

Forgiveness for What? *Vis and Ramin* and *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Dear Ahmad,

What follows is not an attempt at a scholarly paper of localized assessment, exposition, deduction, and analysis of the kind that is usual as a contribution to a collection like this, one put together in honor of a colleague's long record of continuous intellectual achievement. It's much more like an extension of one of the intermittent conversations I've been lucky enough to share with you over the years, one that is personal, wandering, and celebratory, that tries to convey something of the grateful sense of wonder and privilege that you and I have both felt as devoted lifelong readers of the two seemingly very disparate literatures that are our shared heritage. And if anyone who overhears this snatch of fictive conversation should think to query my opening implication that you are as devoted a reader of English literature as I have attempted to be of Persian literature, I would refer this skeptic to your masterly translation,

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one that is evidence of an extraordinary capacity for cross-cultural literary empathy and understanding, of that massive and indisputably major work of eighteenth-century English literature, Fielding's great novel, *Tom Jones*.

And of course, our two literatures *are* very disparate. English has no Ferdowsi or Hafez, or anything remotely like them; Persian has no Chaucer or Shakespeare, or anything remotely like them. But in the spirit of our shared enthusiasm for literature as it transcends even as it simultaneously demarcates cultural difference, I would like to talk for the moment about similarity and continuity, about mutual apprehensions and understandings, flourishing in such apparently diverse cultural milieux, of what literature is and aims to be.

Let's narrow our perspective temporarily to the Middle Ages, and broaden it geographically to the Middle East. In theory, we are now talking about cultural scorn and/or indifference, political enmity, and theological disdain if not outright hatred, or this at least has been the expedient shorthand consensus of the nature of relations between the two areas since the Middle Ages themselves, relations that can be summed up in two words, *the Crusades*. But when we look at the literary products of the world of Christendom and the world of Islam in these regions during the medieval period, we find an extraordinary continuity across this divide of supposedly irreconcilable contempt and animosity between two cultural entities whose mode of interaction was assumed to be restricted to that of warfare.

To begin with, the major literary genres that flourished in each of these areas are more or less identical. For example, both delight in frame stories, compendia that contain a multiplicity of separate tales linked together by a common narrative thread. Major examples are *The 1001 Nights* in the Islamic Middle East and Boccaccio's *Decameron* in Europe. These two compendia of disparate tales are also similar in other ways. The variety of individual narrative units within each frame means that we get a kind of social panorama of the cultures out of which the tales have come; kings and princesses rub shoulders with merchants and

shopkeepers, who in turn keep company with servants, slaves, and mercenaries, as well as thieves, murderers, social outcasts, and riffraff. In both cases, this social variety goes hand in hand with another kind of variability, that of tonal register; some stories are elevated and courtly, some are colloquial and vulgar, some are bawdy, and some are ethically admonitory. And there is a geographical variety; some take place close to home, some in exotic foreign lands, and some in a never-never land of magic and enchantment. This geographical diversity can shade into a recognition of religious diversity. The third story of *The Decameron* is about a Jew at a Muslim court, and the point of the story is that it is not possible for mortal humans to know which of the three major religions that made up the medieval world, Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, is the “true” one. There is a humorous parallel (if it were deliberate, it would be almost a grotesque parody) to this tale in *The 1001 Nights* in “The Story of the Hunchback,” in which a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian, each afraid of being accused of murder, all try to fob off onto one another a corpse that none of them have killed. In *The Decameron*’s story, we are shown that we can’t know whose claims are true; in *The 1001 Nights*’s tale, we are shown that practitioners of all three religions are equally deceitful and venal and that none of their claims—at least as they are made in the course of the tale—are true. The frame stories themselves, which are superficially so different, are in their fundamental import uncannily similar: Shahrzad tells her tales as a way of evading death; the storytellers in *The Decameron* have fled a mortal plague in Florence and tell their stories to while away the time they have snatched for themselves. Both sets of stories are told as a way of escaping from death’s clutch, and as the stories themselves demonstrate, they do so by celebrating the infinite variety of the possibilities of human life.

