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What is at Stake in the Frame Story? A Timurid Reshaping of the Romance of Bahrām Gūr

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Abstract

This article examines Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī’s *Sab‘a-yi Sayyār* (889/1484), a Chaghatay rewriting of Nizāmī’s *Haft Paykar* and Amīr Khusraw Dihlavī’s *Hasht Bihisht*. In the prologue of his *masnāvī*, the Timurid poet expresses harsh criticism against his Persian models. He targets his predecessors’ frame stories, and more specifically their depiction of Bahrām Gūr’s behavior while listening to the seven nested narratives. In fact, Navā’ī’s reshaping of the poem epitomizes several Timurid trends with regard to the Persianate cultural complex: a tendency toward standardization, as well as a keen interest in Naqshbandī Sufism. Incidentally, the latter aspect shows Jāmī’s influence on the Chaghatay polymath’s literary output.

Keywords: Persian poetry; Navā’ī; Timurid culture; Chaghatay Turkish; literary imitation; Naqshbandī Sufism

When an author rewrites the work of a predecessor, he may want to let the readers know his mind about his model. His decisions regarding the episodes to be kept, omitted, or modified may be significant enough to bear witness to his sentiment. Yet it is easier still when the writer makes no mystery of his judgment. This was the case when the Timurid polymath Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī (844/1441–906/1501) produced his own version of Nizāmī’s famous Persian poem *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Portraits, 593/1197). In the prologue to his Chaghatay Turkish version, *Sab‘a-yi Sayyār* (The Seven Travelers, 889/1484), he not only criticizes Nizāmī openly for his take on the story; he also rebukes Amīr Khusraw Dihlavī (651/1253–725/1325), who composed the earliest and major Persian variation, *Hasht Bihisht* (The Eight Paradises), in 701/1301.¹ Navā’ī addresses his readers directly:

nechā naw‘ ishni qıldılar taqşır
gar tutarsen qulaq qılay taqrır
[...]
böylä tuhmat ki ‘aysh uchun Bahrām
yasadı yetti qaşr surgali kām

¹ Between 698/1298 and 701/1301, Amīr Khusraw Dihlavī composed a Pentalogy modeled around Nizāmī’s *Khamsah*. Amīr Khusraw’s *Khamsah* is composed of *Maṭla‘ al-Anvār* (Rising of Lights), *Shīrīn u Khusraw* (Shirin and Khusraw), *Laylī va Majnūn* (Layli and Majnun), *Hasht Bihisht* (Eight Paradises), and *Ā’īnah-yi Iskandarī* (The Alexandrine Mirror).

*yetti iqlīm shāhidīn yetti qiz
har biri lutf u ḥusnī ghāyatsiz*

*yetti qaşrı ichigä keltürdi
kām har kün biri bilä sürdi
[...]
turfa bu kim chū boldi bāda-parast
qıldı aqshamgha tegrü öznü mast*

*uyqu kāmīn alurgha mastāna
shūkhlargha buyurdi afsāna*

*bu ‘ajab kim alar daghi dedilär
qışsa-khān qizlari magar edilär*

*tangdīn aqshamgha tegrü paydarpay
olki ichgäy qadaḥ tölä tölä may*

*anga khūd ghaflat oldi dāb u şifat
uyqusigha fasāna ne ḥājat*

*bolsa ham ‘aql man‘ qılmas mu
qışsa aytur kishi tapılmas mu²*

How their works [Nizāmī's and Amīr Khusraw's] are marred by errors,
If you listen, I shall explain.
[...]

It is calumny [to say] that Bahrām for his delight
Had seven castles built to take pleasure.

Seven girls were the princesses of the seven climes,
Each extremely beautiful and graceful.

He brought them into his seven castles.
Each day he enjoyed the company of another.

It is strange that he loved wine so much.
Every evening he got drunk.

While drunk enough to fall asleep,
He ordered the seductive girls to tell a story.

It is astounding that they even told (their) tales!
Perhaps the girls were storytellers?

From dawn to dusk without respite,
He would drink cup after cupful of wine.

² For *Sab'a-yi Sayyār* I use a manuscript of Navā'ī's *Khamsa* that was copied in Herat in 1485. This copy comes from the University of Michigan (Special Collections Library, Is., Ms. 450). In the MS Michigan 450, the *Sab'a-yi Sayyār* begins on p. 531 and ends at p. 654. For the quotation, see p. 546.

Unawareness became his second nature.
What need then for a tale to be lulled to sleep?

Wouldn't reason prevent such a thing?
Could he not find someone [else] to tell [him] stories?

How dare Navā'ī criticize the works of two such great poets? What Navā'ī criticizes in fact is the setup in which the Sasanian king Bahrām Gūr listens to the seven tales over a week in the seven domed pavilions. The plot of the fourth *masnavī* (long poem in rhyming couplets) of Niẓāmī's *Khamsah* (Pentalogy) is well known. The *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Portraits) or *Bahrām-nāmāh* (The Book of Bahrām) recounts the legendary history of the Sasanian king Bahrām or Vahrām V (420–438/39). The eponymous portraits are those depicting the princesses of the “seven climes,” in other words, the seven regions into which the habitable world was typically divided in premodern geography. The young Bahrām discovers these portraits in his castle of Khavarnaq in Yemen, and falls in love with the seven princesses immediately. Succeeding to the throne of Persia, Bahrām marries them all. Each princess resides in a separate palace, and as the king visits them in turn over seven successive days, each entertains him with a different story. Bahrām's accession to the throne and his visits to the princesses make up the main narrative or the frame story of Niẓāmī's work. This frame story sets the stage for the telling of the seven tales, which constitute the embedded narratives.³

Navā'ī scolds his two Persian predecessors for portraying the great Sasanian king as a drunkard who forced beautiful princesses to tell him stories while he was drunk enough to fall asleep. If one reads Niẓāmī and Amīr Khusraw's depictions of these scenes, one has to admit that Navā'ī's scoffing is not entirely unfounded. Here is how Amīr Khusraw, for instance, recounts Bahrām's visit to the Indian princess in the black-domed pavilion:

shah ba-gunbad-sarāy-i mushkīn shud
khānah z-ū hamchū nāfa-yi chīn shud
[...]
māh-i hindū-nazhād-i rumī-chīhr
khāst az khābgāh-i nāz ba-mīhr

khidhmat-i khāṣṣ-rā miyān dar bast
kamar-i bandagī ba-jān darbast
[...]
z-avval-i bāmdād tā gah-i shām
'ishrat u 'aysh būd u bādah-vu jān
[...]
shah zi-mastī namūd raghbat-i khāb
ham zi-gul mast būd u ham zi-sharāb
[...]
jānash az zawq-i busah maftūn būd
*mastī-yi nuqlash az may afzūn būd*⁴

The king went to the palace with the musk-colored dome.
The pavilion appeared to him like a Chinese pouch of musk.
[...]
The Indian moon [-like beauty] with her Byzantine face
Graciously stood up from her lovely bed.

