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ARTICLE

"The Kurds Have Not Made Love Their Aim": Love, Sexuality, Gender, and Drag in Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*

Michiel Leezenberg

Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
Email: m.m.leezenberg@uva.nl

Abstract

This paper explores the concepts and norms of gender and sexuality in Ehmedê Xanî's 17th-century mathnawi poem *Mem û Zîn*, nowadays regarded as the Kurdish national epic. A reading of this poem with the aid of the conceptual tools of gender studies and the history of sexuality reveals how different its norms and concepts are not only from modern Kurdish ones, but also from those of classical Persian literature. Although the poem does not hint at any taboo concerning male love for beardless boys, it does display a remarkable asymmetry between male and female same-sex desire; it also displays distinct views of legitimate and transgressive sexuality. Thus, this poem encourages a more historicizing view of the gendered and sexual dimensions of modern (Kurdish and other) nationalism, and a greater attention for the distinct characteristics of vernacular literatures within the premodern 'Persianate cosmopolitan.'

Keywords: gender; Kurdish literature; mysticism; sexuality

The 17th-century *mathnawi* poem *Mem û Zîn* (hereafter *MZ*), written in Northern Kurdish (or Kurmancî) by Ehmedê Xanî (1650–1707), has long been celebrated as the Kurdish national epic, and today is widely read as an allegory of the political fragmentation of the Kurds.[1] Most existing studies of this work, whether in Kurdish or Western languages, focus on the question of whether the poem expresses a modern national identity or nationalist ideology, using the concepts of theories of nationalism. At the same time, however, love in all its forms and varieties is a central theme in the poem. Therefore, it also makes sense to read it using the theoretical tools of the history of sexuality. A focus on gender and sexuality is also relevant for the study of modern nationalism, which is often conceived in explicitly erotic terms as love for one's country, and involves qualitative changes in sexual identities and gender relations.[2] Here, however, I will primarily focus on premodern and early modern conceptualizations of love and sexuality, albeit with an eye on modern and present-day

[1] References to Xanî's poem will follow the numbering of Jan Dost, ed., *Mem û Zîn: Şîrove û Kurdiya Îro* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2010). There are slight discrepancies with other editions, but these never amount to more than two or three *bayts*' (distichs) difference. Throughout the paper, I have used Bedir Xan's transcription, which comes as close to a "standard" written Kurmancî as one can reasonably expect at present. This alphabet, however, ignores not only the distinction between glottalized and aspirated stops, but also Arabic consonants. For a full transcription that does more justice to the Arabic loanwords, see Arif Zêrevan, ed., *Memo Zîn* (Stockholm: Nefel, 2004). My translations are based on Saleh Saadalla (trans.), *Mem and Zîn by Ahmed Khani (1650–1707)* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2008), but I have not hesitated to modify his English renderings where I considered it necessary. I have made no attempt to do justice to the poem's rich poetic features, like puns, rhyme, and meter.

[2] Among others, see Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

concerns: following Eve Sedgwick, Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued that issues of gender and women should not be an appendix or afterthought in the study of (Iranian) modernity, and that an understanding of modernity should "incorporate a critical analysis of the modern homo/heterosexual definition."[3]

A focus on love, gender, and sexuality in Kurdish literature also is of interest for another reason. To date, studies on these topics in early modern Islamicate literatures have mostly focused on the great cosmopolitan Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish traditions.[4] Rather less attention has been devoted to the more peripheral vernacular traditions, of which Kurdish letters are a prime example. Early Kurdish literature takes up a distinct place in the "Persianate cosmopolitan" tradition that is increasingly drawing scholarly attention. For one thing, it was not sustained by an elaborate courtly or urban culture. And indeed, as I will argue below, the environment from which *MZ* emerged was that of rural madrasas, or Qur'anic schools, rather than princely courts. Unlike many other *mathnawi* poems, *MZ* shows few if any traces of courtly patronage. For another, as I will argue, we find distinct notions and norms of gendered and sexual behavior here. For example, the poem is one of the relatively rare premodern Islamicate texts that discusses female same-sex desire. This opens up broader questions of whether there may be differences between the dominant urban civilizations and the more peripheral vernacular traditions, in particular concerning matters of gender and sexuality—questions that have not yet received their due.

Below, after a general introduction of *MZ*, I will first explore the poem's distinct Persianate character, which is especially visible in its mystical conception of love; second, I discuss the legitimate and transgressive forms of sexuality that occur in it; third, I discuss gender norms in the story, especially in the light of several episodes of drag; and fourth, I discuss the relation between courtly love and the madrasa environment from which *MZ* arguably emerged. I also will briefly compare and contrast these findings with views of sex and gender in other premodern Islamic traditions; but clearly much work remains to be done here.

Introduction

The tale of Mem and Zîn, two ill-fated lovers who are prevented from marrying, and subsequently slowly pine away and eventually die without consummating their love, is famous all over Kurdistan, and especially in the areas where Kurmancî or Northern Kurdish is spoken: southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, and the Badinan region of Kurdistan–Iraq. It is distinct in being known both in an oral folkloric tradition, where performances of the tale usually bear the name of the main male protagonist, Memê Alan, as their title; and in a very different written version in 2655 *bayt*s (distichs), composed in the late 17th century by Ehmedê Xanî in the Persianate tradition of mystically inclined *mathnawi*s, or poems of courtly romance.[5]

The outline of Xanî's version is quickly told. At a Newroz celebration, Mem and Tacdîn, the two male protagonists, both dressed up as girls, meet Zîn and Sitî, the sisters of the local *mîr* (prince) Zeyneddîn, who are disguised as boys. On both sides it is love at first sight, seemingly for someone of the same sex, but soon after, the true identities and genders

[3] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 2–3.

[4] See Khalid el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic world, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), on Arabic; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, on Persian; and Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), on Ottoman Turkish.

[5] Various editions of such oral performances have been published both in the region and in the West. The most famous of these is probably Roger Lescot, *Textes kurdes, II: Mamé Alan* (Paris: Collection de textes orientaux, 1942), which collates three versions into a single narrative, and includes a French translation. Michael Chyet, in *"And a Thornbush Sprang Up between Them": Studies on Mem u Zin, a Kurdish Romance* (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1991) presents the most detailed discussion of the epic's oral tradition to date, and reproduces several (partly previously published) versions, including translations.

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Figure 1. The tomb of Mem and Zîn in Cizre, Turkey, prior to renovations undertaken in 2007. Photograph by the author.

of the beloveds are discovered. Zeyneddîn grants permission for Tacdîn and Sitî to marry; but due to the scheming of his counselor Bekir, he refuses the betrothal of Mem and Zîn. As a result, both lovers slowly waste away with lovesickness. During a game of chess with Zeyneddîn, Mem openly declares his love for Zîn, at which the enraged prince imprisons him. Eventually, faced with the threat of open revolt by Tacdîn and his brothers, the prince announces that Mem will be released; but by then the latter is already on the verge of dying. After a final meeting, both lovers die soon after each other. They are buried together (Fig. 1), but Bekir, killed by Tacdîn, now takes the shape of a thorny juniper, preventing the two from uniting even in death.

Xanî's version has long been popular in (Northern) Kurdish madrasa circles. Relatively large numbers of manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries have come down to us.[6] Indeed, it has a unique status in Kurdish literature: no other vernacular *mathnawi* poem of the period has been preserved in remotely as many manuscripts. In the late 19th century, it was promoted to the status of the Kurdish "national epic" by Kurdish nationalists living in Istanbul, such as members of the Bedir Khan family and the Southern Kurdish poet Hajî Qadir Koyî (c. 1817–97), a status that was further consolidated by its subsequent printed editions.[7] At present, there are various printings of Xanî's work in circulation, both in the original version and in present-day Kurdish renderings, not to mention translations into other languages.[8] Moreover, for decades, cassette tapes of oral versions continued to

[6] Margaret Rudenko, ed., *Axmed Xani, Mam i Zin. Kriticeskiy Tekst, Perevod, Predislovie i Ukazateli M. B. Rudenko* (Moscow: Nauk, 1962). This is the sole fully critical edition to date; it is based on nine different manuscripts, the oldest of which dates from 1731–1732. As various other manuscripts have become available in the meantime, a full overview of extant manuscript copies in libraries in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, let alone a new critical edition, is much to be desired.

[7] On this process, see Michiel Leezenberg, "Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*: The Consecration of a Kurdish National Epic" in Michael Gunter, ed. *The Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (London: Routledge, 2018), 79–89.

[8] The first printing was published in Istanbul in 1919. In his introduction, the editor, Seyda Hemze, states that any nation worth its salt should have a national literature. This edition was reprinted several times in, among other places, Aleppo, Damascus, and Erbil during the 1950s. A translation into the Sorani, or Southern Kurdish, dialect

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circulate more or less clandestinely in Turkey; in 1991, a Turkish-language film version with the Kurdish title *Mem û Zîn* was released, followed by an Iraqi Kurdish TV miniseries *Memî Alan* in 2002.

