[12] of the far-from-perfect Persian prince, and later Shah, Khosrow. The romance consists of a long wait for the couple to finally unite after a long succession of meetings and partings. Though the poet mentions historical facts, such as Khosrow's finding help in the Byzantine court to fight his rival Bahrām Chūbīn, nevertheless history's intrusion into the love interest is but flimsy here. Neẓāmī also introduces important secondary characters such as Shāpūr, Khosrow's friend and confidant, the courtesan Shakkār who will fascinate Khosrow for a little while, and most famously, the devoted lover Farhād, who hacks away at mount Bisutun.

---

[11] See van Ruymbeke, C. "Firdausi's Dastan-i Khusrau va Shīrīn," where I further develop this point.

[12] Or his "good angel," his "other half," his "'light' heroine," a figure opposed to his dark side, who will guide him. See for the use of these terms in a Jungian analysis Booker, C. *The Seven Basic Plots. Why We Tell Stories* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 178, 298–300. Burgel also indicates that Shirin functions as the *anima rationale*, the uppermost part of the Platonic soul; Burgel, J. C. "Nezami's World Order," in *A Key to the Treasury of the Hakim. Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of Nizami Ganjavi's Khamsa,* eds. Burgel, J. C., and van Ruymbeke, C. (forthcoming); see also Meisami, J. S. *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), *passim*.