³ “Somewhat after the scheme of the *Arabian Nights*,” as Browne points out (Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, 409).

⁴ Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 82–83.

She forced herself to serve him.
 She girded the belt of the service to her soul.
 [...]
 From dawn to dusk
 They took pleasure, and cups of wine.
 [...]
 Drunk as he was, the king expressed his desire to sleep.
 He was drunk on this rose [-like beauty] and drunk on the wine.
 [...]
 His soul was charmed by the taste of kissing.
 [But] the intoxication caused by the words was stronger than the wine.⁵

In fact, several aspects of Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw’s poems unsettle the Timurid poet. First, he does not want to believe that Bahrām had the Seven Domes built merely for enjoyment. For him, there had to be a better justification for the construction of the monuments. Second, he considers it inappropriate for the storytellers to be beautiful princesses. Finally, he does not understand how Bahrām as a king could behave so coarsely. Navā’ī’s reprimand is all the more significant since he was not in the habit of criticizing his models. Quite to the contrary, each *maṣnavī* in his own *Khamsah* usually includes a full chapter (*bāb*) dedicated to the praise of Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw’s works.⁶ The *Sab’a-yi Sayyār* is no exception, since in the sixth chapter, that is, two *bābs* before he expresses his criticism, Navā’ī pays tribute to his prestigious Persian predecessors, including a third poet named Ashraf Marāghī who had also composed a version of the romance.⁷ We should therefore take Navā’ī’s words seriously and not consider this merely as bravado with a view to showing off his ability to compete with his models.⁸

Navā’ī’s reproof of Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw focuses mainly on the frame story. It is not directed against the nested narratives. According to the Chaghatay poet, his Persian predecessors set up a frame story that is morally problematic.⁹ Upon reading the poet’s reproaches, therefore, the following questions arise: If Navā’ī disapproved of Bahrām’s behavior towards the seven princesses and his relationship to pleasure and love generally, how should his own Bahrām differ in this regard? What kind of values should he embody?

⁵ All translations are mine. For the depiction of the same scene in Nizāmī’s text, see Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 146–47; and for the English translation, Nizami Ganjavi: *The Haft Paykar*, 105–08.

⁶ See Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 331–49. Navā’ī’s *Khamsah* is composed of *Ḥayrat al-Abṛār* (Confusion of the Righteous, 888/1483), *Farḥād u Shīrīn* (Farhad and Shirin, 888/1483), *Laylī u Majnūn* (Layli and Majnun, 889/1484), *Sab’a-yi Sayyār* (The Seven Travelers, 889/1484), and *Sadd-i Iskandarī* (The Alexandrine Wall, 890/1485).

⁷ Navā’ī, *Sab’a-yi Sayyār*, 540–42. For a comparison between Ashraf Marāghī’s poem and Navā’ī’s *Sab’a-yi Sayyār* see Hasanov, *Navoiyning yetti tuhfasī*, 20–29, 39–40, 49, 63.

⁸ Navā’ī’s criticisms were pointed out by Soviet scholars as early as the late 1940s. However, since they tended to isolate the “old Uzbek poet” from any Persian influence, they eventually clouded his connection with the Persianate tradition: see Bertel’s, “Navoi i Nezami,” 84–85; Bertel’s, *Navoi*, 201–02. On the ideological dimension of the studies devoted to Navā’ī in Soviet Uzbekistan see Toutant, “Materialist Ideology.” The only study of *Sab’a-yi Sayyār* in a Western language is Feldman’s article “Genre and Narrative Strategies.” Feldman does not focus on the frame story but on the first embedded narrative, to discuss the treatment of the female character in this tale, whom the author compares to the major character in the poem *Dilārām*.

⁹ Despite this critique of his predecessors, Navā’ī was obviously well aware of the metaphoric and symbolic meanings attached to their work (such as the astral symbolism in Nizāmī’s *Haft Paykar* for instance). To some extent, Navā’ī’s realistic approach to Nizāmī and Amir Khusraw’s frame stories may reflect an evolution of the readership of this type of poetry. Almost 300 years had passed since the composition of *Haft Paykar* and the socio-religious context for the reception of literature had changed. Most importantly, however, Navā’ī’s criticisms serve his own specific literary agenda. The poet triggers a religion-oriented discussion with his readers right from the start, so as to prepare them to read his version as the illustration of a religious teaching (I will return to this point in the last section of this article; see in particular footnote 57).

What prompts Navā'ī to reshape the frame story is the desire to give a different image of Bahrām Gūr altogether. The Chaghatay poet wants to portray the king, before he enters the seven pavilions, not as a frivolous monarch who seeks nothing but entertainment, but as a man who suffers from lovesickness (*dard-i 'ishq*). For this reason, he justifies the building of the Seven Domes as a means to heal the king's sorrow. To do so, Navā'ī chooses not to end the romance between Bahrām and the young maiden, Dilārām, before the erection of the palace. Unlike his Persian predecessors, the poet turns the episode of the king's passion for the unfortunate handmaid, whom he had left to her fate after a hunting incident, into the overarching narrative of the *masnavi*. It is lovesickness that will allow the king to evolve spiritually until he finally reunites with his beloved after hearing the seventh tale. Only then is Bahrām able to show that he has become a perfect king.

By making lovesickness the major drive in the king's transformation, Navā'ī reveals the fact that he wrote his work under the influence of his own spiritual master, the leading intellectual figure of the Naqshbandiyya brotherhood in Herat, 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414–92). Bahrām's kingship, at the end of the poem, epitomizes the model of sovereignty put forward by Naqshbandī Sufis at that time. Yet, when Navā'ī composed *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, he also had a real king in mind, to whom he intended to present his poem. The Chaghatay poet was in fact very close to the last great Timurid ruler, Sultan Ḥusayn Mīrzā Bayqara (r. 873/1469–911/1506), whom he praises in the prologue of his *masnavi*.¹⁰ This could suggest that Navā'ī had devised his retelling of Bahrām's adventures as an opportunity to expose the king to Naqshbandī spiritual teachings.

Another Role for the Seven Domes

The body of Nizāmī's *masnavi* consists of two parts: the account of Bahrām's life, which constitutes the frame story, and the seven tales told by his brides, which correspond to the embedded stories. The embedded stories therefore divide the king's romanticized biography into two unequal parts. The first and longest part recounts Bahrām's adventures before he visits each princess in the dome he has built for her. The second begins when the ruler emerges from the seventh dome and restores justice in his kingdom, after putting an end to his evil minister's abuses. Eventually, at the very end of the poem, the king disappears mysteriously into a cave during his last hunting expedition.