Clearly, Xanî's tale has inspired numerous generations of Kurdish readers, initially primarily in madrasa circles, but increasingly also in secular settings. Among Kurdish nationalists, this tale of unhappy lovers is widely read as an allegory of the political fate of the Kurds. Just as Mem and Zîn cannot come together, this reading has it, so the different parts of Kurdistan cannot unite to form a single, independent state. There is much to be said for such an interpretation. Most importantly, Xanî himself seemed to endorse it, lamenting as he did the Kurds' lack of unity and strong leadership.[9] On another level, however, the story can be read as a mystical allegory, in which the love between humans is merely a "metaphorical love" (*'işqê mecazî*), which allegorically stands for the true, or literal, divine love (*'işqê heqîqî*).[10] This seems to be the reading that Xanî himself favored; his poem, he writes, aims "to proclaim the beauty of love" (*zahirkirina cemalê 'işq*).[11] On such a mystical reading, this tale of the unfulfilled love between two humans is not a political allegory, but an imperfect mirror image of the true, divine love. It also describes the transmutation of human love into divine love as an alchemical process: precisely because the love between Mem and Zîn is not consummated, it remains pure, and can be perfected or transmuted into a purely spiritual love for God. As will become apparent below, this reading takes its place in a long tradition of Persianate courtly poetry. Undoubtedly, for a long time this was the predominant reading in the madrasa circles from which it originated.

But whichever reading one prefers, it is clear that these different kinds of love are central to Xanî's story. They include both the mystical love for the divine and the worldly love between humans; and they feature both spiritual love and carnal desire. Given this near-omnipresence of love in *MZ*, it makes sense to reread the poem with the aid of the analytical tools of present-day gender studies and the history of sexuality. Indeed, Xanî's epic is remarkably direct about various aspects of gender and sexuality that in 21st-century Kurdish society are seen as embarrassments, if not taboo topics, such as explicit sexuality, same-sex desire, and cross-dressing or drag. To mention but a few examples: Mem and Zîn first meet during the Newroz celebration, for which Mem and his male companion Tacdîn have dressed up as girls, whereas Zîn and her sister Sitî are disguised as boys. Failing to see through each other's disguise, both the boys and the girls immediately fall in love with someone they believe to be of the same sex. Next, the chapter on Tacdîn and Sitî's bridal night contains an elaborate description of the defloration, full of—to modern tastes—extravagant imagery. Finally, as I will argue in more detail below, same-sex desire

by the poet Hejar appeared in Baghdad in 1960. In the Republic of Turkey, where Kurdish-language activities had been banned since the 1920s, a bilingual edition of Hemze's text in Latin transcription plus a Turkish translation by Mehmed Emin Bozarslan was published in 1968. Although Bozarslan had taken great care to omit all passages that smacked of sedition or Kurdish nationalism, this edition was banned almost immediately.

[9] *MZ*, ch. 5, especially *bayts* 199–207, 230–31. The existing literature on *MZ* has mostly focused on this part of the *dîbaçe* or introduction, in particular on Chapters 5 and 6 of the epic, and has generally been framed around the discussion of whether or not Xanî was a "proper" or "modern" nationalist. See, for example, Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992); Farhad Shakely, *Kurdish Nationalism in Mam û Zîn of Ahmad-î Khanî* (Brussels: Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 1992); and Martin van Bruinessen, "Ehmedê Xanî's Mem û Zîn and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness," in Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Press, 2003), 40–57. Far less attention has been devoted to the poem's mystical aspects, even though references to mysticism occur throughout the text. Arguably, however, even the poem's alleged nationalism should be read in the light of its mystical and alchemical ideas rather than modern romantic-nationalist ideologies. Kamal Mirawdeli, in *Love and Existence: Analytical Study of Ahmadi Khani's Tragedy of Mem u Zin* (London: AuthorHouseUK, 2012), is highly critical of such modernist readings. See also Michiel Leezenberg, "Nation, Kingship, and Language: The Ambiguous Politics of Ehmedê Khânî's *Mem û Zîn*," *Kurdish Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): 31–50.

[10] *MZ*, *bayt* 2.

[11] *MZ*, *bayt* 2486.

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between males, although not between females, appears to be a relatively unproblematic given in the story.[12]

The Persianate Connection: Mystical Love

Even though Xanî hailed from Beyazîd (present-day Dogubeyazit), a relatively remote and peripheral region on the Ottoman-Safavid frontier, his *mathnawi* poem is very much part of a wider cosmopolitan Persianate cultural tradition that was transmitted both by oral and by literate means. This Persianate cultural area, of which we are only gradually beginning to grasp the extent and complexity, stretched from the Balkans across Anatolia and the Iranian plateau all the way to Central and South Asia. It involved poetry in Persian, but also in local vernaculars with a high if fluctuating percentage of Persian loanwords.[13] Thus far, studies of this Persianate poetry have tended to focus on Persian-language rather than vernacular texts, and on the Mughal rather than the Ottoman Empire. But clearly, *MZ* also can be read against this background. For example, its very vocabulary clearly shows that it is part of wider Arabic and, especially, Persianate literary traditions. The poem has a high percentage of borrowings from both Persian and Arabic, but far fewer from (Ottoman) Turkish. Likewise, the vocabulary of love, desire, and sexuality that one encounters in the poem is familiar from classical Arabic- and Persian-language mystical texts. Love is expressed with Arabic-origin terms like *'ishq*, *ḥubb*, and *maḥabba*, which are familiar from devotional mysticism; occasionally, Kurdish terms like *evîn*, which does not have a specifically mystical sense, are used as well. Likewise, lover and beloved are captured in the conventional Arabic-origin vocabulary of, respectively *'aşiq*, *hebîb,* or *talib* and *ma'şûq*, *mehbûb,* or *metlûb*; the Persian *yar* also is frequently used to indicate a friend or lover.

The poem's imagery, as well as its verse style, rich in alliteration, assonance, and wordplay, suggests that it is rooted in Persianate literature even more than in Arabic poetry.[14] Throughout the poem, we find the familiar, and highly conventionalized, imagery of rose and nightingale, of moth and candle, and of love as drunkenness. Occasionally, love also is expressed in the imagery of money and markets, especially during public events like the Newroz celebration. The single greatest, though by no means the sole, model and inspiration for this entire tradition is undoubtedly Nizami's *Layli u Majnun*, a 12th-century *mathnawi* poem that retells an older Arabic story with a new mystical twist: it describes Qays, an Arab boy, who meets the girl Layla in school and falls in love with her; when her father refuses to grant permission for their marriage, he slowly becomes insane (*majnūn*), and cuts all bonds with society, including those with his parents and his friends. After a final meeting, in

[12] There are few if any book-length academic studies of *MZ* in languages other than Turkish, Kurdish, or Arabic. An important early study, indeed to the best of my knowledge, the first monograph, is Ezeddin Resul's *Ahmadî Khanî (1650–1707) Sha'irun wa Mufakkiran wa Faylasûfan wa Mutasawwifan* (Baghdad, 1979); see also the Turkish translation by Kadri Yıldırım, *Bir Şair Düşünür ve Mutasavvıf Olarak Ehmedê Xanî ve "Mem û Zîn"* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2007). Resul does not, however, discuss love or sexuality, apart from a brief discussion of mystical love in Chapter 25. Mirawdeli, in *Love and Existence*, has a brief discussion of sexual, and homosexual, forms of love, but does not historicize the concepts and norms of sexuality. Finally, there are two very valuable recent book-length commentaries: Perviz Cîhanî, ed. *Ehmedê Xanî, Mem û Zîn: Bi lêkolîn û şîroveyeke nû* (Duhok, Iraq: Spîrêz, 2007; Latin transcription, Istanbul: Nûbihar, 2010), and Dost, *Mem û Zîn*.

[13] For an overview of the Persianate cosmopolitan tradition, with a somewhat one-sided emphasis on literate and Persian-language expression, see Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); see also Bert Fragner, *Persophonie* (Berlin: Das arabische Buch, 1999).

[14] The prominent Iraqi Kurdish literary historian Maruf Khaznadar (d. 2010), however, strenuously denies the importance of this Persianate link, arguing that Xanî's poem hails from Kurdish folkloric traditions rather than Persianate literature, and that the latter derives from Arabic verse anyway (author interview, Erbil, July 2009); also see Maruf Khaznadar, *Mezhuy edebî kurdî, Bergî dûwem: Sedekanî çwardem-hejdem* (Erbil: Aras, [1998] 2010), 367–450. Resûl, *Ahmadî Khanî*, 83–94, hardly pays any more detailed attention to the Persianate background of classical Kurdish literature, only briefly discussing the possible influence of Hafez on Xanî's predecessor Melayê Cizîrî (d. 1640).

