
Persian Miniatures as Textual Unconscious: Illustrations of *Layli va Majnun* in the 1431 Hermitage *Khamsa*

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One of the most frequently illuminated tales found in medieval Islamic manuscripts, the love story of Layli and Majnun enjoys an exalted status that endures to this day. The love between them, first told in literary form by twelfth-century poet Nizami Ganjavi, operates on two simultaneous planes: that of earthly desire and that of the spiritual pursuit of the Beloved. A copy of the *Khamsa*, Nizami's anthology of five poems in which their story appears, is currently held by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. This manuscript, known as Ms. VR-1000, dates from 1431 and was transcribed by the calligrapher Mahmud for Sultan Shahrukh, son of Timur and ruler of the Timurid dynasty. The section featuring Layli and Majnun's story includes thirteen miniature paintings along with the *nastaliq* text. Adel T. Adamova, curator of medieval Persian art at the Hermitage, observed that most previous scholarly discussion of the 1431 *Khamsa* has treated the images as independent pictures, segregated from each other and from the text. "I believe that, instead," Adamova wrote, "[the illustrations] must really be seen as an integral feature of the manuscript, closely tied to the text" ("The Hermitage Manuscript" 78). In deference to Adamova's directive, this article examines the relation between text and image in order to understand how the miniaturist's interpretations exceed, undermine, and ultimately allegorically reinforce the textual narrative, thereby creating dis-/continuities within the manuscript. In this effort, I rely on American medievalist Stephen G. Nichols's conceptualization of the textual unconscious to describe how the 1431 *Khamsa* illuminations engage in critical dialogue with their textual referents.

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Nizami's *Layli va Majnun*

Nizami Ganjavi was born and spent his life in Ganja (modern day Azerbaijan) then part of the Seljuk Empire. He is widely considered one of the eminent poets of the Persianate world and his poetry serves as a regional heritage alongside the works of Ferdowsi and Rumi. The editors of *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi*, Kamran Talattof and Jerome W. Clinton, write that his oeuvre “includes the romantic dimensions of human relations as well [as] the heroic” and that his poetry “plumbs the human psyche with an unprecedented depth and understanding” (1). Little is known about Nizami’s life; he was not a court poet, having refused the role to maintain some degree of independence over his art (Chelkowski 4). Thus, most of what we know about him is derived from the autobiographical content of his works. While some scholars have claimed that Nizami’s advanced understanding of Sufi theology indicates his membership in a Sufi brotherhood, others like Talattof and Clinton have argued that there is no direct evidence for this (7). His work is undeniably infused with Sufi principles and expresses Sufi imagery and metaphor; however, as Talattof and Clinton have argued, Sufi learning was “relatively commonplace” in the time and place of Nizami’s life (7). These scholars argue that while the Sufi aspects of his work are of paramount importance, we simultaneously disservice ourselves by limiting our reading of his work to religious interpretation.

According to the preface of *Layli va Majnun*, Nizami was initially reluctant to render Majnun’s story in verse when commissioned by the Transcaucasian ruler Shirvanshah Akhsetan (Gelpke XIII). It was Nizami’s young son, Muhammad, who convinced him that the project of relating the simple story of an Arab boy who wanders through rough mountains and dry deserts while composing poems of love and anguish would be worthwhile (Watson 35). Muhammad was right; Nizami’s masterful poetic rendition attracted many imitators and illustrators throughout the ensuing centuries. Significant early imitations of his epochal poem include Amir Khusraw’s *Majnun and Layla*, Jami’s overtly mystical allegory, as well as Hatefi and Maktabi’s versions. These creative renditions were completed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, well after Nizami’s 1188 version. The Nizami editor Vahid Dastgerdi said, “if one were to search all existing libraries, one would probably find more than 1,000 [versions of the story of Layli and Majnun]” (cited in Gelpke XI). Indeed,

Majnun's story endures even today as a paragon of divine love and devotion, and has found new expression across many genres of art, from novels and films to operas and even pop songs.¹ Islamic cultural historian Peter Chelkowski has concluded that *Layli va Majnun* may be the most popular romance in the Islamic world (66).

Nizami was not the inventor of Majnun's tale. Anecdotes of the mad love-sickness of the poet called Majnun, who pined after a girl named Layli, circulated in the Arabian peninsula long before Nizami took up the work of poetically rendering the story. As Islamic scholar and translator Rudolf Gelpke has elucidated, there are sound reasons to believe that this Bedouin youth lived some five hundred years before Nizami's poetic version. Gelpke states that while we cannot be certain of the historical Majnun's existence, "there are good reasons to believe that he did [exist], probably in the second half of the seventh century A.D., somewhere in the western half of the Arabic peninsula" (XI). In his contribution to *A Companion on World Literature*, Persian literature scholar A.A. Seyed-Gohrab writes that "stories about Layla and Majnun were so popular in early Arabic sources that they achieved a normative character" ("Longing for Love" 2). However, Nizami first collected these narrative fragments and transformed them into a "coherent and entertaining romance" with complex psychological portrayals and a compelling duality between mystical and profane love (2). Through Nizami, Majnun's madness became one facet of a triadic unity where Majnun's love, insanity, and lyrical brilliance are indivisible aspects of the same remarkable devotion to the Beloved.²