In the section preceding the building of the Seven Domes, Nizāmī recounts Bahrām's birth and his upbringing; his prowess as a hunter; his accession to the throne of Persia; his war with China; and his marriage to the princesses of the seven climes. Within the frame narrative's first sequel of events, Julie Scott Meisami distinguishes two significant episodes, for they signal important stages in Bahrām's progress toward perfect kingship: his killing of a dragon, and his romance with a servant named Fitnah.¹¹ As we will see below, the story of Fitnah left a deep impression on Nizāmī's successors.¹² Nizāmī took up the anecdote from Firdawsī's *Shāhnāmah*, not without making significant changes.¹³ Bahrām has a favorite handmaiden, whose name is no longer Āzādah, as in Firdawsī's great epic, but Fitnah. One day, the king wishes to demonstrate his ability in hunting, with a view to impressing his favorite. Unfortunately, Fitnah refuses to express her admiration. Infuriated, the king

¹⁰ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 547–50. Interestingly, in a work composed four years after *Sab'a-yi Sayyār* and dedicated to the memory of the ancient kings of Persia, Bahrām Gūr is explicitly compared to Sultan Ḥusayn Mīrzā Bayqara for his warlike feats (see Navā'ī, *Tārīkh-i mulūk-i 'ajam*, 236). This shows that Navā'ī was somehow accustomed to using the mythical-historical figure of the Sasanian king as a model for the Timurid ruler.

¹¹ Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 207.

¹² On the importance of the romance between Bahrām and Fitnah in *Haft Paykar* see also Jambet, "Postface," 354; Piemontese, "The Enigma of Turandot," 127–29.

¹³ For a comparison between the treatment of the episode in Firdawsī and Nizāmī's *masnavi*s see Meisami, "Fitnah or Āzādah?" For a discussion of other sources that could have inspired Nizāmī see Seyed-Gohrab, "A Mystical Reading," 188–89; Piemontese, "The Enigma of Turandot."

hands her over to one of his officers to be executed. The poor girl, however, induces the officer to spare her life. Having found shelter in one of his manors, she climbs up the staircase leading to a roof terrace every day, carrying a newborn calf on her shoulders. When the calf has grown into a full-size bull, the officer invites the king over. That day, the girl reenacts for Bahrām her incredible performance, determined to demonstrate the truth of her assertion that “practice makes perfect.” Thus, contrary to Firdawsī’s account, the slave-girl is not put to death despite not reacting as the king wishes. She is eventually forgiven, and the king learns a lesson.¹⁴

In his version, Amīr Khusraw cuts down his account of Bahrām’s biography significantly.¹⁵ However, he is careful to retain the romantic story between the king and his favorite slave-girl, whose name becomes Dilārām. While Niẓāmī only devotes three chapters (out of twenty-five) to describe Bahrām’s romance with the maiden, in *Hasht Bihišt* the episode covers a good half of the frame story, namely two of the four chapters that lead to the telling of the first tale. The Indian poet makes substantial changes to the plot. He alters the incident that ultimately reconciles Bahrām with his lover, replacing Fitnah’s display of physical strength with Dilārām’s performance of spell-binding music. After the hunting incident, the king abandons Dilārām in the desert. She wanders for some days until she reaches a small village and meets a farmer who adopts her as his child. He teaches her music, and in particular the four musical modes known to have a magical effect on the listeners. One day, attracted by her fame, Bahrām goes to listen to her playing, unaware of her real identity. He sees a herd of deer mesmerized by the music and realizes that Dilārām was right in their prior argument over innate and learned skills. Eventually, Bahrām apologizes for his arrogance and marries her.¹⁶

In a chapter written for Ehsan Yarshater’s *Persian Literature*, Johann Christoph Bürgel devotes a few lines to the various Persian versions of the romance. After briefly recalling the story as recounted in Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāmāh*, Bürgel points out the narrative changes that occur in Niẓāmī and Amīr Khusraw’s poems. The scholar approaches the matter as the “transformation of a theme.”¹⁷ Yet he merely notes the modifications without hypothesizing a rationale behind them, reserving his comments to suggest to the reader that one version has more “charm” and “flavor” than the other. However, one cannot help but think that Amīr Khusraw may have had other incentives beyond mere literary embellishment, to purge Niẓāmī’s account of Bahrām’s epic in this way. Though we may lack some elements fully to reconstruct the motivations behind Amīr Khusraw’s abridgment, Navā’ī’s critical rewriting may help us to understand them, since the Timurid poet follows his Indian model closely.¹⁸ From the sequence of events leading to the building of the Seven Domes, Navā’ī retains the story of Dilārām alone. Like Navā’ī after him, Amīr Khusraw may have considered this love story to be of greater significance than the king’s warlike feats. On the other hand, Navā’ī’s recasting of Bahrām’s incident with his favorite servant represents a sharp departure from both his Persian predecessors.

¹⁴ Niẓāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 104–20, 134–46.

¹⁵ See Piemontese, “The Enigma of Turandot,” 141.

¹⁶ Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihišt*, 47–71.

¹⁷ Bürgel, “The Romance,” 172–75.

¹⁸ When discussing his own practice of rewriting, Navā’ī uses the word *tatabbu’*. This word, which literally means “following step by step,” is one of many in the Arabic and Persian lexicon of imitation. Paul Losensky makes it clear that *tatabbu’* should be distinguished from involuntary imitation: in *tatabbu’*, he writes, the author makes himself a follower. However, Losensky still translates *tatabbu’* simply as “imitation” (see Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*, 101–114). Similarly, I have kept the word “imitation” to translate Navā’ī’s *tatabbu’* practices. Along the same line of thought, when referring to Navā’ī’s version of the story, I use “rewriting,” “retelling,” and “adaptation” interchangeably, as there is no need to discuss the technical distinctions attached to these terms in the context of this article. For a more detailed discussion of the practice of *tatabbu’* in Navā’ī’s works see Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 134, 268–80, 367–74.

In Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw's versions the anecdote of the king and the handmaid comes to a happy end before the seven tales are told. As a result, the building of the Seven Domes appears unrelated to this episode. However, the Timurid poet is not happy with the disconnect in the sequence of events. He criticizes his predecessors for claiming that Bahrām had the Seven Domes built merely to satisfy his sinful whims. Describing the king's treatment of the princesses in his predecessors' versions, Navā'ī expresses his strong disapproval:

*hukm qilghay ki siz fasāna dengiz
demāngiz 'udhr ne bahāna dengiz*

*bolung uyghaghliq ichrā farsūda
men bolay uyqu birlā āsūda*¹⁹

He [Bahrām] commanded: you, tell [me] a tale!
Do not refuse under any pretext!