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which the two reaffirm their love, both die as virgins. This is not simply a story of tragically unfulfilled love like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Nizami's poem has strong mystical overtones, and suggests (although, unlike Xanî's, does not explicitly state) that, precisely by not being realized, let alone consummated, Layla and Majnun's love is purified into a wholly spiritual love for God, which is not debased or polluted by carnal desire or constrained by societal conventions.[15] The difference from Xanî's text is that, in the latter, these mystical dimensions and the distinction between literal and metaphorical love are overtly stated and discussed in detail.

The importance of Nizami's poem for the wider Persianate cosmopolitan tradition can hardly be overestimated. His version of this tale has been adapted more often than any other classical Persianate *mathnawi* poem; there are literally dozens of imitations (*naziras*) in both Persian and various other languages. Xanî openly acknowledges his indebtedness to this tradition: he mentions Nizami and Abdulrahman Jami as his models, and he refers no less than six times to the figures of Layli and Majnun, not to mention other figures and episodes familiar from Persian oral and literate tales, like Yusuf and Zulaykha, and Wamiq and Ezra.[16]

There also are significant differences between Xanî and Nizami, however. The latter's *Layli u Majnun* is a relatively straightforward narrative, in which the main character's own actions move inexorably toward the mystical purification and alchemical transmutation of his love in and beyond death; and, as said, the mystical aspect remains largely implicit. The narrative of *Mem û Zîn*, by contrast, is marked not only by explicitly mystical language, but also by several kinds of counterpoint. Thus, the doomed love of Mem and Zîn is counterbalanced by the happier love between Tacdîn and Sitî, the consummation of which is described in detail and with apparent relish in Chapter 25; it also is contrasted with, and complemented by, the friendship between Mem and Tacdîn, which is far more central to Xanî's narrative than the friendship between Majnun and Nufal is in Nizami's. Xanî's tale also features elaborate descriptions of worldly and courtly activities, like the celebration of the spring equinox (Newroz), the prince's hunting party, and Tacdîn and Sitî's wedding festivities. I will return to the significance of some of these courtly activities below.

There are important differences between the male protagonists as well. Unlike Nizami's Majnun, who knowingly forfeits all human relations with his friends and relatives, and even with his parents, for the sake of his unfulfilled love, Mem is generally the victim of forces outside himself (most importantly, the king's wrath and Bekir's scheming) rather than a madman primarily moved by an inner erotic drive or desire. Mem's relations with parents or siblings are largely left implicit; but he clearly does not renounce his friendship with Tacdîn. On a psychological plane, Mem thus appears a more likable and less monomaniac character than Majnun. One should beware, however, of overly psychological readings of both Xanî's and Nizami's poems. Scholars like Julie Scott Meisami and Michael Dols see Majnun as an asocial, or even rebellious, youngster, who knowingly alienates himself from society. However such readings, Asghar Seyed-Gohrab has argued, miss the poem's crucial mystical dimension, in which the notion of blame (*malâma*), to denote mystical behavior that by conventional standards, precisely insofar as it escapes convention, plays an integral part.[17] Given their clearly mystical intent, the main characters in both poems are allegorical types as much as real-life personalities.

A related difference is that unlike Majnun's love, which seems to be an inner driving factor, Mem's love is one of passive suffering. Like Qays, Mem is described as having been

[15] Wahid Dastgardi, ed., *Nizami: Layli u Majnun* (Tehran: Enteshârât-e Zavvâr, 1386H).

[16] *MZ*, *bayt* 257.

[17] Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 160; Michael W. Dols, *Majnûn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1992), 332. See the caveats against such psychologizing readings by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylî and Majnûn: Love, Madness, and Mystic Longing in Nizâmî's Epic Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), ch. 5.

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driven insane (*mecnûn*) by his love; generally, however, he is made to suffer by human actors as much as by his own unfulfilled desire.[18] In Chapter 26, it is Bekir who convinces the king to withhold his permission for the betrothal, against the latter's initial inclination. In Chapter 43, again as the result of Bekir's scheming, Mem publicly admits that he is in love with Zîn. As a result, the king has him thrown into a dark dungeon, where Mem will remain imprisoned for a year. This episode of imprisonment in a pit recalls, and indeed alludes to, the story of Bizhan and Manizha that can be found in Ferdowsi's *Shahname* as well as in Iranian oral tradition; but Xanî gives it a wholly different mystical significance.[19] Mem's imprisonment is compared in detail to the retreat of a sufi novice on the path to a higher mystical state (*hâl* or *maqâm*). Xanî writes, "for him, prison became a forty days' cell" (*zindan li wî bûye çillexane*), in an allusion to the forty days of repentance a Sufi novice has to spend in isolation before being initiated into a tariqa.[20] Significantly, during his imprisonment, unlike in his earlier state of affliction, Mem remains optimistic and never despairs of his love. As a result, it is in this enforced solitude and seclusion that he reaches the "stage of unity" (*meqâmê wehdet*), and subsequently the "stage of death" (*meqamê mûtû*), that is, progressive stages in the mystical process of dying to oneself and achieving a selfless union with God.[21] Mem is gradually purified of all worldly and everyday concerns, or as he describes it, "the mirror of the heart has become polished" (*ayineyê dil we bû museyqel*).[22] The prince, he acknowledges in this stage of mystical insight, has only apparently acted unjustly toward him, saying that "He justly exercised this force against me" (*Ev cebr-i li min ewî bi cih kir*), adding: *Heqqê min e, 'edl e zulm-i nîne / Xassiyetê agirê evîn e* (This is what I deserve; it is justice, not oppression / it is a peculiarity of the fire of love).[23] And indeed, these words are vindicated at the conclusion of the story, where even Bekir turns out to have joined the two lovers in paradise: even though he appeared to be a malicious enemy, he has in reality helped Mem and Zîn keep their love pure. This mystically inspired contrast between apparent political injustice and a higher eschatological justice reconciles the story's apparently evil characters, like the king and Bekir, with a more harmonious cosmic and eschatological order.[24]

Sexuality

Given the counterpoint provided by Newroz celebrations, marriage, hunting, and friendship, can we also say that *MZ* expresses concepts and norms of gender and sexuality that are different from those in other Persianate texts? Clearly, the mystical love that escapes or transgresses conventional boundaries and moral judgments plays a central role in the story as a whole, but this is by no means the only form of love we encounter in *MZ*. The unconsummated worldly or metaphorical love between Mem and Zîn finds its transmutation into divine, literal, and purely spiritual love; but in a rather different way, the all too human, and indeed carnal, love between Tacdîn and Sitî is sacralized as well. Let us therefore look in more detail at the references to and attitudes toward sexual love in the epic.

The bridal night itself is described in Chapter 25, in a jumble of images, with no apparent organizing principle, which vaguely recalls the Biblical *Song of Solomon*.[25] The imagery

[18] *MZ*, *bayt* 1306.

[19] Bizhan is alluded to only once in *MZ*, in Chapter 35, when Mem compares the soul locked up in the body to the imprisoned Bizhan (*bayt* 1375). Saadalla, *Mem and Zîn*, 129, however, translates *Bijen* as "sieve"; although this term does mean "sieve" or "winnow" in both Kurmancî and Sorani, this rendering makes little sense in context.

[20] *MZ*, *bayt* 1786.

[21] *MZ*, *bayt* 1788, 1819.

[22] *MZ*, *bayt* 1825.

[23] *MZ*, *bayt* 1809, 1816.

[24] It does, however, lead to an ambiguity in Xanî's political claims; see, for example, Leezenberg, "Nation, Kingship, and Language."