At the time when Nizami was active, the rise of *ghazal* poetry reflected an increasing tendency for poets to use both amatory and mystical vocabulary interchangeably to describe mundane and divine love (Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun* 72). The ambiguity produced by such a practice leaves ample room for multiple, conflicting interpretations of Layli and Majnun's story. For example, beginning in the last years of the twelfth century, the legend became increasingly popular and was often used to illustrate technical Sufi concepts (73). Islamic art scholar Chad Kia explains, "writers alluded to the legend proverbially and Sufi poets composed their own version[s] of the romance" (*Art and Allegory* 114). Majnun's wholehearted devotion to Layli appealed to Islamic mystics who saw in him a paragon of the arduous path towards union with the Beloved. (Seyed-Gohrab,

“Longing for Love” 2). More recently, scholars like Muhammad Taqi Ja’fari and Barat Zanjani have focused on the traditionally Islamic elements of the tale (Talattof and Clinton 7), while still others have investigated the metaphoric depths of imagery associated with Majnun (see Asghar Abu Gohrab’s exploration of ophidian imagery). Chelkowski has argued, it is “virtually impossible to draw a clear line . . . in any of Nizami’s poetry, between the mystical and the erotic, the sacred and the profane” (67). Thus, it is no simple task to offer a definitive reading of *Layli va Majnun*. In what follows, I argue simply that the images that accompany the text dramatically inform our understanding of Majnun’s madness and devotion.

Comprised of approximately 5,000 rhyming couplets, the story of *Layli va Majnun* is included in an anthology of five of Nizami’s poems, known alternatively as the *Khamsa* (an Arabic loan word to Farsi meaning ‘Quintet’) or *Panj Ganj* (meaning ‘Five Treasures’). The name “Majnun” is a sobriquet for his real name, Qays. “Majnun,” which can be translated as “insane” or “possessed by a jin,” is given to him by the community in response to his insatiable desire for his beloved, a beautiful young woman named Layli who belongs to a different Bedouin tribe. The passionate love exchanged between Majnun and Layli is often compared to the ill-fated romance of *Romeo and Juliet*.³ A more fitting parallel might be the exalted love of Dante for his Beatrice, a figure who, like Layli, blurs the line between profane and divinely inspired love. The plot of *Layli va Majnun* is simple. Qays and Layli fall in love at school. As their love grows, the community begins to talk about them and Layli’s father explicitly forbids Qays from contacting Layli. Qays becomes increasingly desperate and his behavior earns him the name “Majnun.” Distraught, Majnun flees from human company into the desert and spends his days wandering around, composing love poems for Layli. He roams naked among animals and lives in a cave, barely eating or sleeping. After a few failed attempts to win Layli back, he surrounds himself with animals that protect him from inquiring visitors. Meanwhile, Layli’s father marries her off to another man, but she remains virginally faithful to Majnun. Eventually, an old man arranges a clandestine visit between Layli and Majnun and the lovers recite poetry to each other from a distance. After a time, Layli’s husband dies; she dies shortly thereafter, and, on her deathbed, confides her secret, enduring love for Majnun to her mother. When

Majnun hears of her death, he and his animal protectors rush to her graveside and remain there until he too dies.

Layli and Majnun's story has been enduringly compelling for illustrators. Chad Kia states that it is one of the most illustrated works in the history of Islamic art (*Art, Allegory* 114). Seyed-Gohrab agrees, writing that the romance "has been a favorite with manuscript painters from at least the fourteenth century in a wide geographic area from the Balkans to the Indian subcontinent" ("Longing for Love" 9). Illustrated manuscripts of Nizami's *Khamsa* are currently housed in various museums around the world. Art historian Priscilla P. Soucek's foundational dissertation, *Illustrated Manuscripts of Nizami's Khamsah: 1386-1482*, identifies at least nine extant illustrated manuscripts of *Layli va Majnun* currently housed in European museums. Chelkowski cites twenty-seven known copies, not including the recently discovered Bryn Mawr manuscript (116). Kia attributes Layli and Majnun's popularity to the rise of Sufism and the resulting proliferation of texts with Sufi motifs and themes (114). Richard Ettinghausen, in his foreword to Chelkowski's *Mirror of the Invisible World*, points out that, much like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Nizami's *Khamsa* offered miniaturists many opportunities to showcase a wide range of settings, characters, and scenes (VII). One manuscript, the 1431 *Khamsa* held by the State Hermitage Museum, offers an atypically large series of *Layli va Majnun* illuminations. It is to this manuscript that we now turn.

The 1431 Hermitage *Khamsa* (VR-1000)

The Hermitage's 1431 *Khamsa* was originally produced in Herat, a city formerly at the heart of the Timurid Empire and now part of modern Afghanistan. Under Shahrukh's reign, Herat was the preeminent artistic epicenter of the Persianate world; the Sultan relocated the most skilled artists, illuminators, and scribes there from Shiraz, another significant center of manuscript production. While little is known about the production process for manuscripts created under Shahrukh's artistic patronage, the name of the calligrapher of this manuscript appears in the colophon: Mahmud (Ghiasian 39). Unfortunately, the identity of the illustrator or illustrators remains unknown.⁴ At present, the manuscript consists of 502 folios with no binding, measuring 237 x 137 mm, with a written text surface of 170 x 87 mm. The text appears in three columns, two of which are horizontal with 23 lines and one narrower diagonal column featuring

16 lines (39).⁵ The colophon lists the production date as 10 Rabi' II 835/25 December 1431 (39). The entire *Khamsa* contains thirty-eight illustrations, thirteen of which pertain to the story of Layli and Majnun. The large number of relevant illustrations is worth noting, given that an even distribution of illustrations across the five poems would guarantee each poem only seven or eight illustrations.

