

Alasdair Watson

From Qays to Majnun: the evolution of a legend from 'Udhri roots to Sufi allegory

TOWARDS THE END of the 12th century of the common era,¹ the Persian poet Abu Muhammad Nizami of Ganjah, whose proper name was Ilyas son of Yusuf son of Zaki, composed the third *masnavi* or long poem in rhymed couplets of his *Khamsa* ('Quintet') also known as the *Panj Ganj* ('Five Treasures'). This *masnavi*, entitled *Layli u Majnun*, was apparently written in the space of four months; quite a feat considering it is composed of more than 4,000 verses.² It was dedicated to the Sharvan Shah Akhsitan I (d. 1197), ruler of Sharvan,³ the region in the eastern Caucasus where Nizami lived. The Shah had sent a letter to Nizami requesting that he compose a poem 'like a hidden pearl' of the love story of Majnun and Layla and dedicate it to him, and, like the Shah's own lineage which was said to go back to the last of the pre-Islamic Sasanian kings, the poem should be just as long.⁴ Nizami found himself disconcerted; he did not have the courage to disobey the king's letter but could not see a way to retell the story in full, until his son Muhammad put a manuscript of the story of Layla and Majnun in his father's hand and consoled him and encouraged him to write the romance.⁵

Although it reached its most perfect form in Nizami's version and is celebrated in several world literatures, the story of Layla and Majnun began in the Arabian desert of the 7th century of the common era with the tragic, 'Udhri love story of Qays ibn al-Mulawwah and his beloved Layla. In this article, I will present a brief introduction to the concept of 'Udhri love, an overview of the Majnun Layla story in early Arabic sources, in Persian literature, and finally, I will look at the story as it was developed into a Sufi allegory by Persian litterateurs such as Nizami.

On the Meaning of Layla (Layli), Qays, Majnun, and of Madness

در هر دلی از هواش میلی گیسوش چو لیل و نام لیلی

*In every heart there is an inclination
to love her. Her tresses are like
the night, and her name is Layli.⁶*

Hakim Nizami Ganjavi.

With this verse, Nizami first introduces us to Layli, and, in the Persian versions the form of the name is indeed *Layli* and not the Arabic form *Layla* as we see from the rhyme of this verse where the name is rhymed with *mayli* (inclination). Layli is among the girls studying alongside the boys (including Qays later to become Majnun) in the local *maktab* or writing school. In the illustration on page 37 they can be seen sitting together on a carpet with their writing tablets (*lawh*) and the *dabir-i danishamuz*, or teacher of writing and wisdom as Nizami calls him, seated to the right.

In the above verse, Nizami plays on the Arabic word for the night – *layl* – from which the personal name Layla is derived to draw attention to the fact that Layla’s tresses are a very dark black – in Arabic, *laylatun layla* is the darkest and most difficult of the nights of the month, especially, one might think, for the lonely lover. Interestingly, and certainly on theme, the word *layla*, can also mean the onset of drunkenness and intoxication (*nashwah*) as an effect of drinking wine. *Umm Layla*, the mother of *layla*, i.e. that which intoxicates, is a phrase used to refer to the usually dark wine in Arabic. Both meanings of the word hold the connotations of covering; wine or *khamr* in Arabic is so called because it veils the mind just as the night – *layl* – veils the world; *Layla* or night has indeed been called the *chador* or veil which covers the world. In Nizami’s epic, Layli spends a great deal of the story in concealment behind the *pardah* or veil. This is interesting because Nizami does not appear to believe in *pardah* for women; as Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab has pointed out, it can be gleaned from an episode in the *Iskandarnama*, the last book of Nizami’s *Khamsa*, that Nizami believed that men should curb their lustful glances rather than women being forced to be veiled.⁷ Nizami shows great sympathy for Layla’s predicament, but when taken as a symbol of the divine, between whom and the world of matter and sense there stands 70,000 veils, this perhaps begins to make sense.⁸

Returning to our line of poetry, it could be read here that Nizami is introducing Layla as the Universal Beloved – in *every heart (dar har dili)* there is an inclination to love her. Does the poet mean that just the students in the class love Layla? The way Nizami portrays the classroom setting is that the other students were too concerned with reading, writing, and reckoning to pay attention to Layla; whereas Majnun was too absorbed in the grammar of *Layla* to pay attention to his studies. The other students were taken over by study of the *sifat-i fa‘al* or hyperbolic adjective and the *hal* or clause of attendant circumstances in grammar, whereas our two lovers were enjoying another *hal* or spiritual state in contemplation of one another.⁹ Rather, does Nizami not mean that the heart of every human being inclines by nature to love of the absolute and the ‘Real’ of which Layla is a symbol?