A subset of frame stories, those that involve pilgrimage, can also be found in both cultures, as we can see if we put Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* side by side.¹ The differences

¹It can’t be anything more than a coincidence, but it’s a satisfyingly apposite one that Attar ends his poem with thirty birds, and Chaucer begins his with thirty pilgrims; he comes on “nyne and twenty in a compaignye” and then adds himself to the group so that “I was of hir felaweship anon” (Geoffrey

are obvious, the main one being that Attar's narrative is relentlessly allegorical and pietistic, while Chaucer's is, in the main, almost equally relentlessly mundane and secular. Also, Attar's poem is minutely structured both in microcosm, episode by episode, and in macrocosm, in the way that everything it contains is there for a teleological purpose and points toward a specific conclusion (in this way, it is more like Dante's *Divine Comedy* than Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*). Chaucer's poem seems to point every which way and sometimes no particular way at all (this impression is increased by the fact that it was left, like almost all of Chaucer's longer poems, unfinished; it simply stops, having not reached no conclusion, either didactic or literal). But the similarities are also palpable. In both, a journey is undertaken for religious purposes (at least ostensibly in *The Canterbury Tales*, and actually, if allegorically, in *The Conference of the Birds*); tales are told as the journey proceeds; and the tales give a panoramic view of the myriad possibilities of how lives could be lived in their authors' societies, for good or ill. Leaving the frame story genre, we can still stay with that of pilgrimage, which was a major prose genre in both the Christian and the Muslim worlds. Both produced many texts that describe actual pilgrimages undertaken by literal pilgrims, usually to Rome or the Holy Land in Christian literature, and to Mecca in Muslim literature. Despite the religious purpose of the journeys described, in both cultures we find pilgrimage texts that brim with local detail about places and people encountered along the way, so that at times they read more like later travel literature rather than religiously oriented texts. This is true, for example, of both Naser Khosraw's *Safarnameh*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Staying with religious literature, we can instance the genre of hagiography, concerned with either a specific personage or a group of such people, as in Jacobus de Varagine's *Golden Legend*, or Attar's *Memorials of the Saints*. Other genre parallels are the numerous romances we find in both cultures (for example, *Vis and Ramin* in Iran, and *Tristan and Isolde* in Europe); tales of warrior exploits imbued with nostalgia for a more

Chaucer, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957], 17, lines 24, 32.)

heroic, now-lost age of epic warfare (*La Morte d'Arthur* in French and in Malory's English translation, *The Shahnameh* in Persian); straightforward travel literature devoid of any religious purpose (Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta); memoirs of travel and encounters with representatives of each culture's feared and despised religious Other that were connected with the Crusades (de Joinville and Usama ibn Munqidh); and love lyrics of great sophistication and delicacy that imply sophisticated courtly audiences to consume and cherish them. And as well as similarities of genre, we may adduce similarities of rhetoric; this is especially true of the rhetoric of love poetry, which can be extraordinarily similar, sometimes even at the level of identical metaphors, in love lyrics produced on both sides of the medieval Muslim-Christian divide.

Why do these similarities exist, and where do they come from? I think we can adduce four possible reasons why a literary work in one culture may sound and look a lot like a literary work in another culture. First, individual works may have a direct connection through transmission and translation. I have suggested elsewhere that the striking similarities between Gorgani's Persian romance *Vis and Ramin* and the various European versions of the story of *Tristan and Isolde* may be due to such transmission.² Second, the works may draw on literary topoi, motifs, plots, rhetorical devices, and so forth that are part of a shared cultural heritage, even if such "sharing" is an unconscious phenomenon. Ernst Curtius has suggested that such a common heritage may account for many similarities between Middle Eastern and European medieval literatures.³ Third, relatively similar social conditions existing in different

²Fakhraddin Gorgani, *Vis and Ramin*, trans. and ed. Dick Davis (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), xxxiv–lxii.