Bear with fatigue and stay awake
While I will fall asleep!

The poet even feigns indignation:

*böylä taklif kimsä qilghay mu
ādamidin bu söz achilghay mu*²⁰

Would anyone make such a proposal?
Is there anyone to speak in such a manner?

Navā'ī cannot imagine that the Seven Domes were built to please an ignominious character. Consequently, he takes it upon himself to find a better explanation. His idea is to connect the edifice to the story of Dilārām. To do so, he extends the romance with the young maid to the point where it takes up the better part of the frame story (a little over ten chapters). The Timurid poet thus offers a very condensed version of Bahrām's biography, pushing back the king's feats into the background. In so doing, he follows Amīr Khusraw's abridgment while at the same time amplifying it. Most significantly, and unlike his two predecessors, he does not end the romance between Bahrām and Dilārām before the erection of the palace. In *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, when the king goes to listen to the first tale in the white-domed pavilion, he has not yet found his missing lover. Thus, Navā'ī connects the construction of the Seven Domes with Bahrām's inconsolable longing for Dilārām.

Under the pen of the Chaghatay poet, the romance takes on a whole new dimension. Right from the start of the *dāstān* (story), Navā'ī emphasizes the fire that consumes Bahrām. The first time the ruler sees his beloved is when Mani—the prophet of Manicheism, also famous for his skills as a painter—shows him the portrait he made of her. As soon as he sees the painting, Bahrām falls in love with Dilārām. Learning from Mani that she is the servant of a rich Chinese merchant, the king sends emissaries with instructions to buy the young lady who, in addition to being beautiful, also happens to be a talented harpist. Bahrām's feelings only grow deeper after meeting Dilārām. He cannot spend a moment without her by his side, and brings the beautiful harpist along on all his hunting expeditions. In this respect, Navā'ī's retelling of the hunting incident is again closer to Amīr Khusraw's version. As the maiden does not express admiration at the sovereign's hunting skills, he hands her over to a group of outlaws, who are instructed to abandon the poor girl in the desert, to

¹⁹ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 546.

²⁰ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 546.

be eaten by savage beasts. The next morning Bahrām is overcome with remorse. He orders his men to search for Dilārām. Since she is nowhere to be found, the king is gripped by grief and sorrow. He is no longer able to rule his kingdom.²¹

As a remedy for his ailment, Bahrām's doctors decide to have the seven pavilions built. Each should be decorated in a specific color appropriate to the clime it epitomizes, for they are designed to host the princesses of the seven climes. The construction of the Seven Domes warms Bahrām's heart. To a certain extent, gazing at the pavilions helps the king overcome his grief. At night, however, Bahrām cannot get any sleep.²² This prompts him to go and visit seven travelers, who soothe him with their tales. Thus, in *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, Bahrām is no longer a drunkard who summons his wives to entertain him with stories so that he may find sleep. He is now a man who suffers from lovesickness (*dard-i 'ishq*). Similarly, the storytellers are not seductive princesses, but travelers hailing from the seven climes, hence the title of the poem. This is how Navā'ī compensates for his predecessors' allegedly problematic frame stories.

In Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw's poems, the erection of the Seven Domes bears no connection to the episode of the handmaid. In *Haft Paykar* it is Shīdah who suggests the idea during a banquet celebrating Bahrām's many accomplishments. The wise and skillful architect advises Bahrām to live according to the stars and suggests that the Seven Domes be built. Each dome will be inhabited by a princess hailing from the astrologically related clime.²³ These princesses correspond to the seven idols (*haft paykar*) Bahrām gazes at in his Khavarnaq castle when he is inebriated. Needless to say, the king accepts the architect's offer without hesitation.²⁴ In this case, the decision to build the Seven Domes is also connected to the theme of love, but very differently from the Chaghtay *masnavī*.²⁵ Similarly, in *Hasht Bihisht* the building of the Seven Domes happens after Bahrām finds Dilārām again. The construction of the edifice is conceived as a means to bring the king back to his duties, since he spends all his time hunting.²⁶

Nizāmī, Amīr Khusraw, and Navā'ī each provide a different justification for the building of the Seven Domes. The Timurid poet views them essentially as a means to heal the king's pain in the separation from his beloved. This narrative innovation implied that the poet had to postpone the episode of the reunion of Bahrām and Dilārām until after the telling of the seven tales, in the second part of the frame story. Yet Navā'ī may have felt that this narrative alteration did not suffice for his purpose. In addition to this enjambment over the seven tales, he also disrupts the traditional relationship between the frame story and the nested narratives.

A Subversive Use of the Frame Story Device

In *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār* the romance of Bahrām and Dilārām does not come to an end before the telling of the seven tales. The love story finds its happy ending within the sequence of events that follows the seven embedded narratives, namely in the second part of the frame story. But Navā'ī's narrative reorganization goes further still. Rather than the usual structure of an enclosing frame narrative and a coherent enclosed story, the Chaghtay poet chooses to transgress narrative boundaries. In fact, the last tale Bahrām is told in the seventh pavilion comes to interact directly with his own personal story, such that it allows for the happy reunion with his beloved. Navā'ī thus creates a *mise en abyme* that blurs the boundaries between framing and embedded narratives.

²¹ Navā'ī, *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, 553–68.

²² Navā'ī, *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, 553–72.

²³ See Krotkoff, "Colour and Number," 101.

²⁴ Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 141–44.

²⁵ On the role of love in *Haft Paykar* see for instance Seyed-Gohrab, "A Mystical Reading," 187; Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 182–83 and 226; Krotkoff, "Colour and Number," 101.

²⁶ Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 61–62.