Shahrukh's rule and artistic patronage have been described by art curator Norah Titley as "a period of renaissance" where "the finest manuscripts were produced" (44). As Titley explains, this sequence of miniatures corresponds to the Herat style of miniature painting, which includes a large expanse of sky in the background, typically painted in either lapis or gold (45). Interestingly, Titley finds the Hermitage VR-1000 manuscript to be of "abysmal quality" and suggests "that the artist, besides being untalented, was probably working from sketches" (58). Considering art historian Yael Rice's 2011 article concerning the discovery of a related set of illustrations, Titley may be right—at least regarding the sketches. Rice shares the discovery of an unpublished, early fifteenth-century illustrated copy of Nizami's *Khamsa* in the Bryn Mawr College Library. Though incomplete, the Bryn Mawr manuscript includes most of the text and ten images depicting the story of Layli and Majnun. For viewers of both manuscripts, the similarities between the two sequences are immediately evident. As Rice explains, "the overlap in the selection of illustrated scenes . . . is striking, with seven of the ten subjects illustrated in the Bryn Mawr *Khamsa's Layli va Majnun* represented in the 1431 Hermitage *Khamsa*" (272). Further, Rice points to the abnormality of the Bryn Mawr's large number of images: the *Layli va Majnun* section contains ten images, whereas all other known copies produced in the same period contain between three and seven images that depict their romance (272). Not until the Hermitage's 1431 *Khamsa* do we see a similarly large number of images dedicated to *Layli va Majnun*. While the exact nature of the relationship between the Bryn Mawr and Hermitage *Khamsas* remains difficult to identify, it is safe to assume based on their remarkable similarities that there *is* some relationship. Perhaps the Bryn Mawr sequence—admittedly, of a truly "abysmal quality"—served as a kind of template for the Hermitage illustrations, or perhaps both sequences relate to each other through an obscure chain of influence.⁶

As many scholars have noted, Timurid manuscript illustrations

typically feature a few illustrations that closely replicate traditional compositions, a few of which build upon existing archetypes, and at least one or two entirely new compositions (see Adamova, Ghiasian, and Bloom and Blair). Adamova argues that compositional repetition allowed *ketabkhaneh* artists to follow tradition by showing respect toward their artistic predecessors as well as to demonstrate skills comparable to earlier masters. Adamova also makes it clear that each manuscript contains one or two miniatures that depict new subjects (“Repetition of Compositions” 72). Following Adamova’s argument, it should come as no surprise that the 1431 *Khamsa* includes images that have an obvious relationship with previous manuscripts. What particularly ought to interest us are those modifications made to newer images that reflect, but nevertheless deviate from, their predecessors, as well as the images for which there is no precedent: the new compositions. Turning away from the manuscript momentarily, I will now lay some theoretical groundwork for the analysis of manuscript illustrations before turning to the illustrations themselves for evidence.

Theoretical Foundations

In “The Image as Textual Unconscious: Medieval Manuscripts,” Stephen Nichols argues that medieval manuscript images serve as a kind of “textual unconscious.” He advances this notion of the textual unconscious over and against a more common-sense conceptualization of the purpose and function of manuscript images. Far from being “simple illustrations” of the text, Nichols argues instead that manuscript images assert themselves as autonomous signs that bear complex and dis/continuous relationships to texts (13). By dis/continuous, I mean that manuscript images engage in complex, dialectical conversations with the textual narratives that purportedly serve as their referents. Or, in Nichols’s own words, “the miniature does not illustrate meaning, it interrogates it” (16). Thus, far from images simply translating text into a visual medium, manuscript images engage with, undermine, bolster, and cross-examine textual narratives. Nichols is careful not to insinuate that images always contradict their textual referents. Instead, he makes it clear that images can be read both oppositionally (reflecting discontinuity) and allegorically (reflecting continuity) in sequential viewings, and that neither reading is truer. The allegorical reading is most important in this analysis because it reveals that the images are a kind of “textual unconscious,” inasmuch as they include objects,

postures, persons, or other aspects that are overtly absent from and yet covertly implied by the textual narrative.

In a strikingly similar vein of thought, Chad Kia offers an additional theoretical version by which we might balance the following analysis. In Kia's "Sufi Orthopraxis: Visual Language and Verbal Imagery in Medieval Afghanistan," he offers an analytical method for the "enigmatic figures" seen in the illustrations of Sufi and Sufi-associated Timurid manuscripts produced in Herat during the last decades of the fifteenth century. Kia breaks new ground in the interpretation of these enigmatic figures by explaining the significant influence of Sufism on Timurid court culture such as how painters, illustrators, calligraphers, and poets all shared a common vocabulary and system of signifiers (6). To give just a brief example: in accounting for the flutist who sits atop a crested hill in the late-fifteenth-century painting "Majnun on Layla's Tomb" (British Library, Or. 6810 f.144v), Kia first admits that the text that accompanies the image bears no mention of flutes or of flutists. However, by demonstrating that contemporary court poets and painters understood the story of Layli and Majnun as a mystical allegory for divine union with the Beloved and by establishing the commonality of literary rhetorical allusions in Persianate poetry of the period, Kia makes the case for deciphering the meaning of the enigmatic flutist within a "metanarrative of gnostic and religious ideas" (4). Pointing towards the Sufi poets Rumi and Jami, who each open a book of poetry with reference to a reed flute and thereby establish the instrument as a symbol of union with the Beloved, Kia situates the illustrator as possessive of the artistic agency to include allegorical, non-textual referents (5). Thus, far from the flutist being a random illustrative accent, the illustrator has in fact included a figure found nowhere in the text only to underscore Majnun's death on Layli's tomb as a moment of divine union. This ability of the image to exceed the limitations of the text by including characters and objects not textually present coincides with Nichols's claim that the image can undergo a transition from "an initial appearance of subservience" to "an instrument of analysis in critical dialogue with poetic strategies" (Nichols 17). By focusing narrowly on the enigmatic figures found in the Or. 6810 f.144v manuscript, Kia argues for the image's ability to infuse the text allegorically with gnostic signifiers not present in the text itself, revealing, in Nichols' terms, the underside or unconscious

of the text. In this image-led reading, the flutist was “really there” in the text all along.