³"But history had spun threads between the Islamic East and the Christian West a thousand years earlier (than Goethe's West-östlicher Divan). Islamic poetry is paralleled by a very extensive and hitherto little studied literature on rhetoric, style and poetics. Both – the poetry as well as the poetics of the Arabs and Persians – were certainly influenced by Hellenistic models, especially in regard to figures of speech, panegyric and the use of conceits. This oriental poetry was then transplanted to Andalusia. There it flourished from the tenth to the thirteenth century." Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 34–341.

times and places end up producing similar effects to those that having a shared culture can produce (a culture with a lot of courts tends to produce a lot of courtly literature). Fourth and most basically, similarities and parallels may arise from our shared biological heritage in that we are all human, and humans have the same basic needs. Although these needs come to be expressed in different ways in different cultures, such expressions and preoccupations inevitably sometimes overlap (no literary culture seems to be completely devoid of love poetry, and few are without martial poetry of some kind or other). Of course, such processes do not exclude one another, and more than one, or even all four, may be at work, in varying proportions, in specific examples of literary similarities across cultural differences.

I'd like to spend the rest of my space in this little paper by drawing attention to the similarities between a Persian romance written in the eleventh century, and an English romance written three hundred years later, in the fourteenth century. The romances in question are Gorgani's *Vis and Ramin*, and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the similarities between which are, I think, quite striking, even though they are certainly not due to any kind of direct transmission from the earlier text to the later one; it is extremely doubtful that Chaucer could even have heard of Gorgani's poem, and it is even more doubtful that he would have had access to any text that could be said to derive from it, except just possibly in a couple of cases, and those only tangentially and at a considerable remove. The similarities to which I wish to draw attention are most likely the result of the second and third categories listed above, with perhaps a touch of the fourth category too.

I'll start with two cases of similarity between these two poems that seem to me to be conspicuously noticeable. First, readers familiar with Gorgani's romance will remember that the first time Vis sees Ramin, she does so from above. He is among a group of musicians, and Vis has been brought by her nurse to an upper story from which she can look down on him through a kind of jalousie. As soon as she sees him, the love she had felt for Viru (her brother to whom she has been married) disappears, to be replaced by love for Ramin. The first time Criseyde sees

Troilus, it is also from an upper story. She is looking down from a room to which she has been brought by her uncle, Pandarus. The room overlooks a street through which Troilus is riding, and as he passes below her window, she sees him and says, “Who yaf me drinke” (“Who gave me the drink”)?⁴ The reference is clearly to the love-potion that is drunk by Tristan and Isolde. Criseyde has fallen completely and hopelessly in love in a moment, just as Isolde had done when she drank the love-potion (that the implied reference is wholly anachronistic, given that *Troilus and Criseyde* takes place during the Homeric siege of Troy, long before the medieval lovers Tristan and Isolde were supposedly alive, is neither here nor there and probably would not have bothered Chaucer even if he had been aware of it).

As indicated above, I’ve suggested elsewhere that Gorgani’s poem could well have been a source for the Tristan story, so it seems that there might just possibly be a remote connection between Criseyde’s reference and Gorgani’s poem, by way of some version of the Tristan tale. But it’s unlikely, and it’s rendered even more unlikely by the fact that the detail of the magic potion, which is so important in the European tale, is absent from Gorgani’s poem. The reference to Tristan does not tie the poem to *Vis and Ramin*; it’s merely drawing on what had become by Chaucer’s time the archetypal European love story. But there is still the fact that the two women first see the man they fall in love with from above, and that they have been brought to the place where they can look down on him by someone who is trying to bring them together at the instigation of, exactly, the man whom they are to glimpse from their vantage point.

In fact, the go-betweens in question, Vis’s nurse and Pandarus, have almost identical roles in the stories in which they appear. They are the amoral enablers who support the poem’s hero in his attempt to seduce its heroine. It is they who spend an inordinate amount of time persuading their unwilling charges to look kindly on the hero, it is they who arrange the trysts where the lovers finally meet, and it is they who are blamed by the heroines when things go wrong. And there is something

⁴Chaucer, *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 408, l. 651.

