

9 Taming the Unruly King: Nizami's Shirin as Lover and Educator

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TRAVELING ON HORSEBACK from country to country, inheriting the throne, rejecting a king's proposal of marriage and keeping him at her doorstep, advising a master mason on finishing a seemingly impossible project, and counseling a young and ill-behaved king in matters of ethics and rulership are not traditional female tasks in any premodern society. They are certainly not what we would consider a medieval Muslim poet's vision of routine activity for an ideal female protagonist. We have to reexamine our expectations at least in relation to Nizami's (d. 1209) celebrated romantic epic *Khusrau u Shirin*, since the activities mentioned fit comfortably in the diverse daily routine of the female protagonist, Shirin.¹ Some questions arise. Was Shirin a completely mythical creation? Are heroes so much "larger than life" that they bear no relation to the social realities of their time? Was Shirin a taboo for the Muslim society of Nizami's time or a shock to the literary tradition in which she was created? This chapter tackles these questions while investigating the personality of Shirin.

Ilyas ibn Yusuf—known as Nizami of Ganjah—was born in 1140. Famed for his erudition, poetic mastery, and subtle story-telling techniques, Nizami has evoked much admiration from his classical and modern critics. "The acknowledged master of romantic *mathnavi* [rhyming couplet]," "the most brilliant poet of the romantic epic," and "a master of thought and word

whose freshness and vigor have not been effaced throughout the centuries" are a few expressions of such sentiment.² Little is known about Nizami's personal life beyond passing references in his own poetry to a few family members. Of his career, we can speak with more certainty. We know that despite being a prolific poet and dedicating five major compositions to contemporary rulers, he avoided writing panegyrics and becoming a court celebrity. He was and remains a mainstream poet of widespread acceptance, and this acknowledged mastery rests not on a patron's favor but on literary talent demonstrated in a vast poetic corpus.³

Heroes and Reality

Was Shirin a mythical heroine who bore no relation to the social realities of her time? Generations of new readers will have to provide fresh perspectives on the epic to forge their answers. The question could also be posed as a broad theoretical query concerning the construction of literary heroes and heroines in general. Let us leave the answer to the former, the nature of Shirin's identity, to be formulated in the course of this chapter and concentrate on the latter: do heroes and heroines of literature represent the cultures in which they are created?

Literary memory of cultures may not reflect the hard and fast realities of their diverse and changing social environments in a concrete manner. The artist may be uninterested in such facts or subordinate them to more pleasant ones for political or artistic considerations. Medieval Persian literary works are no exception. Nevertheless, epic works provide us with the authors' ideals embodied in the hero and heroine. Such heroes may be rebels "who go beyond the verdict of society in their search for appropriate action" with a "non-conformist element" at the heart of their creative instinct. Yet such heroes influence "the collective cultural imagination" of a people. Their images are thoroughly absorbed and remain part of that culture's "understanding of the past and present."⁴ Such ideal/idealized figures will not pass the credibility test with the reader unless a bridge connects their impeccable goodness to the realities of their time. No good storyteller will present his or her audience with protagonists whose actions—good or bad—will be impossible to believe or recognize. Renard affirms this observation in *Islam and the Heroic Image* in relation to Rostam, hero of the most celebrated Persian epic, the *Shahnamah*.⁵ He describes the hero's responses as "larger than life" but maintains that such responses nevertheless reflect the "affective

needs and capabilities” of his creator and his fans alike.⁶ The need to recognize an ordinary human dimension in a hero’s or heroine’s personality is echoed in Campbell’s work on a hero’s various faces. He argues that our fascination for a potent individual capable of achieving extraordinary feats is rooted in the feeling that he [or she] is ultimately each of us.⁷ Thus, authors’ exaggerations of their protagonists’ actions and achievements are limited. Such redefinitions of reality are necessary to express fresh thoughts, even alter generic features. After all, as Calder notes, the idea of a hero is based on the notion that heights can be reached in courage and commitment that go beyond the ordinary.⁸ The authorial alterations of reality will not be successful if they change literary conventions or heroic figures beyond recognition.

The presence of a strong, dynamic, and complex figure in the person of Shirin, the heroine of Nizami’s *Khusrau u Shirin*, deserves attention for reasons other than those exclusive to literary inquiries. The creation and acceptance of Shirin demonstrate that the necessary cultural space for a female character of her magnitude and complexity exists. Furthermore, the epic’s author did not come from an obscure or unconventional background. In his productive career, Nizami produced a series of romantic epics such as *Haft Paykar* and *Khusrau u Shirin* that came to be among the most influential compositions in the Persian literary canon. What many of these works share is the creation of prototypical female heroic figures such as Layli in the tragic romance of *Layli u Majnun* and Shirin in the romantic epic *Khusrau u Shirin*.⁹ Among Nizami’s heroines, Shirin is arguably the strongest and most vibrant. Her depth of personality, practical intellect, and social conduct contradict and challenge the generally held stereotype of the ideal medieval Muslim woman of the author’s time. Such ideals are thought to include silence, passivity, and absence from the social scene. Not only is Shirin beautiful, loyal, and pious, but she also thinks well and acts on her thoughts even when this involves extreme mastery of thought processes or mobility in physical space. She is assertive with words and deeds to the point of keeping Khusrau—the man who is also the king—at her doorstep in order to express dissatisfaction with his conduct.¹⁰ Creating a figure as bold and complex as Shirin has no doubt entailed assistance from Nizami’s imagination and talent for expanding reality. His creation testifies to at least two significant facts. First, a man of Nizami’s traditional stance considered action, intelligence, and dynamism—instead of passivity, submission, and silence—to be the necessary components for creating an attractive heroic woman. Second, in so doing, Nizami did not shock or disappoint his readers but presented them with an enchanting figure who “reflected the affective needs and capabili-