While Kia’s article is concerned with the period of Herat manuscript production just after the period that yields the manuscript under consideration in this article, I believe that his insights into the allegorical relationship between image and text can be usefully applied a few decades earlier within the same Herat school of painting. Sliding backwards in time from the patronage of Sultan Hussayn Bayqara to that of Sultan Shakrukh, I am similarly interested in the images’ ability to reach outside their immediate textual referents in order to support a reading of the text. However, whereas Kia is concerned with the relationship between the image and the contemporary Sufi discourse in which it appeared, I am more broadly concerned with the capacity of the images to deviate from, defy, and allegorically reinforce the text. Medievalist James Rushing has explained, “some pictorializations represent radical rethinkings of the material, while others follow the texts fairly closely . . . it can be assumed neither that an artist’s response to a given story was that of the typical contemporary, nor that an artist’s goal was the slavish ‘translation’ of a text into another medium” (273).⁷ Therefore, we must look closely at the relationship between the images and their textual referents to detect just how the images inform, interrupt, defy, and/or affirm the text they purport to represent. I will next employ the theoretical gestures developed by Nichols and Kia to offer several readings of the Hermitage *Layli va Majnun* images that show their ability to manifest as the text’s irruptive, allegorical unconscious.

Layli in the Garden

We can now turn our attention to the first of several examples of the image as textual unconscious. In the sequence’s third image (fig. 1, p. 118), we see a beautiful palm grove with Layli seated and looking relaxed amidst seven tall trees. Three are cypress trees (heavily associated with Layli in the text) and the others are date palms. Majnun stands in the background in his typical ascetic garb and cross-armed stance. The lovers are separated in the scene by three physical barriers: a formerly silver (now likely black from oxidation) stream that cuts diagonally across the frame; the edge of the garden as it meets the desert; and by another edge where the desert meets a rocky precipice.

Each successive barrier emphasizes the lovers' physical separation and the numerous obstacles prohibiting their union. What at first glance appears to be simply a faithful visual interpretation of the text is in fact a deviation from it on the part of the miniaturist. In the text, Majnun is not the one who walks the perimeter of Layli's garden; instead, it is a stranger singing Majnun's verses. Layli "heard this melancholy strain [and] broke into tears and wept so bitterly that it would have softened a stone" (Nizami 44).⁸ The artist chose here to defy the reality of the text in order to portray its message allegorically by using the figure of Majnun not to represent Majnun himself as physically present near the garden, but to depict the textually unconscious presence of his poetry. Consequently, poet and poetry are collapsed into a single, lovelorn entity; the artist reflects the text's larger, allegorical claim that the poet is nothing but his love songs for Layli.

Mirroring this compression of poet and poetry is the metonymic harmonization of Layli and the Beloved, achieved through the artist's use of seven trees. The number seven frequently recurs within Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions and is generally considered to be holy.⁹ Further, the cultural significance of the two types of trees serves to associate Layli with mystical elements of the divine. First, the cypress tree, one of the oldest and most important symbols in Iran, represents both the material life and the eternal after-life since, like an evergreen, it does not seem to die. Meanwhile, the date palm is the most important tree in peninsular Arab culture, revered as a nutritious desert resource and repeatedly referred to by the Prophet Muhammad as "God's bounty." By depicting her in the grove surrounded by seven revered and divinely associated trees, the artist affirms Layli's literal and metaphorical status within the poem as both beloved and Beloved. However, since the trees are two different kinds—date palms and cypresses—we are reminded of the lovers' fundamental and inexorable separation. While these examples do not necessarily defy the textual context per se—the number and type of trees in the garden is not specified—they do point towards this artist's recurring tendency to represent the narrative with allegorical rather than literal fidelity. In the examples that follow, the miniaturist chooses repeatedly to defy the text in order to portray a higher order of textual meaning.

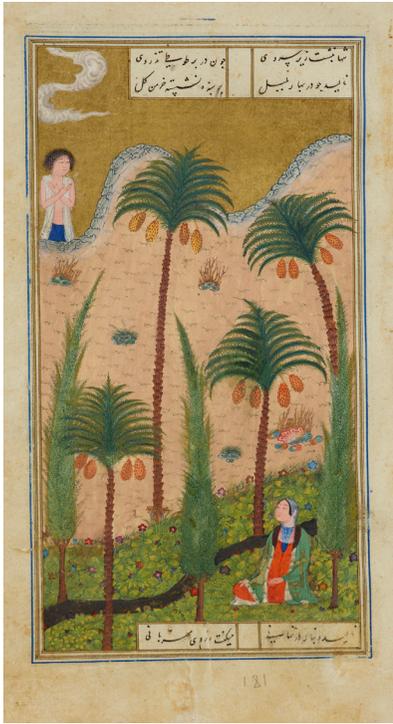


Fig 1, 181A, Fig 2, 193A, © The State Hermitage Museum. Photographed by Vladimir Terebenin. Color images at rmmla.org.