that links these go-betweens even more strongly. Both *Vis and Ramin* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are filled with conversations, arguments, pleading, reproaches. The characters in both poems are defined as much by what they say as by what they do. In both poems, the female lovers are presented as nobly born women who wish to act with appropriate nobility; they are conscious of status and reputation, and they are also conscious that the love affair on which each of them embarks is in some way a violation of their noble status, so that they express hesitation and uncertainty, until finally persuaded, by the nurse and Pandarus, to follow the awakened instincts of their hearts. It is the nurse and Pandarus who effect this awakening, and they do so by long, persuasive harangues in which they consciously and skillfully work on their charges' vulnerabilities and hopes. The colloquial, conversational, resourcefully glib language of the two is extremely similar. It's filled with bits of proverbial folk wisdom, it's knowing about sex and sexual encounters, it's deceitful and wheedling, and it's both sophisticated in its technique and low-life in its register. Their spoken words make the two *sound* as though they are much more plebian than either the heroes or the heroines of their tales are. The nurse *is* in fact more plebian than Vis; she's a servant. Pandarus is not a servant at all. He's from the same class as his niece, but his cheerfully demotic speech, which ignores social and linguistic niceties, conveys a cynical, older male's attitude toward courtship and sex that can make him sound crass and boorish when set beside his relatively innocent niece. In his own terms, he's well-meaning enough, but at his worst, there is something of the lewd voyeur about him that sets him apart from the more self-consciously gracious characters with whom he mingles.

The other moment that seems to link the two tales in a more than merely generic way concerns the dream Troilus has after Criseyde has been lost to him, when she is handed over to the Greeks in exchange for a Trojan prisoner. Here is the dream:

So on a day he leyde him down to slepe,
And so bifel that in his slep him thoughte
That in a forest faste he welk to wepe

For love of here that hym these peynes wroughte;
And up and down as he the forest soughte,
He mette he saugh a bor with tuskes grete,
That slepte ayeyn the bryght sonnes hete.

And by this bore, fast in his armes folde,
Lay, kissing ay, his lady bryght, Criseyde.⁵

(One day, he lay down to sleep, and it happened that as he slept he dreamed he was walking in a forest, weeping because of the woman who had given him such pain, and as he went up and down in the forest, he came on a boar that had huge tusks, and was asleep sheltered from the heat of the sun; next to the boar, enfolded in his arms, lay his bright lady, Criseyde, who kissed him constantly.)

Now there's a boar, a real one, in *Vis and Ramin*, and there's a dreamed boar in *Tristan and Isolde*. The real boar in *Vis and Ramin* kills Vis's unwanted second husband, Mobad, so enabling the lovers to marry and the tale to come to a happy ending. The boar in *Tristan and Isolde* is dreamed of by King Mark, the equivalent of King Mobad in *Vis and Ramin*, and in his dream, it wrecks his household. Troilus dreams of the boar not when he is with Criseyde but after he has lost her. In this way, he is like Mark and Mobad: he is the man who loses out, who doesn't finish up with the girl. When Mobad is killed by the boar, Vis is free to be with Ramin; when King Mark dreams of the boar, Tristan has stolen Isolde from him; when Troilus dreams of the boar, he has lost Criseyde to Diomedes. In all three accounts, the boar is associated with the figure who loses the tale's heroine to another man, and in fact represents that other man. Troilus's dream also seems like a shadowy version of another moment in *Vis and Ramin*. At one point, a musician sings a song before Mobad, Ramin, and Vis, and in his song, he describes a young bull who feeds on grass and cavorts beside a stream above which a huge tree towers. The dream is then interpreted: Mobad is the great tree, Ramin is the young bull feeding on grass and splashing in the stream, and Vis is the stream and the grass. Again we have a strong, unmanageable, potentially

⁵Chaucer, *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 472–73, lines 1232–42.

destructive animal whose possession of somewhere (someone) is im-
potently resented by the person to whom that somewhere or someone
“should” belong.

One obvious difference between *Vis and Ramin* and *Troilus and Criseyde*
(and there are of course a great many differences) is the presence or ab-
sence of the author in his tale. Gorgani doesn't talk about himself very
much, and so those moments when he does refer to his own situation
or opinions seem all the more significant. Chaucer is the omnipresent
authorial commentator in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and he quite frequently
gives his opinion about what is happening as his story unfolds. But there
are two moments when both Gorgani and Chaucer make their presence
unequivocally obvious in the story, and they are the same two moments.
Both apologize for their heroine's behavior, and ask the reader not to
judge her too harshly. Gorgani goes so far as to say that Vis's actions
were fated, and so she cannot be blamed for them.⁶ Chaucer more than
once indicates that he feels very uncomfortable condemning Criseyde
for what she does, most tellingly when she gives up Troilus for Dio-
mede; at this moment, Chaucer writes, “Men seyn – I not – that she
yaf him her herte”⁷ (“Men say, but I don't, that she gave him her
heart”), and he goes on, “Ne me ne lyste this sely womman chyde”⁸
 (“I don't want to condemn this unfortunate woman”). It seems to be
this authorial tenderness toward their poems' morally straying heroines
that most strongly links the actual feeling and atmosphere of the poems
as one reads them. It seems that both authors find themselves celebrat-
ing, certainly sympathizing with, heroines whom they feel they ought
to condemn. But they find themselves unable to condemn them: their
human conscience, their as it were empathy with their own creations
won't allow them to do so.