[25] On the conventional imagery of wedding nights in Persianate poetry, see Christine van Ruymbeke, "From Culinary Recipe to Pharmacological Secret for a Successful Wedding Night: The Scientific Background of Two

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employed by Xanî falls into several groups: first, the kissing and foreplay are compared to the consumption of sweet things, like stealing sugar from each other's lips, and drinking sherbet or syrup. From here, it is but a small step to the imagery of the drinking of wine, with the predictable effect of drunkenness.[26] The beauty of various parts of the newlyweds' bodies also is described using various kinds of flowers and precious stones.[27] Next, the passion driving the two is variously characterized as sickness (*derd-i sihhet*), as intoxication, and even as a storm at sea.[28] The imagery used for the bride is even more chaotic: within the space of a mere six *bayt*s, Zîn is compared to a candle, to the al-Aqsa mosque, to the moon, and to a decanter.[29] Finally, the defloration, too, is described in explicitly sacralizing terms. In Chapter 24, the sexual union is represented as the Islamic pilgrimage or hajj, when Tacdîn is called to the bridal chamber by the candle, with the words:

Ew qible û ke'beya te meqsûd / nezîkê te bû bi emrê me'bûd.
Beyt û hecer û meqam û hucre / Se'y û teleb û tewaf û 'umre
Barî ji te ra kirin muqedder / Ha bûne ji bo te ra muyesser
(Your intended prayer niche and Ka'aba / are near to you at the Lord's command
The House, the Stone, the Place, the cell / The endeavor, the demand, the pilgrimage, the *umra*
God has determined these for you / These have been made available to you).[30]

The sexual act itself is described at some length, and in mostly metaphorical terms of ivory towers, arrows, pearls, shells, and coral:

Tira ko ji 'acê ber hedef bû / Amac bi sefweta sedef bû
Amac ko bû mehellê peykan / Durdane bedel kirin bi murcan
(The ivory tower was right on target / the target was like a refined shell / As the target received the arrow / Pearls were exchanged with coral).[31]

Only in *bayt* 1094 do we find the literal statement that "he gave her his seed with heart and soul" (*nesla xwe ji can û dil bi wê da*). The explicitness of this last *bayt* in particular suggests that the imagery of this chapter, which leaves little to be imagined while rarely getting quite explicit, let alone vulgar, is not simply the result of prudishness. In the following *bayt*s, Xanî also describes the sexual union in the language of alchemy, which is of crucial significance for the poem as a whole.[32] Tacdîn and Sitî are characterized as two alchemists (*du kîmiyager*), who by their sexual union are transmuted into one single soul:

Ew rûh û cesed bi yekve munzem / Nefseyn-i bi yekve bûne mudxem
(As their bodies and souls united / Two spirits together were amalgamated).[33]

In Xanî's account, then, worldly carnal love and sexuality also have a sacral function, even if they are not quite on the same level of purity and perfection as Mem and Zîn's unfulfilled

Images Related to Fruit in the Xamse of Nezâmi Ganjavi," in *Festschrift in Honour of Professor J. T. P. de Bruijn, Persica*, Annual of the Dutch-Iranian Society (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 127–36.

[26] *MZ*, *bayt* 1080, 1083, 1086.

[27] *MZ*, *bayt* 1075, 1083.

[28] *MZ*, *bayt* 1104, 1087, 1079.

[29] *MZ*, *bayt* 1067–72.

[30] *MZ*, *bayt* 1055–57.

[31] *MZ*, *bayt* 1092–93.

[32] Leezenberg, "Nation, Kingship, and Language"; conversely, in the Western tradition, hermetic insight is described in terms of the sexual unification of male and female.

[33] *MZ*, *bayt* 1098, 1099.

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and spiritual love. Nowhere, incidentally, does Xanî mention that the sexual act has, or should have, a primarily procreative function.

Xanî emphasizes that both the love and the sexual contact between Sitî and Tacdîn are according to law and custom. Similar attempts to restrict carnal love to what is religiously sanctioned may be found elsewhere in the poem: whenever Xanî describes feelings or acts of physical love, he emphatically portrays them as licit. This attitude of seeking religious sanction for sexually significant events becomes especially clear in Chapter 40, which describes how Mem and Zîn secretly meet in the prince's garden while the prince himself is out hunting. In various traditions, enclosed gardens are a prime location for secret, illicit, or transgressive sexual encounters.[34] Xanî, however, emphasizes that nothing indecent happens between the two lovers:

> Hubba di dilan ji huddê der bû / Serheddê zerafetan kemer bû
> (The love in their hearts transgressed all boundaries / [But] the limit to their graces was the belt).[35]

Likewise, the Newroz festival (*'îdê newroz*)—which in the 20th century was to become an important national symbol for the Kurds—is not presented as a specifically Kurdish phenomenon, but rather as a "custom of past ages" (*'adetê pêşîyê zaman*), which has the explicitly sexual purpose of finding youngsters a suitable marriage partner:

> Meqsûdê ji çûyîna bi deştê / Ew bû . . . Ev herdu celeb ku hev bibînin / Kufwê di xwe ew ji bo xwe bînin.
> (The purpose of this going to the plain / Was this: [for] Both these flocks to see each other / And to find for themselves a marriage partner).[36]

Especially because it involves cross-dressing (which we will discuss below) it may be tempting to see the Newroz festival as a carnival in Bakhtin's sense, that is, as a folk-cultural inversion of values and hierarchies with a potentially subversive if not revolutionary character regarding both politics and sexuality. But Xanî appears at pains to present it as fully in agreement with both custom and revealed law; he calls it a "blessed custom" (*'adetê mubarek*), which is "along the path of [Islamic] law and sunna" (*bi terîqê şer' û sunnet*), and moreover corresponds to a "natural motion" (*teherruka tabi'î*).[37] Because of this apparent superimposition of natural phenomena, custom, and Islamic law, Xanî appears to assume that sexual acts are heterosexual in orientation and institutionalized in marriage, as distinct from both modern Kurdish attitudes (where even non-sexual same-sex desire has become a taboo topic) and premodern urban and courtly texts in languages like Persian and Ottoman Turkish (where overt descriptions of sexual encounters between men and boys may be found).

Cross-Dressing and Gender Norms

One episode in the epic is particularly significant in relation to both gender and sexuality: when Mem and Tacdîn first meet Zîn and Sitî, both the boys and the girls are in drag. The initial encounter between both pairs of lover and beloved is a wonderfully ironic scene in which both boys, disguised as girls, fall in love at the first sight of two girls dressed up as boys.[38] In classical Islamicate literatures, drag occurs rather frequently and without any appreciable

[34] On the early modern Ottoman garden as a heterotopia for illicit or transgressive sexuality, see Andrews and Kalpaklı, *Age of Beloveds*, 75–76.

[35] *MZ*, *bayt* 1570–79, esp. *bayt* 1574.

[36] *MZ*, *bayt* 485–96.

[37] *MZ*, *bayt* 498, 493, 482.

[38] See also Bradd Epps, "Comparison, Competition, and Cross-Dressing: Cross-Cultural Analysis in a Contested World," in Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, eds., *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 114–60.

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sense of scandal or transgression; for example, in the first encounter of the eponymous heroes in Khwâju Kermani's *Homay u Homayun*, and in the tales of Zumurrud and Ali Sher and of prince Qamar al-Zaman and princess Budur in the *1001 Nights* (171st to 237th night). In the latter, Budur's foster brother Marzawan enters the harem where she is imprisoned while disguised as a girl, and Budur escapes her prison and sails out to sea while dressed as a man. In a further parallel with *MZ*, the two lovers exchange rings at their first encounter. By present-day Kurdish standards, the acts of cross-dressing in *MZ* would qualify as transgressive behavior; but should we also read them in their own setting as actually subverting gender norms?

Famously, Judith Butler has characterized drag as involving just such a subversion, or more precisely as a parody, that is, as a quotation or "iteration" of gender identities, as part of her broader rejection of the idea that gender has a biological essence or a deep or hidden psychological truth. Rather, she argues, gender identities are performatively enacted, and may accordingly be performatively undermined. Drag, she continues, is not necessarily linked to sexual preference, but as an act of quotation, or iteration, it may undermine gender norms that have to be repeated to function.[39] It has been argued that this view of gender as performative suffers from a materialist and bodily bias, which prevents it from taking spiritual and religious factors as anything more than mere ideology.[40] This bias becomes especially problematic in a text like *MZ*, where the spiritual or mystical side of love and sexuality plays such an important role. To begin with, Mem's and Tacdîn's cross-dressing appears not to be sexually motivated, but is intended precisely to avoid making any sexual commitment:

> Wan lew kiribû libas-i tesrîf / Da qet nebitin li wan çu teklîf
> (The reason for their disguising / was so that no one would ever require any undertaking from them).[41]

While parading around Cizîra Botan, Mem and Tacdîn are told that the entire population of the town is smitten with love for two unknown boys of great beauty:

> Du şehlewendê şeddad / îro li vî xelqî bûne cellad
> (Today two merry and fierce lads / have become executioners for this crowd).[42]

These strangers, of course, are Sitî and Zîn in disguise; but at this stage, their identity is revealed neither to Mem and Tacdîn nor to the reader. We are merely told that the boys see "two very lovely angels" (*du melek ziyade dildar*).[43] The girls' reason for cross-dressing is never revealed; only in Chapter 16 is it suggested in passing that they have dressed up so as to not be recognized.[44] The two unknown youths are described in various terms, as statues (*peyker*), as angels (*melek*), but most importantly as gazelles (*xezalan*), the conventional term for beloveds, who may be either male or female, but who are often beardless male youths:

> Sîret melek in suwer perî ne / Ne bayi' in û ne muşterî ne
> (They were angels in stature and fairies in looks / They were neither buyers nor sellers).[45]

[39] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[40] See Brad Epps, "Comparison," 145–46: "it is precisely the spiritual and the sacred that contemporary writers such as Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber . . . have trouble engaging as anything other than a function of myth, delusion, fantasy, performance, parody, and so on."