Madness as Community Attribution

The eighth image of the sequence offers the most explicit rendition of Majnun’s madness as he is paraded about, bound in chains, by an old beggar-woman (see fig. 2, p. 118). Nizami states that Majnun happened upon a poor woman dragging a chained man who “looked and behaved as if out of his senses” (77). When he asks her about the deranged-looking man, she tells Majnun that he “is neither crazy nor a criminal. I am a widow and he is a dervish . . . I decided to parade him in chains, hoping that people would *think him mad* and give us food and alms” (77, emphasis added). Majnun then begs the old woman to substitute him for the dervish, claiming that “I am one of those unhappy men with a disturbed mind. I should be tied up—not he” (78). The woman agrees and, after binding Majnun, drags him from

place to place as he raves and snarls while reciting poetry. Yet, although Majnun refers to himself as insane, the miniaturist is attentive to the strategic intention of this utterance within the text. The strategic use of Majnun's mad performance becomes clear once they arrive in Layli's community, for it is here that Majnun offers a desperate apology to Layli: "Look, I am doing penance because I made you and your people suffer . . . as a punishment, I have given up my freedom" (78). Here, Nizami implies that Majnun's "madness" is in fact a mechanism for the safe expression of Majnun's penitence and devotion. As Seyed-Gohrab has argued, far from Majnun's madness being simply an innate reaction brought on by his longing and despair, it may "serve a purpose" in protecting him from the hostility and violence that would otherwise be meted out to him by Layli's tribe. Seyed-Gohrab explains how Majnun previously used madness "as an excuse to stay in the desert" and to distance himself from the concerns of earthly men (*Layli and Majnun* 153). Even the famed Persian poet Attar picked up on this community element in this brief reflection on Majnun's madness:

One night Layli said secretly to Majnun:
'O you who are deprived of reason because of your love for me,
Be a stranger to reason as long as you can;
plunder reason and be a madman.
Because if you come to me with reason
you will receive many blows in my alley.
But when you are *considered to be* a madman in love
no one will bother with you' (quoted in Seyed-Gohrab 153,
emphasis added.)

As this quotation makes explicit, Majnun accepts the ascription of madness to his character to protect himself and his beloved. His declarations of love and bizarre behavior are tolerated more peaceably under the veneer of insanity than if he were to "come to [Layli] with reason."

Recognizing the strategic value of Majnun's initial affirmation of his own madness, the illustrator chooses to depict Majnun in the center of Layli's community, not as a madman, but as a demure and passive captive who stands quietly in a penitent position with his head bowed and arms crossed. This aesthetic decision at once denies and affirms the text: it denies the textual depiction of Majnun as a

raving madman who throws himself around so violently that he eventually breaks his chains; yet it affirms the textually unconscious understanding of Majnun's madness as a purposeful manipulation of the community's appraisal of his psychology. Again, the artist has defied the text and embraced discontinuity only to portray some other aspect of the textual narrative with greater accuracy. In this instance, the artist has picked up on the text's unconscious belief in the necessity of community in constructing Majnun's madness.

This community-led ascription of madness to Majnun's character is underscored by his textual substitution of the bound dervish. The dervish, a man intent on divine union, is on a path towards enlightenment. As Majnun steps into his place, Nizami makes it clear that Majnun is also resolutely on the path towards spiritual unification. As many mystics before him, Majnun must accept the community's accusations of insanity because, as Seyed-Gohrab explains, accepting this predicate is part of the tradition of becoming a mystic (*Layli and Majnun* 151). Nizami informs the reader at the start of the poem that "what today we mistake for a padlock, keeping us out, we may tomorrow find to be the key that lets us in" (2). Understood in the context of the parade of chains, the chains that bind Majnun and visually signify his madness serve as the "key" that let him into Layli's community to express his desperate apology. Read across the entire narrative, it is Majnun's madness that ostensibly prevents his unification with Layli; yet, on a more mystical level, it is exactly his madness that forces their separation, thus unlocking the door that bars Majnun, like most mortal men, from experiencing spiritual union with the Beloved. By embracing the community's allegations of madness, Majnun is able to apologize directly to Layli for the suffering he caused her community in the battle with Nawfal and to affirm his increasingly ascetic dedication to love and nonviolence. To understand more about the origins of Majnun's nonviolence, we now turn to the battle against Nawfal, where Majnun's asceticism first takes shape.



Fig. 3, 185A, Fig. 4, 189A, © The State Hermitage Museum. Photographed by Vladimir Terebenin. Color images at rmmla.org.

Ascetic Devotion

The fourth image depicts the second battle between Nawfal (Majnun's benefactor) and Layli's tribe (see fig. 3, p. 121). Her tribesmen are in retreat, with their camels exceeding the far edge of the page in their haste to escape. Nawfal's fighters are in their most triumphant moment, and unification between Layli and Majnun seems imminent. In the background stands Majnun, anachronistically clothed in his ascetic rags, with his arms crossed over his chest, watching the battle from afar under a large tree. Here, in his ragged depiction, the image bears a contradictory connection to the text. At this point, Majnun should be wearing robes and sitting astride the horse that he will soon trade for a stag and two gazelles. Instead, the image defies the text by depicting him without the horse or sumptuous attire. While

initially this artistic choice seems defiant, a second examination reveals that this representation again aligns with a higher plane of textual fidelity. The artist has recognized Majnun's increasingly nonviolent and compassionate nature and has chosen to depict the image of his soul rather than that of his body during the battle. Between the two renditions—the text's and the image's—we can again observe an illustrator questioning the text, emphasizing and deemphasizing certain elements according to the interpretation he most desires to convey.