It is perhaps this sense of moral inadequacy for humane reasons—which
seems far too anachronistically “modern” a sentiment, but which also

⁶Fakhraddin Gorgani, *Vis o Ramin*, ed. Mohammad Roshan (Tehran: Seda-ye Moasar, AH 1377/
AD 1998), 49, lines 9–12.

⁷Chaucer, *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 471, l. 1050.

⁸Chaucer, *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 471, l. 1099.

seems to be palpably present—that accounts for the curious volte-face both authors perform as they bring their tales to a close. Gorgani never mentions Islam in his poem (as it is set in the pre-Islamic world, there is no reason why he should). He also flouts a good number of Islamic moral norms, beginning with a brother-sister marriage and ending with the murder of the perfectly innocent younger brother of a king and the survival of an unpunished adulteress who lives happily to a ripe old age. So immoral was his poem seen to be by later generations that Nezami's *Shirin* roundly condemns *Vis* as an evil woman,⁹ and the fourteenth-century satirist Obayd-e Zakani remarked in his *Resaleh-ye sad pand (One Hundred Maxims)*: “Don't expect chastity from a man who consumes hashish and wine, or from a lady who has read *Vis* and *Ramin*.”¹⁰ Similarly, throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer delights in his invented world of pagan gods and goddesses, cramming in references to them at every possible juncture, and recounting his thoroughly unchristian story with great gusto. And then, after their enthusiastically indulgent reveling in their fictional pre-Islamic and pre-Christian worlds, both authors end their poems with pious prayers for forgiveness for writing such a morally compromising tale, and an implied promise of religiously acceptable good behavior from now on. Chaucer goes so far as to dedicate his poem to his fellow more strait-laced and somewhat censorious poet, “moral Gower,” as if a borrowed modicum of Gower's “moral” quality might serve him as a fig leaf for his own enthusiastic excursion into pagan immorality.

But what lives in the reader's mind after reading either *Vis and Ramin* or *Troilus and Criseyde* is not the final prayer for forgiveness. The reader may well ask, forgiveness for what? For tenderness and sympathy, for the humane understanding of human foibles and weaknesses, for delightedly delineating and not condemning the transgressive passion, pleasure, and heartache of young love? These are the qualities that

⁹Nezami, *Khosrow o Shirin*, ed. Behruz Sarvatiyan (Tehran: Entesharat-e Tus, AH 1366/AD 1987), 493, l. 74.

¹⁰Kolliyat-e Obayd-e Zakani, *Resaleh-ye sad pand*, ed. Parvis Atabeki (Tehran: Khavar, AH 1343/AD 1964), 207. Translation mine.

these two wonderfully inventive and moving medieval poems most eloquently share, qualities that can still provoke an appreciatively warm response in us across whatever temporal and cultural spaces might separate us from them. It's in their celebration of Eros and its attendant joys and woes that the two poems speak most directly to us, when they seem to transcend the restrictions of their specific historical and cultural circumstances. These are the moments when we encounter a quality that Thomas Mann has described as pertaining to only the most persuasively beguiling works of art: "The divorce from history, the free humanization that takes place only [. . .] in the service of the erotic myth."¹¹ It is, I think, this "free humanization [. . .] in the service of the erotic myth" that accounts for the particular persuasiveness of these two so disparate but also similar poems that exist wholly within their own cultural boundaries but which are also, for us as readers, able so convincingly to transcend these boundaries.

¹¹Thomas Mann, "The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 335.