When Bahrām enters the white pavilion on the seventh day he meets the last traveler, a native of Khorezm. The storyteller tells the king that one day a Chinese merchant came to his country, with a handmaid who sang and played music. The handmaid was so talented that her music would drive the audience out of their senses, to the point that some listeners met their deaths. The king of Khorezm himself fell under her spell and decided to purchase the handmaid. The Chinese merchant having declined his offer, the ruler captured the maiden by force. Using a magical spell, however, the musician managed to put the king's men to sleep and to escape from the palace. Explaining that he would never force her against her will, the king invited Dilārām and her master to stay with him, as a father and daughter, to which they agreed. The storyteller, who was among the sovereign's entourage, explains that he himself decided to learn to play music with her. Since the traveler had lost his virility after absorbing too much camphor, he was allowed in the proximity of the handmaid. He soon became intimate with Dilārām and noticed that a deep sorrow filled her soul. Eventually, she agreed to disclose the reason for her sadness, on the condition that he leave the country forever after her confession. Her story runs thus: of Chinese origin, she became the servant of a rich merchant at a young age, following a conflict between two khans. The merchant took care of her as if she was his own child. He taught her music and she developed an exceptional talent, which added to her great beauty. Her fame soon spread all over China, to the extent that, one day, Mani painted her portrait without her knowing. As the traveler tells his story, Bahrām realizes that this is the portrait Mani showed him, and that the storyteller is talking about his own lover.²⁷

Owing to Navā'ī's narrative skills, Bahrām and the reader learn about the young lady's circumstances from her own mouth, since the traveler quotes her very words. Her story continues as follows: after being abandoned by Bahrām following the hunting incident, Dilārām wandered in the desert until she met her Chinese former master. The latter took her back under his wing but advised her not to return to the king, as she would put herself at risk. Instead, the master took the young lady to Khorezm, far away from Bahrām. The traveler's story throws the Sasanian king into ecstasy. He writes a letter to Dilārām. Now the two lovers can reunite at last, never to separate again until Bahrām's disappearance in the final chapter of the *dāstān*.²⁸

Thus, the last nested tale resolves the various narratives' entanglements all at once, in a dizzying *mise en abyme*: Bahrām hears the account of his own deeds and learns about their unforeseen consequences. Most importantly, these revelations alone allow him to reunite with his beloved. Once an anecdote in Niẓāmī's *masnavī*, the romance between the handmaid and the Sasanian ruler has grown to become the guiding narrative in the poem. Dilārām comes out as a central character, and Navā'ī turns Bahrām's passion into the main topic of his text.²⁹ Lovesickness (*dard-i 'ishq*) lies at the core of the foundation of the Seven Domes, and becomes the driving force behind the gradual metamorphosis of the king. Whereupon, the whole narrative can be read as an illustration of the consequences of love-sickness, from both a spiritual and a political perspective.

Navā'ī's blurring of the boundaries between frame story and embedded narratives marks a willful subversion of the literary tradition and recasting of Bahrām's role.³⁰ In *Sab'a-yi Sayyār* Bahrām is no longer the epic hero depicted by Firdawsī in his *Shāhnāmah*. Setting his feats aside, Navā'ī focuses entirely on the pain that seizes him as soon as he experiences true love. The Timurid poet blames his predecessors for not having taken advantage of these

²⁷ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 630–36.

²⁸ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 636–42.

²⁹ Feldman evokes "the author's practice" of "restructuring the entire *masnavī* around a humble harpist" (Feldman, "Genre and Narrative Strategies," 269).

³⁰ It is interesting to note that Feldman also uses the word "subversion" when introducing the first nested narrative of *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*: "While there is no mistaking the ultimately didactic intent of Navā'ī's tale, the reader cannot fail to observe certain more or less subtle subversions of expectations" (Feldman, "Genre and Narrative Strategies," 243).

feelings. According to Navāʿī, Niẓāmī and Amīr Khusraw had extolled the adventures of a character quite undeserving of such a treatment altogether:

*boldī farzā bu nawʿ būʿlʿajab ish
būʿlʿajabraḡ yana bu ish bolmish*

*kim munungdek ikki waḥīd-i zamān
har bir öz waḡtīda farīd-i zamān*

*böylä nādān uchun yazīp awṣāf
anga qīlghaylar özlärin waṣṣāf*

*madḥīni bīḥisāb yazghaylar
balki mawzūn kitāb yazghaylar*³¹

Suppose such a strange thing exists,
There is also an even stranger thing,

That such people as these two unique figures in their times [Niẓāmī and Amīr Khusraw],
Each irreplaceable in their times,

Sang the praise of such an ignorant,
And became his panegyrists!

They wrote innumerable eulogies of him,
They even wrote whole books of poetry!

In *Haft Paykar* and *Haft Bihisht*, Bahrām was an “ignorant” because he was deprived of the “fire of love” (*ishq suzi*). As Navāʿī puts it in the same chapter:

*kim birāw mīhrdin barī bolghay
baḡma ḡar mīhr khāwari bolghay*³²

He who is deprived of love,
Do not grant him a look, even if he be the rising sun!

The point is that love, and more specifically the pain it causes, is precisely what makes Bahrām such a great monarch in the Chaghatay rewriting.

Lovesickness as the Source for Perfect Kingship

Why was Navāʿī so critical of his Persian models, and what drove him to implement such radical changes in his rewriting? To understand his reinterpretation of *khamsah-navisī* (the tradition of writing *khamsahs*), one should consider the influence Jāmī exerted on him. The great Persian poet ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) was bound to Navāʿī by a deep friendship. In addition to being his lifelong correspondent, it is likely that Jāmī initiated Navāʿī into the Naqshbandī Sufi order in 881/1476, and remained his spiritual master (*pīr*) throughout his life.³³ We

³¹ Navāʿī, *Sabʿa-yi Sayyār*, 546.

³² Navāʿī, *Sabʿa-yi Sayyār*, 546.

³³ On Jāmī’s influence on Navāʿī see Papas, “Individual Sanctity and Islamization,” 380–390; Toutant, “Evaluating Jāmī’s Influence”; Ökten, “Jāmī,” 199–214; Algar, *Jami*, 40–61.

know that Navā'ī and Jāmī had regular conversations on intellectual topics,³⁴ and that they often sought one another's opinion on their own literary works.³⁵ In light of this fact, roughly at the time Navā'ī was composing *Sab'a-yi Sayyār* (889/1484), Jāmī claimed in his own rewriting of the Alexander romance (*Khīradnāmah-ye Iskandarī*) that he would not rewrite the (pagan) story of Bahrām Gūr. "It is not my job to tell fairy tales (*afsānah*),"³⁶ he explains. To this he adds a few more *bayts*:

chū ma'murah-yi 'umr shud khāk-i tūd
*zi-mi'marī-yi Haft Paykar chī sūd*³⁷

Since the edifice of life will turn into a heap of dust
Of what use is the architecture of *The Seven Portraits*?

Accordingly, when writing his own *Khamsah*, Jāmī replaces the story of Bahrām Gūr with *Subḥat al-Abrār*, a narrative better suited to Sufi matters.³⁸ It is very unlikely that Navā'ī would not have been influenced by his mentor's decision. Still, Navā'ī decided to keep the story of Bahrām Gūr.³⁹ Under these circumstances, it is as though Navā'ī had set as a condition for his own rewriting the idea expressed in Jāmī's *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā*, written a year before Navā'ī's *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*:

dil fāriḡh zi-dard-i 'ishq dil nīst
*tan bī dard-i dil juz āb u gil nīst*⁴⁰

A heart free from lovesickness is no heart.
A body without a heartache is naught but clay and water.