[41] *MZ*, *bayt* 521.

[42] *MZ*, *bayt* 539. For obvious reasons, Saadalla's rendering of *du şehlewendê şeddad* as "two gay, fine and fierce lads" (*Mem and Zîn*, 58) is not entirely felicitous in the present context.

[43] *MZ*, *bayt* 553.

[44] *MZ*, *bayt* 645.

[45] *MZ*, *bayt* 548–59. The locus classicus on this topic is, of course, H. P. Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Farîduddîn 'Attâr* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), ch. 26.

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That is, just like the two boys disguised as girls, the two unknown youngsters seem not to be engaged in the business of seeking a marriage partner.

Second, the gender identity of the beloved appears to be of relatively little concern here. The unknown boys' beauty is generally described in gender-neutral terms.[46] They do, however, immediately become the beloveds, or gazelles, of the disguised boys:

Ji husnê van xezalan / Rehmek qete qelbê wan rewalan
(Due to the beauty of those two gazelles / Compassion filled those boys' hearts).[47]

Conversely, these unknown youths themselves immediately fall in love with what they think are girls. The encounter is described mostly from the perspective of the two male protagonists, but on closer inspection, the author suddenly, and briefly, switches to the perspective of the two girls.[48] Related to this switch is the fact that it is the two girls, in their disguise or role as boys, who take the rings from the boys, in their role of girls, and give them their own rings in exchange: apparently, boys are the ones who are expected to take the initiative in these matters. Clearly, it is not the gender *identity* of the lover that is involved here, but rather the gender *role*.

Things appear to be even more complex, however. Once Tacdîn realizes that their beloveds are not boys but girls, he summons Mem to get up, saying:

Em şêr in ew du xo xezal in / Pir 'eyb e ku em ji dest binalin
(We are lions, they are the gazelles / It is very shameful to moan at their hands).[49]

These words seem to suggest that only men are supposed to be active lovers (*'aşiq*) rather than passive beloveds (*ma'şûq*); that it is only men who can "love gazelles"; that men are not supposed to be suffering because of love for a woman; and, given the fact that both boys have already been suffering for a week before Tacdîn's discovery, perhaps even that such suffering is acceptable if its cause or object is a male gazelle. This relative indifference regarding the beloved's gender, paired with an apparent asymmetry between lover and beloved and between male and female same-sex desire, raises questions of whether love relations may reflect different forms of social inequality, in assigning different roles for men and women, for nobles and commoners, or for adults and youths. Perhaps the relation between lover and beloved, whether or not gendered, is not only an erotic relation but also a relation of power.[50] *MZ*, however, is not very specific about these social aspects of love.

Third, neither drag nor (male) same-sex desire appears to play any morally significant or socially transgressive role. Although Tacdîn finds it shameful for boys to be suffering on behalf of girls, he has no qualms about either dressing up as a girl or falling in love with a boy. Xanî, likewise, nowhere expresses disapproval of cross-dressing or same-sex love among males. Although Tacdîn does not explicitly say so, his subsequent exhortations suggest that he would consider Mem's pining away because of his love for Zîn unbecoming for a man. Mem may be a perfect lover; but he is not an ideal of masculinity.[51]

[46] More generally in *MZ*, beauty of boys and girls is often described in nearly identical, and mostly gender-neutral, terms of earlocks, moles or *taches de beauté* on the cheek, etc. Schultz argues that there is no "morphological distinction" between male and female beauty in medieval European courtly poetry: the beauty of both girls and beardless youths is described in overlapping, if not virtually identical, terms; James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love: The Love of Courtliness and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23. Signs of sex difference, such as beards and breasts, play little if any role in Xanî's evocation of beautiful youthful bodies.

[47] *MZ*, *bayt* 559.

[48] *MZ*, *bayt* 570–85.

[49] *MZ*, *bayt* 629.

[50] See Andrews and Kalpaklı, *Age of Beloveds*, 229.

[51] For example, *MZ*, *bayt* 462.

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Likewise, Heyzebûn, the girls' wet nurse, makes no comments about their dressing up like boys. In fact, not only does she herself repeatedly dress up in the guise of a (male) physician, she also reproduces the girls' pretense when she tells the fortune teller that she has "two innocent sons" (*min du kurik heyin di me'sûm*) who are suffering from love sickness.[52] The fortune teller, however, immediately sees through both her disguise and her lie, and reproaches her for not telling him the truth. At the fortune teller's suggestion, Heyzebûn then proceeds to visit Mem and Tacdîn while disguised as a physician (*bi sûretê tebîban*); she is specifically said to resemble Luqman the physician (*rabûve 'ecûze şubhê Luqman*).[53] Later, to bring the boys the good news about the girls' identity, Heyzebûn once more dresses up like a doctor (*dîsa ketî sûretê tebîban*), looking "like Aristotle" (*ji reng Eristetalîs*), in a possibly ironic echo of the boys' and girls' drag.[54]

The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that the true identity of the two unknown youths is not revealed even to the reader until afterward, when Mem and Tacdîn have returned home and have lingered lovesick for a week. It is only then that Tacdîn notes the bejeweled ring on Mem's finger and finds Zîn's name engraved in it, and that Mem sees Sitî's name on the ring given to his friend. Only then do the two boys realize that the gazelles they have seen were actually girls in disguise:

> Çawa xemilîne ev keçanî / Ew jî geriyane cilkuranî
> (While they had disguised as girls / those had dressed up as boys).[55]

The two girls only get to know the identity of their beloveds after Heyzebûn has gone to see a soothsayer to find out the identity of the nameless girls Sitî and Zîn have encountered. Neither in the characters' actions nor in the narrator's words, however, do we find any hint that these episodes of drag may subvert existing gender norms. Nor do we find any hint that drag is in itself a source of moral worry or outrage. Moreover, as in many other classical Islamicate traditions, same-sex desire toward beardless boys is treated as entirely acceptable.

Homosexuality or Friendship? The Asymmetry of Male and Female Same-Sex Desire

The reactions to the love at first sight that results from this encounter display a clear asymmetry between male and female desire. When Sitî and Zîn confess their love for what they think are two unknown girls to their wet nurse Heyzebûn, she scolds them for having a misguided desire: "your inclination for the female race is impossible" (*meyla we bi qismê jin mehal e*). She adds that girls' love requires "boys' coinage" (*neqdê kuran*), and that girls are "devoid of the love for gazelles" (*farix ji te'eşşuqa xezalan*).[56] The reasons she then proceeds to give for this impossibility are extraordinarily interesting. They do not derive from either custom or revealed law (shari'a), but are formulated in cosmological and philosophical terms of essence and attribute, substance and property, and sun and moon:

> Kurr ayîneyê cemalê zat in / Kiç mezherê pertewa sifat in
> Bê zat-i sifet 'erez mîsal e / Cewher nebitin 'erez betal e
> Qaim dibitin 'erez bi cewher / Bê şemsê qemer dibit munewwer?
> (Boys are a mirror for the beauty of essence / Girls are the appearance of the light of attribute

[52] *MZ*, *bayt* 729.
[53] *MZ*, *bayt* 771–74.
[54] *MZ*, *bayt* 867–68.
[55] *MZ*, *bayt* 621.
[56] *MZ*, *bayt* 695–98.

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Without the essence of attribute, property is mere example / If there is no substance, property is empty.
Properties become real by means of substance / Without the sun, how could the moon become illuminated?)[57]

For Heyzebûn, that is, the girls' longing for girls is not a moral or legal transgression or a pathological medical condition as much as a conceptual or logical impossibility. It should be noted, however, that her use of this vocabulary is rather garbled and confused, perhaps indicating an ironic confirmation of claims elsewhere in the poem that she is not a real doctor or sage.