ties" of such readers.¹¹ Shirin has remained visible ever since her creation not only in the ensuing barrage of romantic epics that mimicked Nizami and kept her as their central protagonist but also as the mythical embodiment of beauty and strength evoked in various lyric genres.¹² For the character of Shirin to be embraced to the degree that it has been, it must have resonated with recognizable as well as desirable traits worthy of love and respect. If we view heroes, as Calder suggests, as "the symbolic embodiments of a collective will, a shared culture" or "a traditional creativity,"¹³ then Shirin can easily be viewed as one model for the symbolic embodiment of the ideal womanhood shared by the Persianate cultures of the Islamicate world.

Contemporary criticism of classical Persian literature presents the classical period as wholly male-dominated. Milani gives voice to a shared sentiment when she declares that "the literature of Iran has long possessed a predominantly masculine character. Conspicuously absent from it has been the presence of women as writers or critics." This female absence is sometimes taken out of its universal context and overemphasized.¹⁴ While in terms of authorship the absence of women is a conspicuous pattern, the portrayal of female figures by male authors is yet to be explored. This neglect is due to a general newness of critical efforts in the field as well as to an unquestioned acceptance by critics (indigenous or otherwise) of the Orientalist stereotype of Muslim women as idle, faceless, passive, and dormant beings not worthy of much attention.¹⁵ Nizami's portrayal of Shirin, a figure he compared to his own wife Afaq, demonstrates that some medieval Muslim men espoused a different view of the ideal woman, one who was endowed with strength, courage for self-expression, and mobility in mental as well as physical realms. Shirin not only defies the Orientalist invention of Muslim womanhood but in many ways goes beyond models of feminine virtue and heroic humility articulated by medieval European writers, for whom women are "marked by the absence of self-assertion."¹⁶

A Plot Summary

Because this study explores facets of Shirin's personality, let us first construct a summary of the epic's plot. *Khusrau u Shirin* tells the story of the love between the Persian king Khusrau and Princess Shirin from the land of Armenia (Arman). Despite her Armenian background and pre-Islamic historical origin, Nizami's princess is not presented as foreign or as practicing a religion different from that of Khusrau. In fact, the author's admiration for

Shirin and the analogy he draws between her and his wife indicate the intimacy between the author and his creation. Shirin, expected to succeed to the throne of her aunt Mahin Banu, falls in love with Khusrau after seeing a portrait of him that was painted and deliberately placed where it would attract her attention. She journeys to the land of Persia (henceforth referred to as Iran) in pursuit of her love, where on the way she stops to bathe in a spring. During this bathing scene, among the most beautifully described in Persian literature, Khusrau gazes at her from behind a bush without knowing her true identity. From the time of Shirin's arrival in Iran and the confession of mutual love between Shirin and Khusrau, the story unfolds in an eventful narrative sequence presenting one obstacle after another on the slow road to the lovers' union. Obstacles are created by Khusrau's mistakes, his stubborn nature, and his kingly pride, such as marrying the Roman emperor's daughter after conquering Constantinople. Along the way, a new character is introduced, the master mason Farhad. Brought in to design a passageway, Farhad falls in love with Shirin's irresistible charm. His love, however, is of a different kind: full and selfless devotion. The only concrete expressions of Farhad's desire for Shirin are the pieces of stone expertly carved into exotic shapes and patterns. His love's enormity is demonstrated when he nearly succeeds in digging a tunnel in the impenetrable Bistoon mountain. This superb metaphorical expression of the desire to find a way to the beloved's heart remains incomplete when the master is tricked by Khusrau's envoy to kill himself under the shock of the false rumor of Shirin's death. From the moment that Farhad is introduced in the story, Shirin is placed between two magnetic yet irreconcilable characters. As a king, lover, and warrior, Khusrau embodies all that the carnal world has to offer. He is handsome, passionate, powerful, and blinded with arrogance, whereas Farhad is cordial, modest, perceptive, imbued with artistic sensitivity, and endowed with an original mind. While admiring Farhad's rare qualities, Shirin remains loyal in her love for Khusrau. In the meantime, Khusrau goes through a metamorphosis. By the end of the story, his untamed personality is transformed through Shirin's companionship and guidance. Our promiscuous prince and ruler changes into a loyal husband and a just, god-fearing king. The story ends tragically. Unlike Khusrau and Farhad, Shirin is not tricked or betrayed. In a premeditated scene, which Nizami describes with affection, Shirin's self-destruction resembles lovemaking more than death. After stabbing herself with a dagger in exactly the same spot where Khusrau's body had received his injury, Shirin

then embraced the king tight,
 Lip to lip and shoulder to shoulder.
 Raised her voice high,
 So high that those outside the chamber could hear:
 A soul has united with a soul, a body with a body
 Liberated from harsh judgment and from separation.¹⁷