In this distich, Jāmī pictures lovesickness as a critical driving force. In a mystical context, this means that no Sufi can travel along the path without experiencing such a feeling.⁴¹

³⁴ Some of their intellectual exchanges are described in the *Khamsat al-Mutaḥayyirīn* (The Quintuple Amazement), a work composed by Navā'ī after the death of Jāmī and dedicated to his memory. In this work the Chaghatay poet reveals that Jāmī taught him how to read the *Lama'āt* of 'Irāqī (d. 688/1289), as well as the *Savānih al-Ushshāq* of Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 517/1123 or 520/1126), to introduce him to the doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240). See Navā'ī, *Khamsat al-mutaḥayyirīn*, 56.

³⁵ Toutant, "Evaluating Jāmī's Influence," 604.

³⁶ *Khīradnāmah z'ān ikhtiyār-i man ast / ki afsanahkhāni na kār-i man ast* ("I want to write the *Book of Wisdom* / For to tell fairy-tales is not my job"): Jāmī, *Maṣnavī-yi Haft Awrang*, 928. On this matter see Toutant, "Evaluating Jāmī's Influence," 608.

³⁷ Jāmī, *Maṣnavī-yi Haft Awrang*, 928.

³⁸ Jāmī's *Haft Awrang* (The Seven Thrones or The Constellation of the Great Bear) consists of seven *maṣnavīs*: *Silsilat al-Dhahab* (The Chain of Gold, between 872/1468 and 877/1472), *Tuḥfat al-Ahrār* (Gift of the Free, 886/1481), *Subḥat al-Abrār* (Rosary of the Pious, 887/1482), *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā* (Yusuf and Zulaykha, 888/1483), *Laylī va Majnūn* (Layli and Majnun, 889/1484), *Khīradnāmah-yi Iskandarī* (The Alexandrine Book of Wisdom, 890/1485), and *Salāmān va Absal* (Salomon and Absal, 893/1488). In a section of the prologue of the *Khīradnāmah-yi Iskandarī* Jāmī explains that he wrote *Tuḥfat al-Ahrār*, *Subḥat al-Abrār*, *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā*, *Laylī va Majnūn*, and *Khīradnāmah-yi Iskandarī* within the framework of *Kamsah-navīsī*. These five pieces thus compose "Jāmī's Quintet" (Jāmī, *Maṣnavī-yi Haft Awrang*, 927–928). For a discussion on that specific topic see Bertel's, *Roman ob Alexandre*, 100–102; Bürgel, "Ġāmī's Epic Poem," 417–19.

³⁹ On Jāmī and Navā'ī's debates regarding which *maṣnavī* deserved to be rewritten and how, see also Erkinov, "La querelle."

⁴⁰ Jāmī, *Maṣnavī-yi Haft Awrang*, 593.

⁴¹ In this respect, Jāmī's conceptions align with classical Sufi interpretations. More specifically, the theme of suffering as a means of spiritual progress is developed in 'Irāqī's *Lama'āt*, as well as in Aḥmad Ghazālī's *Savānih al-Ushshāq*, two works that Jāmī explained to Navā'ī, according to the latter's *Khamsat al-Mutaḥayyirīn* (see note 34). On 'Irāqī's interpretation of suffering see Feuillebois-Pierunek, "Désirer la séparation."

Understandably, therefore, Navā'ī's version of Bahrām's epic had to focus on the king's *dard-i 'ishq*. Lovesickness is the key element in Bahrām's spiritual evolution; it is, similarly, the key element in the narrative progress.

Navā'ī's depiction of the king's torments begins well before Bahrām meets Dilārām. As soon as he sets his eyes on her portrait by Mani, Bahrām is awestruck. Driven mad (*divānah*) with love, he cannot utter a word or take his eyes off the painting. "Love made the king an unfortunate man,"⁴² the poet says. Following the hunting incident, even as Bahrām leaves the handmaid to her fate, the poet devotes a whole chapter to the description of his agony. His pain is so intense that he contemplates suicide. Navā'ī compares his body to "a mountain of pain" (*kūh-i dard*). He is a new Farhād, wandering in the desert in search of his beloved Shīrīn.⁴³ The warlord is forced to acknowledge his defeat against the evil that plagues him. As he describes his suffering, the poet gives the epic a lyric twist. As Bahrām bemoans his state, Navā'ī has him say:

*menmüdürlen ki razm chün tüzdüm
chün sipāhūni yolghuzun büzdüm*

*'ishq chün razm u kīn shi'ār etti
khayli şabrīnni tār u mār etti*⁴⁴

Didn't I fight many a battle,
And crushed the Chinese army on my own?

[Yet] when love declared war
Its troops scattered my patience.

The episode recounting Bahrām's victory over the Chinese emperor (*khāqān*) in Niẓāmī's *dāstān* thus presents a very different face in the Chaghatay text: its recollection in these lines serve merely to disclose the king's vulnerability.

Yet the ruler's suffering is the sign that his heart is undergoing a process of purification. Once Bahrām enters the seven domed pavilions, he is ready for the spiritual progress driven by the stories he is told. One after the other, the storytellers guide the king on his path toward enlightenment, following a pattern inspired by the author's Persian models.⁴⁵ Bahrām's reaction upon hearing the last tale in the white pavilion demonstrates how radically he has changed. While he thinks only of rushing toward his beloved, his advisors restrain him, arguing that a king must show patience (*şabr*) and continence (*qāni'*) at all times. At this time the king is able to overcome his desires and heed their advice, despite the fire that consumes him: he writes a letter to Dilārām, in which he tells her that he, too, has experienced death since they parted. Their reunion will be the prelude of their spiritual resurrection. Bahrām sends another letter to the king of Khorezm, demanding that he set Dilārām free in exchange for a sizable reward. When Dilārām's equipage approaches the Sasanian ruler's palace, Bahrām goes out to meet her. When they finally come together, the king and his former servant both lose consciousness. This is the sign of the purity of their passion. The two lovers have been purified by the fire of their love. Interestingly, Navā'ī is

⁴² Navā'ī, *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, 556.

⁴³ Navā'ī, *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, 564. Navā'ī's *Farhād-u Shīrīn* depicts the torments and the tragic fate of Farhād, in love with the princess Shīrīn, who falls prey to King Khusraw Parviz's jealousy.

⁴⁴ Navā'ī, *Sab'ā-yi Sayyār*, 567.