An additional note on this particular scene: while it is true that Majnun turned the other cheek in the first battle between the tribes and “stood aside . . . sharing the suffering of both sides” it is unclear what role, if any, he plays in the second battle that is visually depicted here (Nizami 58). We certainly know that Majnun chided Nawfal for failing to win Layli in the first battle, thus inspiring his benefactor to resume the fighting. We also know that after Nawfal accedes to the pleas of Layli's father to spare her from Majnun, the latter gallops away to again retreat into the desert. Instead of rendering Majnun's place in the second battle ambiguously by, perhaps, including a character that *might* be Majnun in the skirmish, the artist, ignoring the text, places him firmly within his increasingly familiar ascetic position of renunciation. In the image, we see what Nichols describes as “the reverse or perverse side of the narrative,” which has the power to evoke “repressed meanings” (19). By choosing to place Majnun in a well-established posture of abstinence and renunciation during the battle, the image defies its supposedly simple role as an unbiased “translator” of the text. Instead, it makes a direct claim on the text's repressed position of Majnun during the second battle and forces the reader to return to the text with this image of renunciation in mind.

Majnun's nonviolence seems to be important to this artist since he dedicates not one, but four images primarily to the depiction of Majnun surrounded by his animals. The relationship between Majnun's loving non-violence and the animals who loyally devote themselves to him requires further explication. In the first animal image (image five in the sequence), Majnun happens upon a pair of gazelles that have just been snared by a hunter (see fig. 4, p. 121). The rich, soft brown of their eyes reminds him of his beloved Layli, and he becomes outraged at their capture. As Kia has noted, the motif of gazelles that represent the Beloved occurs even in pre-Islamic poetry and has

appeared in Sufi poetry for centuries (“Sufi orthopraxis” 8). In the text, as depicted in the image, Majnun barter with the hunter to free the gazelles in exchange for his horse. This exercise is repeated when Majnun happens upon a hunter with a trapped stag; he gains the stag’s freedom in exchange for his clothing. Naked in the desert, Majnun is no longer quite so alone, since the animals he has freed begin to gather around him and attract additional devotees. As Gelpke has translated, “a lion began to keep watch over Majnun, like a dog guarding a flock. Other animals followed, a stag, a wolf, a desert fox . . . it was a peaceful army that traveled with Majnun as he roamed the wilderness, his animals always at his heels.” (107-08). Living as a kind of exiled prince among the animals, Majnun’s compassionate love and abstinence from violence is transferred from the realm of normal human capacity into divine exaltation.

Regarding the artist’s depiction of Majnun with his animals four times, it is true that this decision does not counter the text. After all, the four scenes with the gazelles, the stag, the raven, and the menagerie have textual referents. However, there is what Nichols refers to as an “asymmetry of emphasis” between the text and the images: while Majnun’s nonviolence and loving kindness is central to his textual character, the artist’s four-time depiction excludes other arguably key episodes from the textual narrative, for example, Majnun’s encounters with his parents before their deaths. Thus, in choosing to represent Majnun repeatedly with his animals, the artist insists that we read the text from the images’ perspective by hyper-emphasizing his ascetic nonviolence at the expense of deemphasizing his contact with loved ones. As Kia writes, the animals that surround Majnun are “equivalent to Majnun’s attributes as a half-naked, bare-headed, vagabond lover-saint, *who is shunned by or shuns the society of men, but is loved by beasts and God?*” (*Art, Allegory* 103, emphasis added). In further support of this claim, we recall the images’ correspondence with the earlier Bryn Mawr *Khamsa*, which includes ten images depicting the story of *Layli va Majnun*. When contrasting these two sets of illustrations, the most significant deviation comes in the form of the Hermitage’s inclusion of three additional “animal encounters” compared to Bryn Mawr’s. Majnun’s rescue of the gazelles and the stag as well as his conversation with the raven are fully absent from the Bryn Mawr illustrations. In accounting for this asymmetry of emphasis, we are

forced to “reread the text in the final analysis from the standpoint of the image’s perspective” (Nichols 20). In so doing, we discover that the Hermitage artist has staked a claim in favor of Majnun as both a messianic leader and a master ascetic. In both cases, the one they call Majnun is ironically a quintessential embodiment of love, nonviolence, and spiritual devotion.