Shirin's Heroic Cycle

Let us now explore various stages of the maturation of Shirin's heroic personality. A conceptual framework can bestow a meaningful order on investigation; the infrastructure I offer is a modified version of the organization that Heath, in his study of the popular Arabic epic *Sirat Antar*, recovers from that text. It demonstrates a clear pattern in isolated events and renders visible the "general configurations of storytelling structures that govern the organization of these individual motifs." He terms this general sequence of events "the heroic cycle," which pertains to a popular work, one with unidentified authorship and largely addressed to a different audience.¹⁸ Still, it corresponds to general heroic patterns observed in classical Islamic compositions and proves equally useful in its application to *Khusrau u Shirin*. Applying the heroic cycle, I demonstrate a distinct characteristic in the composition of Shirin's persona and establish that she is a hero in her own right and not another replica of most female protagonists, the reversal of the male hero.¹⁹

Rise of the Heroine

The first stage of the heroic cycle, the rise of the hero, describes the unusual circumstances of the hero's birth (unusual social status, physical attributes, or extraordinary accoutrements). It is often connected with singular acts of courage and generosity leading to widespread public acceptance. Although the circumstances of Shirin's birth are not told, she comes from a royal lineage in an exotic land, a land other than Iran. Described as Armenia, this geographical entity possesses mythical qualities. It is ruled by women (currently Shirin's aunt Mahin Banu), its inhabitants have no occupation but merrymaking, and the evil eye has no effect there.²⁰ Nizami endows Shirin with at least two of the extraordinary accoutrements that great heroes usually possess: unusual helpers and a wonderful horse. Shirin has seventy un-

rivalled beauties at her service who are equally peerless in martial arts and capable of fighting lions and elephants. Her black horse Shabdiz is even more important in that Nizami devotes several independent sections to describing its merits. This unique black steed, running on its "iron hooves" faster than the "philosopher's mind," later becomes Khusrau's. The agency of the king's physical mobility and military victories in fact belongs to Shirin.²¹ Shirin proves her heroic abilities in many ways including her solitary journey on horseback to Iran. She is strong enough to remain mounted and brave enough to dismount in the wilderness and bathe in clear, inviting water. The princess and the spring become metaphors for one another. They are both unique, inaccessible, brilliant, and full of life. To rid herself of weariness, Shirin does not just wash her flower-like body in the spring; she grows in it in the manner of water lilies on the surface of ponds.²² Shirin's delicate beauty does not detract from her heroic ability to survive. The metaphorical organic bond between her and the spring serves more than to indicate her brilliant beauty, for it also endows her with the life-giving power of a clear spring at a long journey's end.

The Heroine's Love Story

The heroic cycle's second stage is the love story. Nizami pays meticulous attention to details about the way Shirin falls in love. Khusrau surrenders his heart after hearing a verbal description of Shirin and admits to it shortly afterwards. For Shirin, a full portrait of Khusrau is painted to accompany verbal praise and secure her attention. Even so, it takes three viewings and a long conversation with the painter Shapur for Shirin to confess openly her feelings.²³ This delay cannot be seen as the result of a woman's weak and hesitant nature, for when she is certain of her feelings for Khusrau, the daring decision to ride alone to Iran takes little deliberation. Shirin's arrival in Iran does not lead to the lovers' encounter back in her country. A long process of courting begins in which Shirin and her female attendants prove their riding and shooting skills as much as Khusrau demonstrates his bravery by engaging a lion in bare-handed combat. Nizami uses the metaphor of "the master hunter" capturing the beloved's heart for Shirin and that of a helpless prey to allude to Khusrau:

The king watched Shirin secretly.
 [He realized] what her hunting would in the end bring!
 He saw a gazelle appearing out of nowhere,

Intent on pursuit and capturing of the king.
 In the hands of that master hunter, that world-conqueror [Shirin],
 A world-conqueror such as Khusrau became a helpless prey.²⁴

Khusrau has equally to charm Shirin, not just by good story-telling skills and defeating lions but by quelling the riot in his homeland and recapturing what is claimed by his rebellious officer Bahram Chubin but is legitimately his. Disagreements between the lovers occur mostly because of Shirin's loyalty to her principles. Although she is desperately in love, love can be fulfilled for her under one condition alone: turning Khusrau into the virtuous man and worthy king that he has the potential to be. To defy Shirin's exacting standards, Khusrau uses every device he can muster. He begs in humility, frowns, departs in anger, and even marries other women (including Maryam, the emperor's daughter) to intimidate Shirin. Shirin takes each incident with dignity and does not allow her love to shake her will, for she knows that Khusrau will return apologetic and regretful. On one such occasion, Khusrau camps at the threshold of Shirin's palace and begs her to show at least a glimpse of her face by appearing on the terrace if she chooses not to open the door for him to enter:

Open the door, after all this is the king!
 He has come on foot to apologize to you.
 You know that in my furthest thoughts
 I would not dream of doing you any wrong.
 You have to sit with me for a while!
 I cannot go before seeing your face.
 But if you so wish I leave this place in haste,
 Allow me [at least] to take one look at you head to foot!²⁵

Shirin appears on the terrace and speaks to the king in humility. Her heart is broken but her will is not. Despite her humility and loving words, the palace's doors remain closed. Khusrau's promiscuity is as unacceptable to Shirin as his kingly negligence in abandoning his throne to the rebellious Bahram. She seeks the affection of the faithful lover and the honorable king that Khusrau deserves to be. Shirin's iron will and closed doors triumph over the king's stubborn nature. This personal transformation of an overbearing, aristocratic young man into a just and respectable king is the greatest of Shirin's heroic services.