⁴⁵ In *Haft Paykar*, "at the beginning of each episode, in Seyed-Gohrab's words, each princess welcomes Bahrām to her pavilion and immediately starts to tell a sensual but didactic story" (Seyed-Gohrab, "A Mystical Reading," 187). The seven princesses in Niẓāmī and Amīr Khusraw's poems are therefore not only lovers, but also educators.

careful to also recount Dilārām's torments, thus giving her as much prominence as the female protagonist in *Layli and Majnun*.⁴⁶

After their reunion, the color white, which is the color of the seventh pavilion, literally invades Bahrām's kingdom in its entirety. Like Amīr Khusraw before him, Navā'ī does away with the chapters in which Nizāmī made the case that Bahrām has become a legitimate ruler by restoring justice in his kingdom. In the Chaghatay version the spread of the color white is enough to signal the king's transmutation: Bahrām has become a perfect king in the same way that he has become a perfect lover. From now on he will be entirely devoted to his wife, just as he will be devoted to his subjects.

In the epilogue of his *maṣnavī*, Navā'ī pictures himself at the court of his protagonist. He is the direct witness of Bahrām's speech on the transformative, if not alchemical, powers of love.⁴⁷ Of all the treasures he has acquired, there is not one he did not spend for the welfare of his people:

har ne ilgimgā tūshti şarf ettim
*shāh-i darwīsh dahrđin kettim*⁴⁸

I spent everything that fell into my hand [for my people]
[And] left the world as a beggar king.

In addition to becoming a just king, as was already the case in Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw's stories, Navā'ī's Bahrām also behaves like a beggar-king – a king able to conceive of power in powerlessness, and of sovereignty in the service of God and of his subjects. The concept of the beggar-king corresponds to Navā'ī's ideal of perfect kingship.⁴⁹ It was also the model of royalty propounded by the Naqshbandī Sufis.⁵⁰

An Illustration of the Naqshbandī Teachings

Not only did the Timurid poet seek to turn Bahrām's legendary biography into an illustration of Sufi enlightenment, he also lent the end of the story an explicit Naqshbandī overtone. In the last chapter of the *dāstān* Bahrām disappears during a hunting expedition, as in Nizāmī's version. During this last outing the king kills so many animals that floods of blood run through the earth. Eventually the hunting ground turns into a huge swamp. As the blood of the slaughtered animals starts to shake the bottom of the earth, all living beings, beasts and hunters included, find themselves engulfed in a torrential rain. Bahrām himself is caught in the swirl. The world is "a dragon," writes Navā'ī, "that engulfs everyone."⁵¹ To escape the torments of this world, one must thus follow the path of *fanā* (annihilation). Such is the poet's advice to himself:

ey Nawā'ī wujūd ḥarfīn unut
*‘adam olmaq bilā fanā yolī tut*⁵²

O Navā'ī forget the letter of existence!
Turn to nothingness and embrace the path of annihilation.

⁴⁶ As Feldman puts it: "Thus the major female character of Navā'ī's *masnavi* becomes virtually an equal protagonist with Prince Bahrām, and she can no longer be compared structurally with Nizāmī's Fitna" (Feldman, "Genre and Narrative Strategies," 244–45).

⁴⁷ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 646.

⁴⁸ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 649.

⁴⁹ On the concept of spiritual poverty in Navā'ī's works see Abduqodirov, *Navoiy va Vahdat ul-vujud*, 57–77.

⁵⁰ See Papas, "Islamic Brotherhoods."

⁵¹ Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 644.

⁵² Navā'ī, *Sab'a-yi Sayyār*, 645.

The following chapter is entirely devoted to this theme. It focuses on the importance of detachment from a world characterized by transience and treachery. The fate of such great kings as Jamshīd, Alexander, and Bahrām serves as a warning. “Where is King Bahrām, who used to reign over the celestial sphere?”⁵³ the poet asks. For this reason, Navā’ī exhorts his readers to get their “ships” ready for the last journey:

*ey Nawā’ī safargha ṭayyār ol
tā ki mumkindürür sabukbār ol*

*özlügüngdek aghir yüking yoq bil
ol aghir yükdin özni äylä yengil*

*chünki ol yükni özdin etting kam
düst küyida bil burunghī qadam*

*bal ki ol yükni chünki salb etting
qadaming ranja äylämäy yetting*

*waṭan ichrä safar birāw ki demish
anğa ta’wīl gūyā bu emish*⁵⁴

O Navā’ī prepare for the journey!
Come as lightly loaded as you can!

Know that there is no heavier thing than your being,
Alleviate yourself of this heavy load.

Since you’ve reduced the load of your being,
Know that this is the first step on the path towards the Friend.

Or rather, since you have disposed of that load,
You will reach Him without injuring your foot.

Travel in the homeland, as one said;
Let us regard these words as an interpretation of that saying.

Waṭan ichrä safar is the Turkic adaptation of the Naqshbandī principle *safar dar waṭan* (travel in the homeland). These Naqshbandī “sacred words” (*kalimāt-i qudsiyya*) characteristic of the order to which Navā’ī belonged, entail the concept of an inward journey in which the seeker progresses in his own internal world.⁵⁵ Navā’ī uses Bahrām’s tragic end as an illustration of the famous Naqshbandī principle.⁵⁶ Lovesickness detached Bahrām from the world and led him to sit on the throne of spiritual perfection. The king’s reign can thus epitomize the model of sovereignty that Naqshbandī Sufis put forward. When Bahrām becomes oblivious of the necessity of such detachment from the world and embarks on one last hunting expedition, fate reminds him of these Sufi teachings in the cruelest way.

⁵³ Navā’ī, *Sab’a-yi Sayyār*, 646.

⁵⁴ Navā’ī, *Sab’a-yi Sayyār*, 646 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ The idea of an inward journey as opposed to an outward one distinguishes the Naqshbandiyya from other Sufi brotherhoods, which had always encouraged the disciples to travel physically. On this particular point see Algar, “The Naqshbandī Order,” 134.

⁵⁶ On the concept of *safar dar waṭan* in Navā’ī’s works see Olim, *Naqshband va Navoiy*, 140–79.