Closer examination of the images’ propensity to hyper-emphasize Majnun’s ascetic devotion to and exalted status among the animals also highlights a stark contrast between what we might shorthand as “Majnun the Mad” and “Majnun the Exalted.” As earlier clarified, when among human communities there is an unconscious current within the text (as revealed in the images) that understands Majnun’s madness as both strategically emphasized *by* him and ascribed *to* him by the community. However, it is evident in both text and image that, when Majnun is among his *own* naturalistic nature community, he is perfectly sane. In fact, he is of such sound judgment that he is truly respected as a leader among his animal devotees. Here he establishes a peaceable kingdom where “the wolf no longer devoured the lamb . . . and the jackal buried his age-old feud with the hare” (Nizami 108). In the ninth image, Majnun is seen resting at a wellspring underneath a flowering tree, surrounded by his animal community (see fig. 5, p. 125). The gazelle sitting closest to him has her head in his hand as the two gaze into each other’s eyes.¹⁰ As mentioned, the gazelle repeatedly symbolizes Layli within the poem, and the entire menagerie of animals is drawn towards Majnun’s loyalty to her. In the image as in the text, the setting is overall peaceful and idyllic, with an absence of chaos, despair, or madness. Here we understand Majnun to be in his most natural state: reciting poetry in the desert, surrounded by his loyal community. He is not ranting and raving; rather, amidst his animals, he is at peace as a leader among his disciples. The miniaturist takes care to underline fourfold Majnun’s communion with the animals, not just simply to serve as a counterpoint to the ascriptions of madness or to assert “the image as an instrument of analysis in critical dialogue [with the text],” although these aims are certainly met (Nichols 17). In the final instance, Majnun’s nature community is hyper-emphasized in order to prepare the sequence’s viewer to be attentive to other signs of his exalted, purified state.



Fig. 5, 203A, Fig. 6, 191B, © The State Hermitage Museum. Photographed by Vladimir Terebenin. Color images at rmmla.org.

Majnun the Exalted

The significance of the wellspring in the ninth image may well be overlooked without recourse to a third theoretical methodology for examining manuscript images. I would like to bolster our assessment of the images as a kind of “textual unconscious” by invoking the *approche sérielle* first formulated by French medievalist Jérôme Baschet and as applied by American medievalist Jerry Root. The *approche sérielle* is concerned especially with the relationality of images. It is an approach equipped to discuss the relationship among images *as they are*, and not necessarily as they reflect narrative content (or, in our inquiry here, into the textual unconscious, as they simultaneously do and do not reflect narrative content). As Root explained in his investigation of a particular sequence of illuminations, “[the visual element, when] on

its own or isolated in one scene . . . is a non-signifying visual marker, but when viewed as *a related part of a series of images*, it introduces a rhythm and syntax that allows it to participate in a visual language of gestures and objects” (Root 176, emphasis added). The attentiveness to sequence that the *approche sérielle* provides may deepen our reading of the images as a kind of textual unconscious.

With this attentiveness to sequence in mind, we can return our gaze to where it began, to the third image (fig. 1, p. 118). Recall that in this scene, we see Layli settled peaceably in a garden while Majnun (or the figure of his poetry) roams the perimeter. This time, our eyes find the oxidized stream that cuts diagonally across the lower third of the frame, providing just one of the barriers between Layli and Majnun. This stream appears as a non-signifying visual element within the image until one takes care to notice its recurrence in not one, but in two additional images within the sequence. The stream first returns in image seven, a scene in which Majnun has already begun to collect a following of animal disciples and is in deep conversation with a perched raven (fig. 6, p. 125). His compassion for Layli and, by extension, for the entire world is growing daily and the animals, sensitive to his remarkable loyalty, have gathered around him and look to him as a leader. As Majnun speaks to the raven, it takes wing just after sunset. Its yellow eyes are slowly replaced by a starry sky, where “a countless multitude” stares down at Majnun and compels him to “hide from their gaze” and to “cover his face with his hands, and weep bitterly” (Nizami 76). Majnun’s increasingly tender love and compassion for Layli, her tribe, the gazelles, the stag, the raven, and all other creatures is causing him significant grief and, at this junction, it is unclear if he will survive his own devotion. This impasse is even rendered visually in the stream: as it flows, a chokepoint can clearly be seen. However, by following the stream, we arrive at the ninth image (fig. 5, p. 125), the scene in which, as previously discussed, Majnun can be seen seated at the mouth of a wellspring, content among his animal companions. Without an attentiveness to sequence, this wellspring might be simply understood as another “non-signifying visual element” within the image. But *in relation to the other two scenes with bisecting streams*, this wellspring can be understood as the culmination of Majnun’s spiritual journey. After much suffering and strife, he has found the wellspring of compassion. In this scene, his earthly devotion to Layli has brought

him to the end of the path of earthly desire and he has transitioned into a state of enlightenment. The animals that peaceably surround him have given up their quarreling in homage to his divine loyalty to, and spiritual proximity with, the Beloved. The *approche sérielle* helps us understand that, by sequestering himself in the desert away from humans and by keeping strict ascetic principles, Majnun has entered into a higher plane of consciousness and has achieved full union with his Beloved. He therefore says in the text that Layli and he are one, and the one is he. In his words, “the name is only the outer shell and I am this shell, I am the veil. The face underneath is hers” (Nizami 104). In the eternally held gaze of the ninth image, Majnun and Layli meet at the mouth of the wellspring and embrace gently. That she is depicted as a gazelle emphasizes the triumph of the lovers’ spiritual union in spite of ongoing physical separation: terrestrially speaking, Layli *is not* there with Majnun, but in a more important and mystical sense, she *is* there, as the gazelle and as the Beloved. It does not matter that the lovers will never again overcome their separation in the corporeal world. They are already together; they are forever together in such a way that they do not need physical proximity to be close.