Next, Heyzebûn's arguments explicitly place the Kurdish lovers in the Persianate tradition, presenting a number of literary models or scripts for this boy-girl complementarity:

Ev Meyl-i ku dê bikit we meftûn / Ev Leyl-i ku dê bikit we macnûn
Mecnûn ko nebit 'edîlê Leylê / Leylê ku dikit bi Leylê meylê?
(This inclination – would it seduce you? / These Leylas – would they turn you into Majnun?
If Majnun were not Leyla's opposite / How could Leyla be inclined to Leyla?)[58]

She also mentions other famous pairs of Persianate lovers, like Wamiq and Ezra, and Khosrow Perwiz and Shirin. These comments make it tempting to read Heyzebûn's words as the expression of a more general heteronormativity; but things appear to be more complicated. To begin with, her talk of opposites is echoed in Chapter 14, when Xanî describes the meeting and mutual love at first sight as the unification of complements: mold and cast (*qalib* and *meqlûb*), desirer and desired (*talib* and *metlûb*), and even body and soul (*ten* and *erwah*, and *can* and *eşbah*).[59] Nowhere, however, does he explicitly describe it as a merging of male and female. Likewise, in Chapter 26, in the justification of the king's use of evil men like Bekir he remarks:

Lewra ku nebit eger texaluf / Temyîz-i muhal e hem te'aruf
(Because if there were no contradiction / Distinction would be impossible as well as recognition).[60]

Xanî lists a number of such complementary opposites; but here, too, the opposition between man and woman, or boy and girl, is conspicuously lacking. Indeed, on closer inspection, we may perhaps discern a different attitude toward same-sex desire among boys already in Heyzebûn's own words. When she castigates Sitî and Zîn for falling in love with girls, she adds:

Meyla beşerî beşer divêtin / Emma we kiçan piser divêtin
Mankind's inclination desires mankind / But you girls desire boys.[61]

Arabic *bashar* may indicate a gender-neutral "mankind" or "mortals," but it also may denote a gendered notion of "men"; on such a reading, the first half of the *bayt* also can be translated as "men desire men," which implies that same-sex desire among males is socially acceptable.[62] In fact, unlike Sitî and Zîn, Mem and Tacdîn nowhere appear to be

[57] *MZ*, *bayt* 699–701. Saadalla's translation does not render the philosophical meanings of terms like *zat*, *sifat*, etc.
[58] *MZ*, *bayt* 703–4.
[59] *MZ*, *bayt* 564–65.
[60] *MZ*, *bayt* 1128.
[61] *MZ*, *bayt* 697.
[62] Saadalla's English translation renders this phrase gender-specific and heterosexual: "the inclination of a woman is towards a man" (*Mem and Zîn*, 73); but the Kurdish original does not force such a reading.

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particularly shocked about the apparent gender of their beloveds; nor are they told by anybody that their love is incorrect or inappropriate, in the way Sitî and Zîn are lectured by Heyzebûn. Xanî appears as tolerant about drag and (male) desire as he is strict about sexual acts.

These asymmetries provide an interesting sidelight about the distinction between acts and identities that Michel Foucault draws in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*.[63] Foucault distinguishes the premodern notion of sodomy as a juridically and religiously significant *act* from the modern concept of homosexuality, which, as a medically or psychologically relevant *condition* articulated as normal rather than pathological, combines outward behavior with inner desire. Famously, or notoriously, however, Foucault restricts his attention to the 19th-century emergence of the sciences of sexuality on the one hand, and the sexual practices of free males in the ancient pagan and early Christian Greek and Roman world on the other. He further postulates an essentializing opposition between a modern Western *scientia sexualis*, and an *ars amatoria* he sees as typically non-Western and/or premodern.

Although Foucault's strict dichotomies between act and identity, ancient and modern and, indeed, East and West, have been criticized by scholars working on Islamicate sexualities, as well as by medievalists, his work has proved fruitful for Islamic studies.[64] In the wake of his argument that sexuality is a distinctly modern object of knowledge and power, a number of authors have argued that early modern Islamic cultures lacked a concept of sexuality (and, by extension, of hetero- and homosexuality) in anything like the modern sense of the word. Khalid el-Rouayheb argues that early modern Arabic literature is replete with references to same-sex love, and more specifically pederastic love for beardless teenage boys; but that there was no unitary juridical concept of, let alone a uniform punishment for, all kinds of homosexual desire and acts. Neither same-sex desire, which was widely—although not universally—seen as a normal and relatively unproblematic aspect of human nature (*fitra*), nor *ubnah*, or effeminacy (which was seen as a medical condition rather than a moral or legal transgression), nor *liwât* (sodomy, or anal sexual contact) quite coincides with what nowadays is called "homosexuality."[65]

MZ takes up a distinct place in this classical tradition. On the one hand, it accepts same-sex desire between men, although not between women; on the other, it sees only sexual encounters between married men and women as permissible. This raises the question of whether any of the acts or desires to be found in *MZ* qualify as homosexual in the modern sense, and whether we can infer from this anything distinct about (the literary representations of) the early modern sexual customs of the Kurds, and more generally of peoples in the peripheries of the great early modern Islamic empires and cosmopolitan traditions. Although one should proceed with caution here, we do see early modern Persian authors like the 17th-century philosopher Mulla Sadra (1571–1640) discussing the presence and absence of desire for boys among different peoples as relative to the distinction between refined urban civilization (*hadâra*) and rural tribal society (*badâwa*). In his famous *al-Asfar al-Arba'a* (Four Journeys), he writes that the divine purpose of the refined desire for beautiful boys is to inculcate in older men the care for younger boys, and to transmit the fine arts of urban civilization to future generations; therefore, he continues, it is absent among

[63] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); English translation by Robert Hurley, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1990).

[64] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, ch. 3. For a critique focusing on the modernizing Islamic world, see for example Najmabadi (*Women with Mustaches*, 19), who argues that Foucault's distinction introduces a radical alterity with the past and with the non-Western world, which "makes it difficult to distinguish historical specificity from unreproducible peculiarity." For a discussion of some of the methodological challenges and pitfalls that emerge when trying to operationalize Foucault's notions in the context of medieval Europe, see Schultz, *Courtly Love*, introduction. Karma Lochrie, in "Desiring Foucault," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 3–16, rejects Foucault's view of mystical sexuality in medieval Europe as "idealized and nostalgic."

[65] Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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"primitive" peoples like the bedouins, the Turcomans, the Kurds, and Black Africans.[66] The question of whether or not this claim is factually or politically correct need not detain us; what is significant here is Sadra's distinction between civilized urban and tribal rural customs and traditions, and his positive valuation of same-sex desire for beautiful boys as something refined and noble. Two centuries later, the Kurdish scholar Mullah Mahmûdê Bayazîdî (1797–c. 1868) strikes a rather different note. Around 1860, he writes that sodomy (*liwât*) does not occur among the Kurds, and that both this practice and the drinking of alcohol have been brought to them in recent times by the Persians and the Ottoman Turks.[67]

In Xanî, neither *ubnah* nor *liwât* occurs, let alone vulgar or derogatory Kurdish expressions for either catamites or passive homosexuals, like *hîz*, *qûnek*, and *qûnder*.[68] But we do find terms like *mucerred*, *mişteha*, *xilam*, and *wildan*, which in early modern Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish literature refer to beardless male youths who may be sexually available.[69] The term *mişteha* occurs three times in *MZ*, but never clearly carries the sense of "unmarried youth."[70] *Mucerred* occurs only twice, once in a metaphorical or metaphysical sense (*cewher ji erez bû mucerred*, "when substance became separated from property"), and the other time in a context that generically alludes to the attractiveness of young girls and boys (*Murdan û murahiq û mucerred / Lawê we ku xet wekî zumurred*, "Men, beardless boys, and juveniles / Youngsters with temples like rubies").[71] *Wildan* occurs only once, in passing, when Xanî speaks of young boys alongside houris and peris. *Xulam* (from Arabic *ghulām*) occurs more often, several times with possibly homoerotic or sexual connotations. Most importantly, in Chapter 53, Mem remarks:

> Lê cenneta 'aşiqan cuda ye / . . . naguncine wê hur û xilman
> (The heaven of lovers is a separate place / There is no place in it for houris and *ghulāms*).[72]

The remark that the paradise for lovers has no need for houris or *ghulāms* seems to imply that others do have both at their disposal in paradise, possibly as objects of love or sexual gratification.

Questions concerning the acceptability of same-sex desire become particularly pressing in the case of the friendship between Mem and Tacdîn, which is—to present-day readers—characterized in explicitly homoerotic terms. Xanî writes of Tacdîn that "For him, Mem was a perfect lover" (*Mem ji wî 'aşiqek temam bû*), adding that their love went beyond that between brothers, or between fathers, mothers, and their children. After describing Mem as a brother (*bira*) and a candle (*çira*) for Tacdîn, and as a "brother for the hereafter" (*birayê axiret*), he even compares the two boys to the most famous lovers of classical Persianate literature:

> Ew herdu ciwan we lêk-i 'aşiq . . .
> Yek Qeysê zemane yêkê Leyla / Yek Wamiqê 'esr û yêkê Ezra
> (The two youths were each other's lovers . . . One was his age's Qays, the other was its Leyla / One was its Wamiq, and the other Ezra).[73]

[66] Molla Sadra, *al-Asfar al-Arba'a* (Najaf, 1387H), 7:171–2, quoted in ibid., 35.

[67] Mullah Mahmûdê Bayazîdî, *'Adet û rusumâtname-ê ekrâdiyye*, ed. Jan Dost (Istanbul: Nûbihar, 2010), 107–8.

[68] These terms are attested at least as early as the Sorani satirical poet Shaykh Reza Talabani (d. 1910), and also occur in Yûsuf Ziyaeddin Pasha's 1894 Kurdish–Arabic dictionary, *al-Hadiyya al-Hamîdiyya*. Their very existence indicates that, *pace* Bayazîdî, sodomy did in fact occur in 19th-century Kurdistan.