Now that we have discussed some of the meanings of Layla’s name, we will make mention of the meanings of Qays and Majnun. According to Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, author of the *Kitab al-Aghani* (‘Book of Songs’), Qays’ full name and lineage was Qays ibn al-Mulawwah ibn Muzahim ibn ‘Udas ibn Rabi‘ah ibn Ja‘dah ibn Ka‘b ibn Rabi‘ah ibn ‘Amir ibn Sa‘sa‘ah.¹⁰ The name Qays carries the connotation of measuring or discerning which implies intelligence – hence the transition from Qays to Majnun – intelligent to incoherent. The word *qays* also means difficulty and hunger, both of which Majnun experienced.¹¹ Some have also said that it means moon, but I have not yet found evidence for this. As for Majnun, it means, literally, possessed by *jinn* or, by extension, crazy or mad. Abu Sa‘id al-Asma‘i, however, said that Qays was not mad but that he had a defect known as *luthatun* or *lawthatun* like that of the poet Abu Hayyah al-Numayri.¹² If we read *luthatun*, this means that he was slow and ponderous, if *lawthatun*,



Layla and Majnun at school.

From a manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, dated 909 (1504).

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Pers. d. 105, fol. 125v.

then we are back to madness as it means tinged with insanity. Although in his poetry, Qays sometimes refers to himself as *majnun* or mad, as does Layla refer to him, he really considers himself to be *mubtala* or afflicted by trials from God. He says:

فضاها لغيري وابتلاني بحبها فهلا بشيء غير ليلى ابتلانيا

'He [God] has decreed Layla to be for another, and has afflicted me with love for her,

O would that He had afflicted me with something other than Layla.'¹³

It is said that as soon as he recited this verse, he lost his mind.

This idea of affliction rather than madness is in accord with the Islamic view of madness since it is related that the Prophet of Islam passed by a group of people who had gathered in a circle round a person having a fit. He asked why they were gathered and they told him it was a mad person having a fit (*majnunun yusra* '). The Prophet said that this person was not mad but rather, afflicted (*mubtala*) and proceeded to give the definition of true madness as being an overweening sense of one's own self-importance reflected in one's gait and manner.¹⁴ Now we will turn to the subject of 'Udhri love.

'Udhri Love

'Udhri love, and its poetic product the 'Udhri *ghazal* or lyric, takes its name from the Arabian tribe of the Banu 'Udhrah, a sept of the Quda 'ah federation. 'Udhri love is typified by a man's attachment and dedication of himself and his poetry to a single woman throughout his life during which his passion burns intensely for her and he seeks union (*wisal*) with her. Although the love is generally requited, i.e. the woman loves him in return, union is prevented – a state of affairs either self-imposed by the poet, or, more usually, imposed by societal factors. This deprivation leads to suffering and torment, sickness, madness, and ultimately, death, often by death-wish. Known as a tender-hearted tribe with hearts like 'the hearts of birds which dissolve away like salt in water',¹⁵ poets of the Banu 'Udhrah such as 'Urwat 'Afra' (d. 650 CE) provided early examples of this phenomenon. Other poets of this school are Qays Lubna (d. 688 CE) of the Banu Kinanah, Jamil Buthaynah (d. 701 CE) also of the Banu 'Udhrah, Kuthayyir 'Azzah (d. 723 CE) of the Banu Azd, and, of course, Majnun Layla (d. circa. 688 CE) of the Banu 'Amir in whose poetry and life the 'Udhri phenomenon perhaps reached its apotheosis. You will note that in all of these examples, the poets are identified by the names of their beloveds – so Majnun Layla means Layla's Majnun, 'Urwat 'Afra', 'Afra's 'Urwah and so on. 'Udhri love seems to have been characteristic of Bedouin poets of the deserts of the Northern Hijaz and Najd in the early Islamic period; its chaste love has often been contrasted with the hedonism of the cities typified by the more explicit verses of poets such as 'Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a (d. 712 CE), whose light-hearted amorous exploits with noble Arab women who came to Mecca as pilgrims were the antithesis of the enduring love of the monogamous, suffering 'Udhri poets.

The Islamic revival of the religious and moral principles of 'iffa (chastity or restraint), and *zuhd* (abstinence) may well also have been a contributing factor to the

development of this type of love. In this regard, one thinks of Joseph in the Qur'anic narrative who, when tempted by Potiphar's wife resists and remembers God, and becomes the paragon of chastity and patience.¹⁶ Others attribute a saying to the Prophet of Islam to the effect that whoever loves passionately and is discreet and chaste and patient and subsequently dies, then he is a martyr. Jamil Buthayna echoes this in a verse:

لكل حديث عندهن بشاشة وكل قتيل عندهن شهيد

Every conversation with women is felicitous,
Everyone who dies because of them is a martyr!