At first, this reading found within the sequential ordering of images may seem textually redundant: Nizami’s case for Majnun’s enlightenment is abundantly clear, even in translation. However, by cross-referencing between the text and the image, we are made aware that the stream has no significant textual referent. Majnun spends his days meandering the Najd, a high desert plateau that stretches across the heart of contemporary Saudi Arabia. The Najd boasts several lush oases, but most of the land is arid desert. While wadis (dry riverbeds that fill up with water after heavy rains) might reflect a more realistic illustrative choice, instead we see water running throughout Majnun’s many seasons in the desert. Here again we see evidence of the miniaturist’s decision to defy the text only to depict its most essential message faithfully. By painting verdant landscapes where there ought to be rocky precipices and by including water where there ought to be only sand, the miniaturist guides our eye to Majnun’s wellspring as an unexpected fountain in the midst of his dry desert of renunciation and illustrates that the path of ascetic devotion is a path to union with the Beloved. Majnun admits this view when approached by a young disciple from Baghdad by stating: “Who do you think I am?”

A drunkard? A lovesick fool, a slave of my senses, made senseless by desire? Understand: I have risen above all that, I am *the King of Love in majesty*” (Nizami 161, emphasis added). Majnun at last abandons his lovesick “madness” to admit to his own exalted, messianic status. He has made the journey upstream and achieved union with the Beloved. By using the textually unfounded stream as a metaphor, the miniaturist has allegorized the text and drawn us through the same process of discovery that Majnun himself experiences: the madman is not mad at all. He is “the King of Love in majesty.” He is enlightened.

Conclusion

During this analysis, I have shown that the 1431 *Khamasa* miniatures accompanying the story of Layli and Majnun utilize strategic discontinuities with the textual narrative in order to depict a higher magnitude of allegorical meaning. In particular, the textual undercurrent of Majnun’s madness as a community ascription rather than as a natural fact is quite literally illuminated by the manuscript images: they illustrate, by deliberate contravention, what the story chooses not to narrate. Thus, attending to the textual unconscious as revealed through the images enables us to see that Majnun is not simply mad; rather, the ascribed predicate ‘Majnun’ serves several strategic purposes that ultimately allow him to move forward along his path towards unification and enlightenment. Our image-led reading of his madness and nonviolence allegorically bolsters one of the most transparent claims within the text: that Majnun, the “King of Love in majesty,” is an enlightened figure. As demonstrated, there is value in refusing to limit the power of medieval manuscript illuminations to direct, mimetic elaborations of the texts they purport to represent. Careful utilization of theoretical methodologies like the *approche sérielle* and the “textual unconscious” can fully credit the images with their ability to irrupt, contradict, and, at times, affirm the text. Further, we should be attentive to the images’ ability to reach outside of mimetic textual engagement and pull in contemporary gnostic and mystical referents, thereby enhancing certain philosophical and spiritual themes within a given story. As Nichols takes care to remind us, it is, after all, “the miniatures which ‘choose’ the texts they illustrate” (Nichols 16). Attending to the agency of images within medieval manuscripts can help elucidate claims hidden by the nature of the textual encounter.

NOTES

¹Rock musician Eric Clapton's songs "Layla" and "I Am Yours" are based on Clapton's readings of Rudolph Gelpke's translation of the story of *Layli va Majnun*. For more detailed information about the global popularity of the story of Layli and Majnun, see Seyed-Gohrab's "Longing for Love."

²Asad Khairallah has compared aspects of Majnun's character to certain archetypal predecessors, including the lovesick poetry of Orpheus and the ascetic animal companions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh's* Enkidu. However, Khairallah argues that Majnun remains unique from these predecessors in that he "is the archetype of the triadic unity of love, madness, and poetry as channels for identity with, and annihilation in, the Beloved" (3). See his chapter "Madness or Poetic Vision" for more information on the Majnun archetype.

³For comparisons between the two romances and a summary of the existing discussion, see Jerome W. Clinton's "A Comparison of Nizami's *Layli and Majnun* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*" in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi*.

⁴Adamova believes that the manuscript reflects a single illustrator and that variations seen in the images are due to the painter's movement between repeated and novel compositions. Following Adamova's informed opinion, this article refers to a single unknown illustrator. See Adamova's "Repetition of Compositions."

⁵Adamova wrote that the manuscript likely had thirty-nine original illustrations, appearing across 503 folios. See "Repetition of Compositions."

⁶See also the 1410-11 *Miscellany* (Add. 27261), now housed in London, with which Adamova has previously associated the Hermitage *Khamsa*. The illustration in the *Miscellany* depicting the "Battle with the Tribes" so closely resembles the 1431 Hermitage *Khamsa* that it is possible that a stencil was used. See Adamova's "Repetition of Compositions."

⁷For medieval Western (especially German) examples of the relationship between text and image, see the work of James Rushing, Kathryn Starkey, and Michael Curschmann.

⁸The Nizami quotes that appear in this article are taken from Rudolph Gelpke's 1966 translation, which in turn is based on Nizami editor Vahid Dastgerdi's previous scholarly assessment of over thirty

Persian medieval manuscripts depicting the story of Layli and Majnun. This translation does not exactly reflect the story of Layli and Majnun as written in the 1431 *Khamsa*, especially since the 1431 *Khamsa* appears to include the apocryphal union between Layli and Majnun in Layli's community. Scholars with full access to the 1431 Hermitage *Khamsa* in its original language would be best equipped to modify and correct my analyses.

⁹This is also true of other faith communities, including Christianity. For a near-global consideration of religious regard for the number seven, consult Mutiso's "Number Symbolism in World Religions" and Moin's "The Number Seven."

¹⁰The body language of Majnun and the gazelle mirrors that of the European archetype of the unicorn (a symbol of Christ) resting its horn in the lap of the Virgin Mary. This archetypal parallel underscores not only the divine association between Layli/the gazelle and the Beloved, but also Majnun's increasingly exalted state of purified devotion.

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