[69] See, for example, Andrews and Kalpaklı, *Age of Beloveds*, 63.

[70] *MZ*, *bayt* 30, 382, 1396.

[71] *MZ*, *bayt* 2569; 1021.

[72] *MZ*, *bayt* 2240–41.

[73] *MZ*, *bayt* 458–66. Mirawdeli (*Love and Existence*, 234–35) downplays this homoerotic bond between Mem and Tacdîn, instead describing it as "ideal fraternity and friendship."

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There is no hint, however, of any sexual attraction between the two boys, nor even of any asymmetry between lover and beloved. Mem and Tacdîn are depicted as equals, or near-equals, both in age and in social background; both also are characterized as *'aşiq*, that is, active lovers rather than passive beloveds. This male bonding is not really what would nowadays be called homosexuality, but neither is it quite the kind of male brotherhood to be found in Persian Sufism, as it involves worldly and courtly activities like fighting and hunting, and involves a number of virtues characterized as masculine.[74]

Given the courtly setting of *MZ*, it becomes tempting to see Mem and Tacdîn's friendship as expressing an ideal of courtly male elites, but given the madrasa context in which it circulated one may ask whether it does not express a religious or mystical, rather than courtly, ideal of masculinity. The views of masculinity and male friendship or homosocial bonding found in *MZ* differ equally significantly from those of classical Persian *akhlaq* (ethics) literature by authors like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–74). The gendered dimensions of this genre have recently been explored by Zahra Ayubi, who argues that these authors, despite proclaiming the equality of all humans, consistently relapse into depicting men as superior to women, and elite male homosocial bonding as superior to marriage.[75] Now Mem and Tacdîn, and Sitî and Zîn, are clearly depicted as, respectively, male and female members of the local courtly elite; but it should be added that Mem, in particular, is a rather more ambiguous embodiment of the courtly ideal of masculinity than his friend Tacdîn. Whereas the latter thinks it is shameful for a man to be suffering on behalf of a woman (despite, as described, expressing no similar qualms about suffering on behalf of a boy), the former continues to pine away with lovesickness for months, in fact for the rest of his life. Nor does Mem's strict and repeatedly emphasized chastity quite reflect the courtly ideal of masculinity, which involves self-control and playing the active role in sexual encounters rather than complete abstinence.[76]

This brings us to an important limitation of trying to apply the concepts of modern sexuality studies to premodern or non-Western settings. Although physical intimacy between friends, like holding hands and kissing, was—and is—very much an accepted form of behavior in the Muslim Middle East, this intimacy does not necessarily have a sexual component. Hence, Alan Bray has warned, reading premodern or non-Western friendships as somehow homosexual is not only anachronistic or ethnocentric (we have known as much since Foucault); the modern preoccupation with sexuality also risks obscuring the wider ethical frame of friendship. Premodern friendship, Bray argues, is ethical, as it operates in public and outside of individual goods. Bray further sees friendship not as an expression of a particular mentality, but rather as a code that can be manipulated: precisely because premodern friendship was public, he argues, it could be either praised as involving nobility and loyalty, or equally well turned into a pretext for accusations of debauchery, sodomy, or treason. For this reason, he concludes, premodern friendship involves what he calls an "uncertain" ethics.[77]

We find little if any such uncertainty in Xanî's text. He describes love between males as unhesitatingly as beauty in boys, and is quite explicit about the noble ethical aims of male friendship. This friendship, he writes, is a form of love, which aims at loyalty, and which is a goal both difficult and noble to achieve:

[74] Compare with Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 52–58.

[75] Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, the Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[76] Ibid., esp. 223–37.

[77] Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. ch. 5. In turn, Bray sees a big East–West rift between Catholic Latin Western Europe and Orthodox Eastern Europe: in the latter, he argues, the church had specific rites for friendship (9). Perhaps, however, one should focus less on institutions than on practices in these matters.

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Yarî ne hesaniye cefa ye / Meqsûd-i ji yarîyê wefa ye
(Love is not easy, it is difficult / Love's aim is loyalty).[78]

Therefore, Mem, no matter how much he is in love with Zîn, still tries to help his friend Tacdîn, and vice versa. In this respect, he also differs from Nizami's Majnun, who knowingly foregoes friendship as well as family relations for the sake of his unfulfilled love for Leyla.

Xanî emphasizes the importance of male friendship especially in the face of the dangers conjured up by human sexuality. Even while madly in love himself, Mem loyally stays in front of the door to Tacdîn's bridal chamber for a full seven days, to protect the newlyweds against enemies (*dijmin û reqîb*), whether human or demonic.[79] In turn, Tacdîn sets his own house on fire to prevent Mem and Zîn from being caught during their secret encounter in the prince's garden, and subsequently even contemplates open rebellion against the king when Mem is unjustly imprisoned. His friendship is stronger and nobler even than political loyalty. From *bayt* 1198–1203, it further emerges that another function of friendship is to share, and thereby to make bearable, the sorrow of unfulfilled love:

Unsiyyetê 'aşiqan sikûn e / Sermayeê wehşetê cunûn e
(The companionship of lovers gives tranquility / The food of solitude is madness).

This suggests that the very fact of Tacdîn and Sitî getting married dooms Mem and Zîn, as it deprives them of their main pillars of support in their suffering, and causes them to go mad from unfulfilled longing. In short, Xanî does not hesitate to call the friendship between males a form of love; but this love is a primarily ethical phenomenon, and appears to have no sexual overtones. Moreover, and unlike in *Layli u Majnun*, both male friendships and married relations between man and woman act as counterparts to the main theme of unfulfilled and non-carnal love.

Courtly Love, Mystical Love, Madrasa Love

The attitudes toward gender and sexuality found in *MZ* differ not only from modern Kurdish norms, but also from classical Persianate literature in other languages and genres. More specifically, its views of masculinity and (male) sexual behavior reflect a vernacular rural and religious environment rather than a cosmopolitan Persian urban or courtly setting. Because of both Mem's involuntary suffering and its explicitly mystical overtones, love as described in *MZ* has a less clearly courtly character than in many other works of classical Persianate literature.

Prima facie, this may sound like an odd thing to say. Clearly, the poem is set at Prince Zeyneddîn's court in Cizîra Botan, and has mostly courtly protagonists. Mem and Tacdîn are the sons of, respectively, a secretary (*debîr*) and a minister (*vezîr*) in the prince's cabinet or divan; both, that is, are of noble descent. Likewise, Zîn and Sitî are characterized as princesses (*şhehzade*).[80] Since courtliness may be seen as a marker of social distinction, one may ask whether we can detect any drive for distinction in *MZ*.[81] Some such markers of social distinction are indeed found in the activities of the nobility described in the poem, like the prince's hunt in Chapter 36, and in the conspicuous consumption displayed at Tacdîn and Sitî's wedding in Chapter 23.

But can the love between Mem and Zîn, or Tacdîn and Sitî (or between Mem and Tacdîn, for that matter), be called a form of courtly love in any substantial sense of the word? In fact, the concept of courtly love is not uncontroversial even when applied to medieval Western

[78] *MZ*, *bayt* 469.
[79] *MZ*, *bayt* 1063–66, 1105–9.
[80] *MZ*, *bayt* 464, 386.
[81] Schultz, *Courtly Love*, 164–69.

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European literature; its application to classical Islamic letters is even more complicated, in particular because love between humans—whether courtly or other—clearly functions as a metaphor for the mystical love for God here. Although a very large part of classical Persian literature is "courtly" in the sense that it was produced under courtly patronage and often presented in a courtly setting, one may doubt whether it involves a specifically courtly love.[82] The *akhlaq* tradition discussed by Ayubi, however, clearly has a courtly character, in that it visibly caters to male members of the secular court elites.