This verse earned Jamil an accolade from no less a noble Arab woman than Sukayna bint al-Husayn, i.e. the daughter of Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, who esteemed him higher than his contemporaries the poets Jarir, al-Farazdaq, and Kuthayyir because of it.¹⁷

Other religious concepts such as the poet being destined by God's eternal decree to love the beloved (as we saw in Majnun's verse earlier), the eternality and transcendence of love, which existed at the time of the primordial covenant in pre-eternity and which will continue in the afterlife where the lovers are finally united are also common themes in 'Udhri poetry.¹⁸ A verse by Imam Husayn's foster brother Qays ibn Dharih, known as Qays Lubna, says:

My soul became attached to her soul before we were created,
And after we were in the womb and in the cradle.¹⁹

'Udhri poetry was the forerunner of the 'Abbasid courtly *ghazal*, where the beloved is even more idealised and idolised, and may also have influenced the Troubadours and the rise of the notion of European 'courtly' love. The idea of the 'Banou-Azra' who 'when they love, they die' also re-found its way into European literature in the 19th century with Stendhal's treatise *De l'amour* (1822)²⁰ and inspired the Romantics.²¹

Qays and Layla in Arabic Sources

Despite the disputes as to whether Majnun ever actually existed, Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, author of the *Kitab al-Aghani* ('Book of Songs'), for example, relates from his source (Ayyub ibn 'Abayah) that he 'asked every branch of the Banu 'Amir about Majnun and found no-one who knew of him.'²² On the other hand, al-Isfahani also relates that al-Asma 'i (d. circa. 828 CE) asked a Bedouin Arab about Majnun al-'Amiri, and he answered: 'Which one do you mean? For amongst us (Banu 'Amir) there was a whole group accused of insanity so which one are you asking about?' I (al-Asma 'i) said: 'The one who was mad about Layla.' He said: 'All of them were mad about Layla!'²³

It seems then that there were a number of poets such as Muzahim ibn al-Harith, and Mu'adh ibn Kulayb, both from the Banu 'Amir who were also called 'Majnun' and whose sweethearts were also called Layla, but the most famous and the most prolific in terms of poetry (although much verse not authored by him has also been attributed to him) was Qays ibn al-Mulawwah.



Majnun at the Ka'ba.

From a manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, dated 915–16 (1509–10), Astarabad. State Library of Victoria, RARESF 091 N65K, fol. 136r.

According to the accounts of early Arab narrators such as Ibn Qutaybah and al-Isfahani, Qays and Layla were cousins from the tribe of the Banu 'Amir who first met and fell in love while tending their flocks as children in the desert. As children they were inseparable but when they grew up, Layla was secluded from Qays. Regret at this separation is evident from a later verse attributed to Qays which tells how he and Layla became attached to one another as '*youngsters tending our flocks; O would that, until today, neither us nor the flocks had grown up!*' They did meet again in their youth and declared their love for one another, but Qays' poetry about his love for Layla was becoming popular, something her family saw as dishonourable, and when he went to her family as a suitor his suit was rejected and Layla was forced to marry another man. Qays was inconsolable and took to wandering in the wilderness and consorting with wild animals and eventually lost his mind, hence his name Majnun, an Arabic term for one possessed or mad. Otherwise incoherent, Majnun, whenever reminded of Layla or when her name was mentioned, would compose, in perfectly formed speech, some of the finest Arabic poetry. Some, such as Nawfal ibn Musahiq, a noble Arab chieftain, took pity on him and tried to intercede for him, but Layla's people refused on pain of death to contemplate Majnun entering their camp and petitioned the authorities (the Sultan) to condone his killing in the event they did so; and indeed the Caliph of the time Marwan ibn al-Hakam's governor with responsibility for the taxes of Layla's tribe, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Awf, although initially sympathetic to Majnun, was soon swayed by Layla's tribe against him. Majnun was taken by his father to Mecca on a pilgrimage (opposite) in the hope that he might forget his obsession with Layla, but Majnun, while clinging to the drapes of the temple there, only prayed to God that his love for Layla be increased and that he would never ever forget her.