Introducing a new lover, Farhad, Nizami puts Shirin on equal footing with Khusrau by demonstrating that as he enjoys the attention of other women,

she is capable of having devoted lovers other than the king. Farhad is not the champion of a worldly kingdom but holds authority in another—equally fascinating—realm, art. Farhad is a master mason who enters the story in order to carve a stony passageway for milk to flow to Shirin's palace. This carefully selected metaphor highlights a fundamental difference between Farhad's love for Shirin as compared to Khusrau's passion: its gentle and nurturing dimension. Once the author uses the adjective *farzannah* (wise) for Farhad and describes the artist's mastery of geometry and sculpting skills, we are certain that this lover will not be found drunken begging at the doorstep of Shirin's palace. If giving Shirin a devoted second lover to make her equal to Khusrau was one justification for Farhad's creation, this difference in personality is another significant reason why a second lover is needed in the story. Farhad is added because Shirin's exquisite beauty and complex personality call for a lover who is deeper and more perceptive than Khusrau. Until Khusrau's passionate and concrete desires mature into a fuller love to correspond to Shirin's, Farhad's artistic sensitivity functions as the mirror reflecting Shirin's more evolved understanding of love. As Daleski demonstrates for English literature, love triangles, in addition to heightening the sense of drama, give the author a chance to introduce a "second self," a different side of the hero's or heroine's personality. The second lover serves as a mirror reflecting qualities that have not attracted or been reflected in the first lover.²⁶ Nowhere is the sharp contrast between the personalities of Farhad and Khusrau more apparent than in their confrontation and ensuing verbal contest over possessing Shirin's affection. A curious Khusrau, shocked by the fact that Shirin may reciprocate his style of pursuing other lovers to arouse jealousy and threatened by Farhad's reputation for artistic mastery and personal charisma, arranges for him to be brought to the palace. In the ensuing conversation, the king's tone is sarcastic, guileful, and interrogative. Farhad's responses, while not audacious, are imbued with reverence for love and indifference to royalty. Whereas Khusrau attempts to keep the conversation concrete, Farhad moves in the direction of ambiguity and abstraction. Curious about the whereabouts of Farhad's homeland, the king hears "the land of companionship." Concerning the skills most common in that part of the world, he receives the riddle: "selling one's life to buy sorrow." Knowing full well that he cannot contest the king's worldly authority, Farhad strives to show that kings have little authority in the realm of love. The opportunity to assert this point comes when Khusrau attempts to dismiss Farhad's devotion by pointing to the strange nature of "selling one's life." Farhad re-

minds him that all conventions including royal decrees crumble in the domain of love, in which no incident could be considered strange:

The first thing, "Where are you from?" said the king.

"From the land of companionship," answered he.

"What is the occupation of the people in that land?" the king asked.

"They trade their lives for sorrow," he replied.

"But selling lives is not appropriate," said the king [sarcastically].

"It is not unexpected for true lovers," he answered.

"Did your heart get you so deep in love?" was the king's next reaction.

"You talk of heart," said Farhad; "for me this is a matter of life [or death]."²⁷

Shirin is not heedless of this refined and artistic soul, yet neither is she indifferent to his selfless love. When his passageway is prepared, she is so impressed with the work's aesthetic quality that she removes her earrings to reward the artist's mastery. In a later visit to his work area, she gives the exchange a new and personal dimension by offering him a glass of milk from her own hands. Her visit to Farhad first sparks Khusrau's jealousy. The true state of her appreciation for Farhad, however, emerges only after the master's bitter and untimely death:

Shirin's heart was pained with his loss.

A rare bird had disappeared from her garden.

She shed many a tear like the spring clouds

At the loss of that lonesome cypress tree grown on the stream's side.

She had his body dressed in exquisite vestment as did the nobles,

Then returned him to the earth and [herself] returned empty-handed.

She built a dome over his burial place,

Making his tomb a site for regular visits.²⁸

Yet at no point in the story is Shirin overwhelmed by having the full devotion of these two extraordinary lovers; neither does she ever attempt to use one against the other. She loves Khusrau, cherishes Farhad's artistic expressions of love, and yet stands confidently between the two strong love currents because she has a part of each lover in her own complex character: Khusrau's beauty, noble lineage, and passion combined with Farhad's sensitivity and wisdom.²⁹ Her choice of Khusrau over Farhad is not due to her preference for material power as opposed to wisdom. She chooses because she is loyal to the one she loved first and is aware of her ability to educate Khusrau and correct his erroneous ways.³⁰

The Heroic Service

The heroic cycle's third stage is the heroic service. Although Shirin's heroic nature endows her with a rebellious dimension that motivates her for an act as daring as her solitary journey on horseback, she is in many ways a traditional royal figure prepared to fulfill personal and patriotic obligations. When her aunt Mahin Banu dies, Shirin follows her responsibility by ascending to the throne. Her heart is broken, for Khusrau has left her in anger and married another woman. Yet she rules with the utmost care and justice. She frees prisoners, abolishes unfair taxes, and attends to seekers of justice. When she leaves her kingdom to a trusted friend and sets out to seek Khusrau again, her abdication is motivated by the fear that her preoccupation with Khusrau's love might affect her ability to be a just ruler.³¹