Conclusion

The explicit reference to the Naqshbandī principle at the end of *Sab‘a-yi Sayyār* uncovers the mystical turn in Navā‘ī’s rewriting of the romance. There is no ambiguity as to how the reader should understand the allegorical meaning of the narrative. It was much less obvious in Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw’s poems, the Sufi dimension of which remains open to debate.⁵⁷ In the Chaghatay version of his story, Bahrām accomplishes an inward journey, “a travel in the homeland.” The king’s spiritual progress and his alchemical transmutation are conditioned by his intense and deep suffering. According to Navā‘ī, who aligned himself with Jāmī’s Sufi conceptions, no spiritual purification is possible without the pain of separation. In this regard, Navā‘ī’s atypical use of the frame story as a literary device can be explained by his desire to guide his reader’s interpretation closely enough that no room is left for ambiguity. One can hardly imagine a better way to show that the seven tales should be read as *exempla* for Bahrām to heed, since the last tale is precisely that which enables him to reunite with Dilārām. Navā‘ī’s blurring of the boundaries between framing and embedded narratives makes the symbolic relationship between these two diegetic structures much more explicit than was the case in Nizāmī’s *Haft Paykar* or Amīr Khusraw’s *Hasht Bihisht*. What is more, if it can be argued that, from a strictly literary perspective, the structure of framing and embedded narratives, including the special instance of *mise en abyme*, constitutes a “curiosity of literature,”⁵⁸ the Chaghatay poet’s singular rearrangement makes his version of the narrative an even more fascinating enterprise.⁵⁹

In addition, it is worth noting that the dialogue Navā‘ī engages with Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw through his rewriting closely reflects the Timurid attitude to the Persian cultural tradition generally. For some years now, scholars have highlighted a number of trends characteristic of the Timurid period with respect to the arts.⁶⁰ The Timurid penchant for standardization shown by Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry to prevail in the visual arts also obtains in literature, as demonstrated by Paul Losensky in his seminal work.⁶¹ While painters, calligraphers, and other artists were engaged in the preservation and propagation of the classical Persian poetic canon, Timurid poets put all their efforts into the definition and organization of the tradition’s thematic and symbolic repertoire. In many respects, Navā‘ī’s reshaping of *Haft Paykar* corresponds to a form of standardization. By turning the anecdote of Bahrām and the handmaiden into the poem’s main subject matter, the poet strengthened the narrative’s unity of action considerably. From a diegetic point of view, the story becomes more cohesive and the connection between the frame story and the nest narratives is tightened. From a symbolic point of view, the entire story is placed at the service of a single, central element: the fire of love, which torments Bahrām and gradually causes his transmutation.

This last aspect brings us to the other significant trend characteristic of the period in which Navā‘ī composed his imitation. At the end of the fifteenth century a growing interest

⁵⁷ In Nizāmī and Amīr Khusraw’s narratives it is obvious that the king embarks on an ethical and spiritual journey (see for instance Meisami, “The Theme of the Journey”; Piemontese, “The Enigma of Turandot,” 130). However, the Sufi dimension of this journey is far from clear. In his *Encyclopaedia Iranica* entry on *Haft Paykar*, F. de Blois maintains that “although there are mystic (Sufic) traits in the narrative (notably in the story of the seventh victim) it is also misguided to regard it, with some, as a Sufic allegory. It is a work of art that is very firmly rooted in this world, and its ethical content is of essentially worldly, not religious, nature”: de Blois, “*Haft Peykar*,” 524. Ritter also refutes the interpretation of the *masnavī* as a Sufi text: see Ritter, “Review of *The Haft Paikar*,” 113. For the opposite viewpoint, see for instance Seyed-Gohrab, “A Mystical Reading”; Jambet, “Postface,” 351. As for *Hasht Bihisht*, the Sufi issue was even less an object of debate, since the poem was generally regarded as less serious and more entertaining than its model.

⁵⁸ Puschmann-Nalenz, “Reconceptualisation of Frame Story,” 49–50.

⁵⁹ On Navā‘ī’s narrative techniques see also Feldman’s concluding remarks (“Genre and Narrative Strategies,” 274).

⁶⁰ See Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 183–314.

⁶¹ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, 166; Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*, 145–54.

in Sufism seemed to have gained a foothold at the royal court. The production of Sufi-inspired texts became more prominent, and copies were made in larger numbers in Herat, the capital of the Timurid empire.⁶² Jāmī and Navāʿī played an important role in this process.⁶³ However, while the former, who was the leading intellectual figure of the Sufi brotherhood, never mentioned Naqshbandī principles in his poetry, his disciple did not refrain from citing them in his rewritings.⁶⁴ Navāʿī's explicit, didactic efforts could be explained by his desire to exert his influence on the last great Timurid ruler, Sultan Ḥusayn (r. 873/1469–911/1506), whom the poet praises in the prologue of *Sabʿa-yi Sayyār*.⁶⁵ Owing to his unique position at court, Navāʿī could act as the prince's counselor. Considering "the receptivity of Timurid princes to Sufi counsel and dictation,"⁶⁶ it is not unlikely that he envisaged his imitation of *Haft Paykar* as a Naqshbandī mirror for princes.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the above considerations lead us to conclude that Navāʿī's criticism of his predecessors in the prologue of *Sabʿa-yi Sayyār* was all but rhetorical. In the poet's eyes, important issues really were at stake in the frame story of Bahrām Gūr's romance; and from his perspective, something needed to be done to ensure that the edifice of *Haft Paykar* would not turn into a heap of dust.⁶⁸

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⁶² Milstein, "Sufi Elements," 357–69.

⁶³ The growing interest in Sufism at the time mirrors the rise of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order in Herat. Here is what Hamid Algar writes about the importance of the brotherhood in the Timurid capital and the special role that Jāmī and Navāʿī played in its dissemination: "Sa'd ad-Dīn Kāshgharī (d. 866/1462) [...] established for the Naqshbandiyya in Herat a dominant position [...]. Among the initiates of Sa'd ad-Dīn Kāshgharī was the great scholar, poet and mystic, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī, whose vast corpus of writing contains several treatises on the Naqshbandiyya, and his colleague, 'Alī Shīr Nawāʿī, the virtual founder of Chaghatay Turkish literature. It can even be said that the whole brilliant cultural life of Herat in this period stood under Naqshbandi patronage" (Algar, "A Brief History," 19). On the importance of Sufism in Herat in the second half of the fifteenth century see also Algar, "Political Aspects"; Paul, *Die politische und soziale Bedeutung der Naqshbandiyya*; Paul, *Doctrine and Organization*.

⁶⁴ This may have been prompted by the very nature of his Turkic-speaking readership, which was less familiar with Persian mystical poetry and perhaps in need of further clarification. For more conjectures on this issue see Toutant, "Evaluating Jāmī's Influence," 637–39.

⁶⁵ Navāʿī, *Sabʿa-yi Sayyār*, 547–50. Since Navāʿī also praised Khadija Begim, who was the sultan's favorite wife, Feldman makes a parallel between the couple formed by Bahrām and Dilārām and that of Sultan Ḥusayn and Khadija Begim (Feldman, "Genre and Narrative Strategies," 269–75). About the close relationship between the Naqshbandī order and the Timurid dynasty see Algar, "A Brief History," 10–16.

⁶⁶ Algar, "Political Aspects," 126.

⁶⁷ On this topic see Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 623–35.

⁶⁸ We refer the reader to Jāmī's quotation cited above: "Since the edifice of life will turn into a heap of dust/ Of what use is the architecture of *The Seven Portraits*?"

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