After Qays lost his mind and refused food and drink, his mother asked Layla to arrange to meet him; one night she did and begged him to spare himself. But he answered in verse: 'She said: "Why are you thus possessed?" So I said to her: "Love is graver than madness; the lover never recovers, while the madman only has fits every so often."' According to al-Isfahani, they both wept at this and then conversed until shortly before morning when they had to part for fear of being discovered by Layla's tribe. This was the last he saw of her. However, the *khobar* or news of each other's doings and sayings often reached the lovers; for example, one of the Banu Murrah who had been travelling through Najd passed by Layla's tent and told her, without knowing who she was, how Majnun was now wandering in the wilderness with wild beasts, incoherent except when a woman named Layla was mentioned. The man describes her reaction saying that he had never before seen such passion and grief. Another significant event mentioned by the narrators is Majnun's ransoming of a gazelle 'like unto Layla' caught by two hunters; the sources say that he gave them a sheep or a camel in its stead. As we shall see, much was made of this episode by the later romances. Eventually, Majnun was found dead in a deserted rocky valley, a final poem inscribed in the arid ground beside his head described the grief, the broken heart, and the desolation of the lover.²⁴

Qays and Layla in Persian Literature

From these Arabian roots, the story, recounted by the *rawis* or narrators of poetry, made its way to the Persianate world in the great cross-cultural fertilisation that began after the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iran in the mid-7th century CE. According to DihKhuda in the Persian Lexicon known as the *Lughatnamah*, it was the very same *Kitab al-Aghani* of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani and its patronage by Sahib Isma‘il ibn ‘Abbad, the vizier of the Daylamites, that was largely responsible for spreading the story of Qays and Layla and its associated poetry throughout Iran during the 4th century of the Hijra (10th century of the common era) and came to the attention of Baba Tahir Hamadani towards the end of that century.²⁵

A great many Persian writers wrote about or alluded to Layli and Majnun in their prose and verse. The Persian scholar ‘Ali Asghar Hikmat mentions 40 Persian and thirteen Turkish versions. Hasan Vahid Dastgirdi (d. 1942), who provides us with the definitive edition of the text, says that he has found more than 100, and that if a thorough search of all the libraries of the world was made, more than 1000 would probably be found.²⁶ However, the versions by Nizami (d. circa 1209), and Jami (d. 1492) are the most celebrated with that of Nizami remaining unsurpassed. The bare bones of the story (and I use the term advisedly, for even Nizami, when asked by his patron Sharvan Shah Akhsitan to write the piece, was sceptical as to what he could make of it since he thought the material to be a little scanty) remain the same in all versions, however, many embellishments are introduced by the Persian narrators. So, for example, in Nizami’s poem, Qays becomes the son of a ‘great king of the Arabs’,²⁷ and meets and falls in love with Layla at the local school in an urban rather than pastoral setting.²⁸ Jami, on the other hand, taking his cue from an alternative Arabic version of the story, has Qays meeting a group of women in the desert. He stops to spend the day with them and slaughters his camel in their honour, and converses happily for a time with a noble and beautiful lady named Karimah. After a while, another man named Munazil approaches and the women turn their attention to him and, much to his annoyance, Qays is spurned, leading him rue the unfaithfulness of women and to engage in a long quest for true and undying love until he eventually finds Layla.²⁹

Other embellishments include making the episode with Nawfal into a fierce and bloody battle in which Majnun can’t seem to make up his mind which side he is on, an exchange of letters between Majnun and Layla, Layla’s refusal to consummate her marriage with Ibn Salam to the extent that she strikes him, and Majnun becoming a king with a court of wild beasts at his command. Nizami also introduces a number of additional short anecdotes or stories by way of making one or other ethical or philosophical point. For example, he relates the story of the youth who, finding disfavour with the king he has served for ten years, is thrown to a pack of fierce dogs. The foresighted lad, however, had often secretly been bringing tasty morsels to the normally vicious dogs who, because of this, didn’t harm him. Nizami makes use of this story to compare the faithfulness of dogs and the unpredictability of a ruler’s favour, as well as drawing out other moral lessons

from it. In these literary versions, characters are more fully developed, and highly poetic and hyperbolic descriptions of the two lovers' beauty and character are to be found as well as a general use of artistic and metaphorical language.

Layla and Majnun as a Sufi Allegory

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about the versions of Nizami, and later, Jami, is the way the writers use the legend of Layla and Majnun as a vehicle for their mystical or Sufi worldviews, or as an allegory for the soul's journey towards God, the ultimate 'Beloved'. In Sufi thought, the beauty of the created world is a reflection and indicator of the absolute beauty of the Creator for which the mystic longs, and hence, given a mystical interpretation, Layla can be seen to represent the beauty of the Divine, and Qays the seeker on the path of union with the Divine who, in much the same way as the Angel Gabriel who symbolises the universal intellect was left behind when the Prophet, on his heavenly ascension, reached the lote tree at the furthest reaches of the cosmos, and then came within 'two bows' widths' of the Divine presence and lost his senses, Qays leaves behind the binding intellect and becomes Majnun, lost and intoxicated in his contemplation of the Divine beauty, but also suffering in this temporal world from separation from his beloved.