Shirin's greatest heroic service is to tame Khusrau's untamed personality. In the story, through her words and deeds, Shirin maintains a dialogue with him. This effective dialogue, ranging from pleading to reproach, has a transforming quality. Whether through keeping Khusrau behind closed doors, blaming him for drunkenness, or instructing him concerning the significance of learning, Shirin diverts the king's attention from a constant search for pleasure to higher goals. This transformation is not surprising where the overall aspirations of the story are concerned. On the contrary, it is essential that Khusrau's personality improve if he is to remain the epic's central male protagonist. As Calder observes, heroes may have ups and downs but as individuals who supposedly contain "the best of the mass," they must never be allowed to act against the collective interest.³² Khusrau's drinking habit, neglect of some duties, and promiscuity, perhaps tolerable for a young prince, have to be changed for him to become a proper king. In that sense, Nizami's desire to improve Khusrau's personality is not in itself unexpected or unique. What makes his approach worthy of mention is the agent of this change. In most epic tales, a wise old man, a mythical creature, or a good (male) companion are placed beside the hero to become a source of wisdom and set him on the right track when he deviates from the appropriate course of action. Here Nizami's choice of a young and attractive woman as the instrument of the change is both intriguing and unusual. Educators and sources of wisdom are traditionally, universally male, while women are at best good learners. The methods of training leave much to be desired too. Shakespeare and Shaw are two out of innumerable writers who employ strong male educators to tame shrews and shape uncouth women into refined ladies. In each case, the teacher is a male, the apprentice is a female, and the harshness of

the teaching method—despite some surface criticism—is ultimately justified through the glorification of the magical final transformation. By contrast, Shirin is a woman in love trying to educate a man who is at the same time the king. Considering the situation, she moves with admirable certainty and force. If at times she feels trepidation, it is due to fear of risking his love rather than being subjected to kingly wrath. She combines her lessons with gentleness and humility and considers herself neither better nor worse than her student. Her propriety is due to her kind nature rather than to any sense of hesitation with using power to tame him. Thus, Shirin reminds Khusrau of the need to free Iran from the rebellious Bahram Chubin instead of spending his time seeking her:

You have youth, bravery, and kingship.
 You are the head [of the land], your head adorned with the crown.
 Free the limbs of this land from the confines of chaos.
 For once demonstrate your [kingly] skills
 To this Hindu who has pillaged your personal belongings,
 To this Turk who has taken over your royal office.
 Destroy his body with a flash of your sword.
 Break the spell that he has cast [on Iran].
 For the hands of kings in seeking the king's pleasure
 Should, at times, carry a wine cup, at other times a sword.³³

An intriguing characteristic of Shirin's wise and stable personality is its apparent lack of conflict with sexual desire and attraction. All major belief systems demonstrate suspicion toward female sexuality and at best consider it a source of distraction and temptation. This sexual potency is equally exaggerated in literary traditions. Women's sexually magnetic power can make men lose their ability to judge and leave them susceptible to committing irreversible errors. It is not surprising that such dangerous beings have not often been portrayed as educators or sources of wisdom and knowledge—or have achieved that status only after aging and losing their initial physical attraction.³⁴ Shirin, however, is beautiful and desirable. Her ruby lips, dark hair, and fragrant body are frequently and graphically described. Bird, flower, and other imagery from nature form a substantial part of these descriptions, filled with playful, deliberate exaggerations. They are not meant to have any mystical or spiritual connotation and at times are clearly and unquestionably erotic. The best example of Nizami's attention to Shirin's sexuality (and its attributes essential to making the heroine's character) occurs during the lovers' wedding night. As demanding as ever, Shirin asks Khusrau not to drink that particular

evening so that they can have a sober and full appreciation of their first intimate contact. Knowing Khusrau's ways, she then puts an elderly woman in her place to measure his sobriety and test his promise of self-restraint. Predictably unable to keep his word, Khusrau discovers the ruse despite being drunk. Then, after thirty verses devoted to yet another description of her beauty, Shirin finally enters the nuptial chamber. The description of the lovers' first intimacy is probably the most lavishly detailed erotic description of lovemaking in classical Persian literature. Despite possessing female carnal charm, Shirin retains her role as counselor and source of wisdom.

Death of the Heroine

The heroic cycle's last stage is the hero's death. Farhad, who killed himself after hearing the false rumor of Shirin's death, has been dead for some time. Shirin and Khusrau are united in marriage, resulting in a transformation of Khusrau's restless personality. In fact, Khusrau's devotion to learning and worship gives his son Shiruyeh a chance to confine his father and place himself on the throne. Shiruyeh's greed is further fueled by his love for Shirin, whom he has admired since the age of nine when she married his father. Hoping to possess Shirin, he stabs Khusrau to death in his sleep in his confinement chamber, and Khusrau dies without waking Shirin.³⁵ Shiruyeh's message of love and promise of union with Shirin follow. Shirin has two choices: to live with a murderous usurper whom she disdains or to die with the just king and caring husband she loves. Like any proper heroic figure, she chooses the latter. Nizami seizes the opportunity to give her a royal farewell, one more prominent than any other protagonist in the story.