There are particularly strong reasons to have doubts in the case of *MZ*: despite its courtly setting, there are no signs it was written for a specifically courtly audience. On the contrary, all the available evidence suggests that, until at least the late 19th or early 20th century, its readership consisted primarily of madrasa pupils. The extant manuscripts are remarkably large in number and generally plain in execution, without the illuminations characteristic of more expensive manuscripts produced for princely patrons. Madrasa alumni also report that works like Xanî's *MZ* and Melayê Cizîrî's *Dîwan*, although (unlike Xanî's other writings) not formally part of the *rêz* or curriculum, were widely read in Kurdish rural madrasas.[83]

This ambivalence between court values and madrasa values repeatedly emerges in the poem. Although *MZ* is set at and around prince Zeyneddîn's court, and celebrates courtly values and ideals like chivalry, bravery, and friendship, not to mention chastity in love, one may well ask to what extent it is actually informed by the ideals of madrasa culture rather than courtly traditions. If it is, this would even more clearly distinguish it from the courtly *akhlaq* tradition and its ideals of masculinity, as discussed by Ayubi. For one thing, Xanî states that (mystical) love is not a prerogative of the nobility; for another, and in contrast with almost all other examples of *mathnawi* literature, *MZ* lacks the customary chapter of hyperbolic praise for a local patron, like the chapters in praise of Shirvanshah Akhsatan b. Manuchihr (d. 1203) in Nizami's *Layli u Majnun*.[84] Even more significantly, where Xanî does mention a contemporary local prince, he does so in a tone of exhortation, not to say reproach, rather than praise. In Chapter 6, Xanî introduces Prince Mîrza, reportedly the then ruler of Bayazîd, with a few lines of customary, not to say perfunctory, praise, calling him the "ruler of the age of learning," whose "mere look is alchemy" (*hakîmê weqtê me'rifetnak... / Mehza nezera wî kîmiya ye*); but this prince is less praised than admonished to pay more attention to learning and to the literate elites in his domain.[85]

The poem's very madrasa environment, however, suggests an intriguing parallel with European courtly literature. James Schultz has argued that both the ideal of courtly love and the vernacular literature in which it found expression were part of a new lay culture that emerged during the 12th century at the great courts of Medieval Europe. In this new courtly literature, he continues, one finds nonperipheral forms of love and sexuality that were distinct from both the learned latinity related to church institutions and the transgressive sexual practices to be found at the margins of urban life. I am in no position to evaluate Schultz's detailed and persuasively argued account, but it opens up an interesting series of questions concerning love and sexuality in the courtly literature of the premodern and early modern Islamic world, and especially in a vernacular-language poem like *MZ*, which aims to create a learned literature in Kurdish for the sake of the illiterate masses (*ji boyê 'âmê*), in a self-conscious act of *bid'et*, or heretic innovation.[86]

[82] Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*; also see Meisami, "Genres of Court Literature," in J. T. P. de Bruijn, ed., *General Introduction to Persian Literature*, vol. 1, *A History of Persian Literature* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 233–69.

[83] Author interviews, Diyarbakir, Hakkari, 2010–2015. See, for example, Zeynelabidîn Zinar, *Xwendina Medresê* (Stockholm: Pencînar, 1993), 96.

[84] *MZ*, *bayt* 477; compare to *Layli u Majnun* (ed. Dastgirdi), 26–39.

[85] *MZ*, *bayt* 274–75; these alchemical comments also may be read more in line with the rest of the story: for Xanî, it is kings who can transmute base metals into gold, worthless metal into valid coinage, and human love into divine love; Leezenberg, "Nation, Kingship, and Language."

[86] *MZ*, *bayt* 236–39.

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There are indications that the vernacularization of Kurdish, or more precisely of the Northern Kurmancî dialect, has followed a trajectory distinct from both the Romance languages in medieval Western Europe and other peoples in the 18th-century Ottoman empire. It appears to have occurred primarily in rural madrasa settings rather than at local courts or in towns, and hardly if at all involved courtly patronage by local princes, or *mîr*s, let alone an urban mercantile bourgeoisie. This is not to deny, of course, the existence of all forms of courtly patronage of poets among the Northern Kurds. Evliya Çelebi, for instance, mentions several Kurdish-language poets at the court of Amadiya.[87] Further south conditions for vernacularization were rather different. The creation of a worldly literature in the local Hawrami or Gorani dialect from the 14th century onward had been sponsored primarily by the Ardalan court at Senna, and the emergence in the 19th century of a literary tradition in the dialect of Sulaimaniya (subsequently known as Sorani) was in part encouraged by the local Baban court. But on the whole, the variable links between the vernacularization of different varieties of Kurdish, courtly patronage, and madrasa culture, not to mention the broader questions concerning cosmopolitan and vernacular languages and their different norms of gender and sexuality, remain largely unexplored topics.[88]

MZ's madrasa environment may help to explain Xanî's tendency to emphasize mystical love over courtly distinction.[89] It also may help to explain his focus on the ethical side of the male bonding between Mem and Tacdîn. The madrasa audience for which Xanî wrote his *mathnawi* poem on literal and metaphorical love, as well as his didactic works on the Arabic language and the principles of faith, consisted of unmarried young males, most of whom were presumably from relatively humble rural backgrounds, with few if any members of the nobility among them. In such an environment, discussing the virtues of friendship between male equals may become an important if delicate affair. Extending a phrase coined by a present-day Kurdish scholar, one may call this particular kind of male bonding "madrasa love," but I leave a fuller discussion of the character, ambiguities, and risks of this love to another occasion.[90]

Conclusions

A systematic attention to premodern and early modern norms and concepts of gender and sexuality may invite us to rethink whether and in which ways modern Kurdish national identity is conceptualized in gendered and sexual terms. The first apparent finding in such a study is the enormous difference between classical and modern concepts and norms. Xanî describes male desire for beardless boys, love between man and woman, friendship between males, and, last but not least, the love for God as distinct but legitimate modalities of love. He is rather more restrictive in his attitudes toward sexuality. Conspicuously absent among all these forms of love, moreover, is the patriotic love of the fatherland. Clearly, the romantic love of a territorial fatherland is a more recent innovation. It made its first appearance in the Islamic world only in the early 19th century; likewise, the very term for "fatherland" itself (*watan/vatan* in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, and, somewhat later, *welat* in Kurdish), is a 19th-century innovation. In Arabic, the term *ḥubb al-watan* seems to have been coined as a translation of the French *patriottisme* in Rif`a al-Tahtawi's 1834 account of his journey to France, which was translated into Turkish in 1839. In Ottoman Turkish, the closely similar neologism *hubb al-vatan* is first attested around the same time. The first Kurdish author

[87] *Seyahatname*, vol. 4, 380b–381a; ed. Dankoff (a.o.): vol. 4, 332–33.

[88] For a more detailed account of the vernacularization of Northern Kurdish madrasa learning, a process of which Ehmedê Xanî's writings were an integral part, see Michiel Leezenberg, "Elî Teremaxî and the Vernacularization of Madrasa Learning in Kurdistan," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2014): 713–33.

[89] Meisami (*Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 255) already calls attention to the increasing interpenetration of mystical and courtly imagery in later Persian *mathnawi* poetry.

[90] Zinar, *Xwendina Medresê*, 57–59; what he calls "madrasa love" (*evîna medresê*), however, only denotes pupils falling in love with local girls, rather than the male bonding between pupils, or between pupils and masters.

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to use the phrase "love of the fatherland" was, to the best of my knowledge, Hajî Qadir Koyî (d. 1897). In an undated poem in his *Diwan*, written in the southern Sorani dialect and probably composed in the late 19th century, he states, possibly following al-Tahtawi's example, that *Hubbî weten e delîlî îman* (Love of the homeland is proof of faith).[91]

This shift appears to reflect a wider process. Both in Europe and elsewhere, the distinctly modern phenomenon of nationalism not only involved a radical redefinition or rearticulation of gender identities and gender relations, but also a new regimentation of erotic love and sexual desires and practices. Afsaneh Najmabadi has described how in late 19th-century Iran, male nationalists, who were rooted in a Sufi tradition of male homoerotic love, developed a notion of heteroerotic love for a homeland conceived of as female.[92] This is not simply a change in sexual orientation from homo- to heteroerotic: the 19th century saw the articulation of a new ideal of beauty as gendered, and more specifically as feminine; and, as noted above, categories like "heterosexual" and "homosexual" do not correctly apply to the premodern Islamic world.

The comments by Hajî Qadir and Miqdad Bedir Khan suggest that among the Kurds a similar transformation in categories of gender and sexuality occurred. Considerations of space preclude discussion of the details of this process, but it is clear that, in Kurdish as in neighboring languages, both the concept of patriotism and love of the fatherland and the corresponding definitions and regimentations of masculinity, femininity, desire, and sexuality are 19th-century innovations. It is probably no accident that new nationalist readings of Xanî's poem as an allegory of the Kurds' aspirations for a unified and independent nation state emerged during this period. New conceptions of gender and sexuality play a crucial role in these readings.

In conclusion, then, detailed attention to the varieties of love featured in early modern vernacular epics like *MZ* may help us explicate and historicize the sexual and gendered dimensions of both classical vernacular madrasa learning and modern Kurdish nationalism, especially given Xanî's enormous stature among both madrasa pupils and secular nationalists. A closer look at Xanî's poem, its background, and its intended audience, suggests that the trajectory of vernacularization among the Kurds was madrasa-based rather than court-sponsored; perhaps it is this background in rural madrasa culture rather than urban or courtly settings that accounts for the differences between Xanî's attitudes toward masculinity, femininity, and sexuality and those found in the wider premodern Persianate tradition.

[91] Haji Qadir Koyi, *Diwan*, ed. Serdar Hemîd Mîran and Kerîm Mustefa Shareza (Sine [Sanandaj], Iran: Intishârât-e Kurdistan, n.d.), 198.

[92] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 2.

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