In common with the practices of many mystics, Majnun shuns the world and lives in the wilderness, often in a cave, with a rock for a pillow and wild animals for company as if in spiritual retreat (see p. 44). He fulfils the dictates of *zuhd* or abstinence, meaning *qillat al-ta'am*, *qillat al-kalam*, and *qillat al-manam* – minimum food, minimum speech, and minimum sleep. He is a great ascetic and when Salam of Baghdad visits him in the hope of becoming an adept and being a vessel for Majnun's verses, and offers him food, Majnun says that he has 'eaten the eater within himself',³⁰ meaning that he has conquered his lower desires and the demands of his animal soul. When his uncle Salim visits him and offers him food he again refuses telling him he has forgotten how to eat and needs no more than a few roots and grasses to sustain himself. Salim ends up agreeing that only one like Majnun, who is content with a little grass, is truly free; a king in this world. Here, Nizami introduces a story about a hermit who eats only grasses to emphasise the point. Although the lovesick Qays in the Arabic sources neglects to eat and drink, Nizami gives this abstinence a higher purpose as a means of subduing the *nafs* or carnal soul, and attaining freedom from desires to allow love to take over.

As a result of this, Majnun says: 'My soul is purified from the darkness of lust, my longing purged of low desire, my mind freed from shame. I have broken up the bazaar of the senses in my body. Love is the essence of my being. Love is fire and I am wood burned by the flame. Love has moved in and adorned the house, my self has tied its bundle and left. You imagine that you see me, but I no longer exist: what remains is the beloved.'³¹ Here, Majnun perfectly describes the Sufi state of *fana'* or annihilation of the self in the One, the Truth, or the Beloved. Ego no longer exists. This and many other passages in Nizami's poem show that he has died before he has died, as the Prophetic tradition dictates.



Majnun among the animals.
From a manuscript of Nizami, *Layla u Majnun*, dated 980 (1572–73), Samarqand, illustrations likely to be early-17th century, Mughal India. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Douce 348, fol. 42r.



Death of Majnun at Layla's tomb.
From a manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, copied c. 1504. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Pers. d. 105, fol. 175r.

The episode of Majnun ransoming a gazelle ‘like unto Layla’ from two hunters who had snared it is based, as we have said, on an actual event mentioned in the Arabic sources. Nizami develops this into a plea for compassion for all God’s creatures and suggests that to kill such beautiful and innocent beings is more fitting of the wolf than of human beings and that it is a great sin to kill a gazelle. Majnun enumerates the reasons why they shouldn’t be killed and the hunter agrees, but he is bound to act as he does for worldly reasons, dependency, and responsibility. Majnun gives the hunter his horse and frees the gazelle, gently kissing its eyes that are so like those of the beloved.

As for clothing, he wears nothing but a loincloth, even, as in paintings illustrating the story, when he goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca (see p. 40), something which fellow martyr to Divine love, al-Hallaj (d. 922 CE), insisted on doing rather than donning the statutory pilgrim garb, much to the chagrin of his contemporaries. Majnun occupies

himself with the *dhikr* or remembrance of Layla – everything reminds him of her, from the eyes of the gazelle, to the black crow which speaks to him of her black tresses. He weeps constantly at his loss, his state of separation from the beloved, 'scattering the pearls of his tears into the tresses of the darkness'.

In the end, the tragic element of the story is accentuated by Nizami with Majnun begging God to take his soul away in death at Layla's grave (opposite). As a friend of God, his prayer is answered and he is reunited in heavenly bliss with his beloved. Buried side by side, Layla and Majnun's grave becomes a place of pilgrimage where the prayers of those who visit are also answered. They are now elevated to the status of saints and martyrs to pure and eternal love.

To conclude, and as a final thought, it is possible to view Qays and Layla as representatives of the drunken and sober schools of mystical love respectively; with the ecstatic utterances (the *shathiyat* or theopathic locutions) of the former, and the silence but intense inner burning of the latter. In the *Mustatraf* of al-Ibshihi, the author quotes these verses attributed to Layla, a poet herself who said:

لم يكن المجنون في حالة إلا وقد كنت كما كانا
لكنّه باح بسرّ الهوى وإنني قد دُبتُ كتماننا

Majnun never experienced a state,
That I did not share with him.
Except that he divulged the secret of love,
While I was burning up in concealment.³²