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Beloved

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Beloved

The “beloved” forms a central literary concept, highly developed during the medieval Islamic period and still popular in our own times, in the urbanized societies of the Middle East and Central Asia. Encountered throughout the literatures of Persian, Ottoman, and Chaghatay (Uzbek) Turkish, Urdu, and Arabic, among others, this concept manifests itself through highly charged, homoeroticized images and metaphors. The beloved is characterized through such highly eroticized and theatrical tropes of wanton allurements as disheveled locks, torn garments, intoxication symbolized by a wine cup in hand, and appearing at the bedside of the feverish lover. (See, for example, the poems of Hafez, c.1320–1390.) Generally the beloved does not represent an actual personage (except as an historical youth such as Ayyaz, the paramour of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, a symbol of idealized love in Persian literature), but rather an idealized handsome youth inspired by the presence of thousands of Turkish slaves who served as cupbearers (*saqi*) and pages in royal courts and informal, all-male social gatherings as well as in Mamluk (slave) armies throughout the Middle East. These youth are depicted in the miniature paintings of the period that pictorially embody the literary images found in the poetry they illustrate.

Ambiguity regarding the actual gender of the beloved remains obscured by at least three factors. First, the Persian and Turkish languages are grammatically ungendered; the pronouns for “he” and “she” are the same. The attributes referring to the beloved such as “moon-faced” (*mahchehreh*), “disheveled locks” (*zolf-e-parishan*), “graceful cypress” (*sarv-e naz*), and “bow-shaped eyebrows” (*abru-kamari*) that suffuse this vast literature may be applied either to a youthful male or female. Second, beginning at the end of the eighteenth, and particularly toward the end of the nineteenth, century, a large body of this classical Middle Eastern literature

was translated by individuals such as A. J. Arberry and Gertrude Bell, who, either from societal pressure or personal impulse, translated this poetry in terms of females as the beloved, a practice continued by many natives of the area in modern times because of their awareness of the homophobic attitudes found in the West. Only recently have important scholars such as Schimmel, Southgate, and Hillmann seriously questioned such translations, and the attitudes they represent, providing sorely needed scholarly corrective measures to counteract decades of deliberate obfuscation in translations reflective of historic anachronistic homophobic attitudes. Third, Sufism (Islamic mysticism) constitutes another type of ambiguity. In Sufi poetry, God is represented as a fabulously beautiful, unattainable youth (*shahid*, witness): the Ultimate Beloved. Sufi poetry such as that by Jallal-ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273) extols the quest of union with the Beloved and the utter annihilation that ensues for the seeker. A major issue in literary scholarship is discerning the degree of Sufi elements in poems by famous classical poets such as Sa'di (c.1215–c.1290) and Hafez. The issue of ambiguity in the representation of the beloved focuses on the question: to what degree did these poets celebrate the earthly and the heavenly that constitutes a major area of analysis of classical literatures of the Middle East. Always foregrounded in this poetry is the concept of the beloved, that beautiful, unattainable, provocative youth.

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See also Abû Nuwâs; Androgyny; Arabic Literature; Islam; Mujûn; Nuzhat Al-Albaab; Persian (Iranian) Literature and Culture

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