Shirin is the survivor, in control and able to restrain her personal grief to bury her lover with the full respect he deserves (as she did earlier for Farhad). She has the king's body placed in a bejeweled coffin and carried by the nobility to his burial site. Dressed in red silk with her face made up like a bride's, Shirin follows the body with light, seemingly happy steps. In this way, she hides her sorrow from the murderous Shiruyeh and gives a hint of the joyous nature of the union that is going to follow after her self-destruction next to Khusrau's body. She then stabs herself and dies with her body upon his as in a loving embrace.

This gracious but sorrowful end has a deeper wisdom than is first apparent. That Khusrau's own son Shiruyeh murders him is not a mere coincidence or a result of sheer bad luck. Shiruyeh is the outcome of Khusrau's marriage to the Roman emperor's daughter Maryam, an act motivated by political am-

bition as well as disloyalty to Shirin. Khusrau has committed much wrong in his own time. He may be forgiven for excessive drinking and promiscuity as a young prince, but other sins are less forgivable. At his command, the false rumor of Shirin's death was spread with the explicit aim of harming Farhad. That his son should now kill him may be seen as punishment for the unjust and jealous act of trickery that triggered Farhad's suicide. What destroys Khusrau in the end is the consequence of his earlier acts of jealousy and betrayal.

If Farhad is a victim of the trickery of others and Khusrau of his own mistakes, Shirin demonstrates full agency in her own death. She takes her life in a premeditated plan with full awareness of its goal: to deny Shiruyeh's will to possess her after Khusrau's demise. Nizami does not bemoan Shirin's death, for he presents it as a courageous act and a way for her to reunite with the deceased king. In the loss of this legendary heroine, nature cries instead. A storm darkens the horizon, and a cloud rises from "the sea of sorrow" to rain a flood that covers all mountaintops.³⁶

Nizami and Shirin

The degree of Nizami's attachment to Shirin and his insistence on breathing life into this fabulous figure find a touching personal explanation in the closing verses of the romantic epic *Khusrau u Shirin*. Just as we consider the story concluded, we observe the author emerging from the text to shed his garb as the detached storyteller and ask us to observe and acknowledge his personal stake in the composition. He wants us to know that Shirin comes not only from his creative imagination but also from his life, that he knows her because he was married to a woman like her, one named Afaq:

O you! Who do not take heed from this story:
 What do you think, that you are reading a fabulous tale?
 O, this tale begs for tears,
 Tears as bitter as rosewater to be shed for Shirin.
 For the life of that short-lived one
 Was scattered to the wind as are flowers in their prime.
 She left early like my Kipchak idol,
 O, it was as if she was my Afaq herself.
 A royal figure in beauty and in wisdom
 Sent to me by the prince of Darband.
 Silk was an armor on her body, stronger than armor.
 Her dresses tight-sleeved like a man's garment.

She was capable of pulling heads by their ears
 Yet gave me a pillow of companionship to rest on.
 Like all Turks, she needed to emigrate [and left].
 In her Turkish ways she ravished all that I possessed.³⁷

Sent to the poet by the prince of Darband, Afaq was a Kipchak slave-girl who according to Nizami's biographers became a fundamental turning point in his life. Through Afaq, he "experienced true love, its ecstasy and also, within a short time, its sorrow." In the moving passage above, Nizami not only mourns the loss of his beloved wife Afaq but also reveals her as the woman who was the inspiration for Shirin's creation.³⁸

Nizami paid his greatest respect to Shirin, and by extension to Afaq, through not making the heroine of his epic the shadow (or the reverse) of a male hero but a powerful individual in her own right. The individuality and centrality of Shirin's figure stand out in contrast to the universal characteristic of premodern heroines who were an "image of antithesis" in relation to the hero. Edwards describes female heroes as "leading a fugitive existence" with their presence "overlooked" and identities "obscured." "Western culture, for example, has represented heroes typically as military leaders: commanding, conquering, and above all male. . . . Within this context—patriarchal, hostile, preoccupied with rank—the woman hero is an image of antithesis. Different from the male—her sex her sign—she threatens his authority and the system he sustains."³⁹

Shirin is given the attention that male heroes usually receive in that she "dances in the spotlight" instead of being "eclipsed" and "upstaged in darkness," and the centrality of her figure to the overall story is equally significant.⁴⁰ A male hero is universally the primary figure who inspires and therefore requires followers. The heroine obeys, falls into line, and takes second place. Although a hero can theoretically exist in a narrative without a heroine, the reverse is not the case.⁴¹ Far from being a shadow of Khusrau or Farhad, Shirin forms a necessary pillar without which the story would collapse. Nizami demonstrates awareness of the centrality that he bestows on Shirin. In the closing verses of the story, the second and third, as quoted above, are of particular relevance here:

O, this tale begs for tears,
 Tears as bitter as rosewater to be shed for Shirin.
 For the life of that short-lived one
 Was scattered to the wind as are flowers in their prime.

In these lines, the only reason given for the sadness of "this tale" is Shirin's untimely death. Although such an allusion does not mean that other deaths in the story are insignificant, by singling out Shirin's demise to close the narrative and by describing it as begging for tears, Nizami makes her fate the embodiment of the tragic essence in the story. She is beyond doubt the most central figure.⁴²

Shirin's Resonance in Literary Memory

Was Shirin a taboo for the Muslim society of Nizami's time or a shock to the literary tradition in which she was created? How did readers come to terms with a woman who was a powerful hero? An ideal way of assessing the popularity of a figure in a literary tradition would be to look for studies evaluating the character. Classical Persian verse and its critics did not focus their attention on character development. Their view of literature was in one sense holistic and in another acutely conscious of details. The holistic approach focused on the overall aim of the literature to teach, entertain, and praise. The particularistic aspect of the critical approach to poetry concerned itself with mastery of verbal expression, the fine details at the sonic surface of poems. Although no premodern writer is known to have analyzed Shirin's character, the fact that Nizami passed the test on both general and particular levels is apparent from some unambiguous facts. *Khusrau u Shirin* acquired canonical status immediately after its composition and activated a process of literary imitation that continued to modern times. The long, impressive list of those who imitated Nizami includes Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), Khaju (d. 1352), and Jami (d. 1492). Imitation of authoritative texts was a familiar literary device enabling a poet to adopt a known classical text and use it as a forum to express his or her creative impulse by producing variations on the familiar themes. This process was by no means a blind repetition of the old but rather a complex and dynamic process of interaction with a vast and resonant body of literature to revive for personal use what reverberated intertextually in the readers' cultural memory. That so many poets retold the story of *Khusrau u Shirin* is a sign of widespread admiration for the work.⁴³

Another, more specific way exists to measure the resonance of Shirin's image in the Persian literary memory. The *ghazal*, the most common vehicle for lyric expression in classical Persian literature, did not usually employ thematic expression. Instead of having a narrative line run through its various elements, the *ghazal* made use of an effective method of juxtaposing vivid

images and concepts, each alluding to diverse poetic figures and events. In this way, it freed itself from the confines of one story and acquired a striking resonance by employing many stories circulating in the culture's literary memory. Shirin is beyond doubt one of the most frequent topics of such allusions in Persian literature. In the intertextual journey taking her through eight centuries of writing, she remains a symbol of life, beauty, youth, and love. She is the archetypal beloved of classical Persian poetry.⁴⁴

Western literary influence has brought new perspectives to the Iranian literary scene. Going beyond allusions to pay close attention to storytelling and character development has, in modern times, occupied Iranian critics too. As a result, we can now observe the more direct cultural reactions of the unconventional force and independence of a female character such as Shirin. An example is the comparative study of the personalities of Layli and Shirin in *Sima-yi du zan* (Portraits of two women) by the Iranian critic Sirjani.⁴⁵ Layli, the female protagonist in Nizami's other celebrated romantic tragedy, *Layli u Majnun*, differs from Shirin. Not only does she not travel to seek the one she loves, she is married to a person against her will. Sirjani explores the reasons for the difference between these women's personalities in Nizami's work. Favorably impressed by Shirin's strong will and harshly critical of Layli's weakness, he considers the difference to be the result of varying circumstances in the two stories' composition. Nizami created a woman of his personal choice in the figure of Shirin, whereas Layli's personality was already shaped, and the poet put her preexisting story into verse only at his patron's request. Sirjani's study is not without conceptual flaws. For example, he does not indicate that Layli and Majnun's love is meant to exemplify different sentiments than Khusrau and Shirin's. Everyone in the story—not just Layli—thinks and acts in a more restrained, introverted manner. Sirjani's essay serves an immediate political purpose in that it provides social commentary directed at the ideal of womanhood in postrevolutionary Iran. He offers contemporary Iranian women a classical model of self-assertion when he praises Shirin for boldly pursuing her love. The fact remains that a twentieth-century Iranian male critic endorses eight hundred years of admiration for Shirin by giving her assertive personality his unconditional approval.

Scholars could sift through the vast body of romantic tales in classical Persian literature to see how many Shirins, as opposed to Laylis, are found. Did Afaq's decisive personality prompt Nizami to create a dynamic and assertive Shirin? Did his idealized vision of the "other" in the exotic, faraway land of Armenia give free rein to his imagination? Or did the nature of the

story, a happy retelling of a tale of love requiring immediate and concrete fulfillment as opposed to belated spiritual reward, warrant Shirin's creation? Whatever justification may be found for the conception of this lively and influential woman in classical Persian literature, her continuing presence may not be explained by any factor other than her full acceptance in the culture. We are advised to examine carefully our notion of an "ideal woman" in pre-modern traditional societies. As Edwards observes, "sex, class, status, and occupation have great historical and social resonance, but not inherent meaning. A culture's heroes reflect a culture's values."⁴⁶

NOTES

1. This romantic epic was composed in 6,500 verses during the years 1177–81 and was dedicated to Atabak Shams al-Din Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan, the Seljuq ruler. I use the Persian edition, Nizami Ganjavi, *Kulliyat-i khamsah-i Nizami-i Ganjavi*, ed. Muin Far (Tehran: Zarrin, 1362/1983). All English translations are mine.

2. The former quote is from Edward Browne's *A Literary History of Persian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 2:400, and the latter two are from Jan Rypka, *History of Persian Literature*, trans. P. van Popta-Hope (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1968), 210.

3. Browne, *Literary History*, 400–402.

4. Jennie Calder, *Heroes: From Byron to Guevara* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), xii.

5. Composed by Abu al-Qasim Firdausi most probably during 975–94. See Rypka, *Persian Literature*, 155; and Mahmoud Omidasalar's chapter in this volume.

6. John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 233.

7. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949), 365. Linda Hunt uses the same argument to justify the criticized silence and passivity of Jane Austen's Fanny Price; "A Woman's Portion: Jane Austen and the Female Character," in *Fetter'd or Free: British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 8.

8. Calder, *Heroes*, ix.

9. Nizami's versified romantic epics total five and have come to be known as the *panj ganj* (five treasures). In order of composition they are: *Makhzan al-asrar*, *Khusrau u Shirin*, *Layli u Majnun*, *Bahraminamah* or *Haftpaykar*, and *Iskandar-namah*. For an account of Nizami's life and information on these masnavis (rhyming couplets), see Zabih Allah Safa, *Tarikh-i adabiyat dar Iran: Az miyanah-i qarn-i panjuma ta aghaz-i haftum-i Hijri* (Tehran: Firdausi, 1369/1980), 2:198–824. For existing manuscript copies, early printed editions, and critical editions, see François De Blois, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey* (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1994), vol. 5, pt. 2, 438–95.

10. Nizami, 253–79.

11. Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, 233.

12. The persistence of the lyrical resonance in Shirin's personality over a long time span is remarkable. Just as for the poet Hafiz (d. 1390), Farhad's fall for Shirin serves as the archetypal motif of the lover's total surrender to love; Hafiz, *Divan-i khvajah Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz*, ed. Husayn Niknam (Tehran: Alburz, 1374/1995), 59, verse 5. The contemporary Iranian poet Shahriyar hears Farhad's complaint of separation from Shirin in the sorrowful flute's song; Muhammad Husayn Shahriyar, *Divan-i Shahriyar*, 16th ed. (Tehran: Zarrin, 1374/1995), 1:203, verse 9.

13. Calder, *Heroes*, ix.

14. Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 1. Overlooking the universality of female absence in the world's written literature is exemplified in Michael Hillmann's study of the contemporary Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. He opens the book's preface with the statement, "Iranian history is of men and their exploits," which implies that the history of other societies is of women and their own exploits; *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers and Three Continents Press, 1987), 1.

15. For an Orientalist portrayal of Arab/Muslim women, see Malika Mehdid, "A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The 'Oriental' Female," in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities, and Struggles of Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 18–58. Mehdid notes that even Edward Said, critical observer (*Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), does not tackle the gender issue.

16. Chaucer's treatment of Constance's life in *The Man of Law's Prologue and Tale* is an example. Juliette Dor, "Humilis Exaltetur: Constance of Humility Rewarded," in *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 74–75. The comparison between Shirin and Nizami's wife Afaq focuses on the strength of personality and length of life; Nizami, 331.

17. Nizami, 327.

18. Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sirat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 68–69.

19. That heroines are often the reverse of heroes demonstrating little more than patience and suffering has been observed in many studies. Richard Jordan describes Donne's heroine Elizabeth Drury as a "heroic figure who did little more than die" in *The Quiet Hero: Figures of Temperance in Spenser, Donne, Milton, and Joyce* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 62. Cf. heroines in Carruthers, *Heroes and Heroines*.

20. Nizami, 125.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 140.

23. *Ibid.*, 126–30.

24. *Ibid.*, 164.

25. *Ibid.*, 256–57.

26. Hillel Matthew Daleski, *The Divided Heroine: A Recurrent Pattern in Six English Novels* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), 18.

27. Nizami, 219.

28. *Ibid.*, 233.

29. Nizami's positive attitude toward his heroine Shirin must not be taken as a categorical absence of misogynistic assertions in his writings. Such negative comments are often expressed by his protagonists, not Nizami himself. One example is the reaction of Khusrau's wife Maryam to Khusrau's desire to see Shirin. She objects to the visit by commenting on women's unreliability; see Nizami, 202.

30. The fact that Nizami and his royal patrons would most probably not approve of a union between a princess and a stonemason is another factor in directing the story line.

31. Nizami, 193-94.

32. Calder, *Heroes*, xii.

33. Nizami, 181.

34. Cf. Jose Ignacio Cabezon, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Penguin, 1990). Fedwa Malti-Douglas examines Islamic literary tradition in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

35. Nizami, 320-24.

36. *Ibid.*, 327-28.

37. *Ibid.*, 331.

38. For information on Nizami's wife Afaq, see Rypka, *Persian Literature*, 211.

39. Lee R. Edwards, *Psyche As Hero: Female Heroine and Fictional Form* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 4.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

42. Nizami, 331.

43. Safa, *Tarikh-i adabiyat*, 809.

44. The Persian ghazal has often been criticized for being fragmentary because of its lack of narrative line and use of allusions. For discussion of this misconception, see Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 141-45. For premodern and modern examples of allusion to Shirin, see Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*.

45. Saidi Sirjani, *Sima-yi du zan: Shirin va Layli dar khamsah-i Nizami-i Ganjavi* (Tehran: Nau, 1368/1989).

46. Edwards, *Psyche As Hero*, 4.