

RUMI

The Homoerotic Sufi Saint

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Expressions of sexuality, specifically homoerotic poetry, in mystical writings are by no means uncommon. Wendy Noel DeSouza examines Louis Massignon's explicit expressions of homosexuality through his translations of Sufi mystical love writings.¹ Paul Losensky documents the commonality of homosexual tendencies in the Persian poet Muhtasham's works, specifically *The Lover's Confection*.² Amira El-Zein writes that Rumi's encounter with Shams-Tabrizi sparked Rumi's poetic nature and notes that all his poetry is addressed to him.³

With El-Zein's background on Rumi's life (1207–1273) in consideration, this article will analyze Rumi's love poetry dedicated to his teacher Shams-Tabrizi (1185–1248). Specifically, it will first introduce Rumi's itinerant life and his discipleship under Shams. It will then contextualize Rumi's poetry within the conventional sexual norms of the eastern Mediterranean (present-day Turkey), where long-standing Hellenistic ideals of male-male relations coexisted alongside the cultural norms of pre-modern Islam. It will finally examine the explicitly sexual imagery within Rumi's poetry, noting the crude imagery of selected passages versus the overtly loving imagery found in the many devotional verses dedicated to his spiritual guide.

Such analysis is important for several reasons. While homoeroticism in Rumi's poetry has not gone unnoticed by scholars in the field, such as Mahdi Tourage and Ali A. El-Huni, this work will firstly contribute to the literature by contextualizing Rumi's poetry to his spiritual guide Shams-Tabrizi within the much larger cultural milieu of Greco-Roman and

Islamic culture in the Eastern Mediterranean. Secondly, it queers previous assumptions about the marriage/lover trope in mysticism studies, which Evelyn Underhill most clearly articulated by assuming and asserting that the “Spiritual Marriage” is a heteronormative one.⁴ Finally and by extension, this study redefines the nature of erotic mystical poetry in general. Usually, erotic verses dedicated to the Divine are understood to be a metaphor for the poet’s longing for intimacy with their God. In Islam, Allah is neither male nor female; but in Rumi’s love poetry, the subject he longs for takes on a distinctively male character, which he explicitly imagines as his guide Shams-Tabrizi.

Rumi’s life & learning

Rumi’s life

Many people today recognize the name Rumi even if they do not have a full understanding of who he was or his contribution to the mystical writings of Islam. Rumi, birth name Jalaluddin Muhammad, was born in 1207. One source claims that he was born in Balkh, Persia, or modern-day Afghanistan, while another cites his birthplace as Vakhsh, Iran.⁵ According to El-Zein, Balkh was invaded by Tartars, forcing Jalaluddin and his family to flee to Rum, Konia, or modern-day Turkey.⁶ The region Rum is the reason Jalaluddin acquired the name “al-Rumi,” or Rumi.⁷ However, Lewis writes that Rumi’s family left Vakhsh because his father Bahâ al-Din was “denied the rank and prestige he sought.”⁸ Despite the discrepancies in Rumi’s birthplace, both authors agree that the poet migrated to Konia, present-day Turkey. Rumi received a traditional religious studies-education in Aleppo and Damascus, including the study of Hanafi law, Koran, Hadith, and theology.⁹ While obtaining this education, Rumi was “initiated into the Sufi path.”¹⁰ Once he returned to Konia, he became a recognized and beloved expert in Islamic law, also known as a *mufti*.¹¹

People today often recognize Rumi for his poetry; but before Rumi met Shams-Tabrizi, he had never written a single documented verse. Their encounter on November 29, 1244, made “poetry flow from him.”¹² “He [Rumi] became more ecstatic in his worship, expressing his love for God not only in a careful attitude of self-renunciation and control, but also through the joy of poetry, music and meditative dance.”¹³ Shams-

Tabrizi, Rumi's spiritual guide, transformed Rumi's life upon their first meeting and each day thereafter.

The master-disciple relationship

The teacher-student relationship is extremely important within the Islamic sect of Sufism. The goal of a Sufi mystical experience is to "merge with Allah in ecstatic union," or *fana*.¹⁴ Union can only be achieved with the help of a master who is in Allah's favor. The disciple follows the way, or *tariqa*, which is a strict process that will prepare the disciple for their mystical experience.¹⁵

Unifying experiences such as these occur through religions across the world. Evelyn Underhill describes this type of mystical experience in Christianity as a "Spiritual Marriage" between the Word of God or God Himself and the soul; the Divine is the Bridegroom, and the soul is the Bride.¹⁶ The way in which Underhill describes this mystical experience is heteronormative, assigning the soul the role of "bride." Rumi and Shams' master-disciple relationship, and the poetry it inspired, challenge the heteronormative thinking surrounding mystical-lover experiences with the divine.

According to his autobiography *Me & Rumi*, Shams writes of an eagerness to teach even before meeting Rumi. "I want someone who knows nothing. I want to teach," he writes.¹⁷ Shams also writes, however, that he does not want to teach simply anyone; "I've put my finger on the pulse of those who guide the world to the Real."¹⁸ As a result, through a series of veiled parables, poetry, and writings akin to journal entries, Shams effectively intimates that he considers his student to be God's saint.¹⁹

Aflaki and Sipehsalar, biographers of Rumi's life, report that Shams and Rumi stayed alone together for a period of approximately six months.²⁰ During their time together, Rumi learned the *tariqa* from his spiritual guide. Shams vanished after this brief period of time but remained a constant presence throughout the remainder of al-Rumi's life.

Rumors circulated about what came of Shams after he left Rumi. Some say that Rumi's youngest son killed him, another theory is that Shams was killed because of "religious blasphemy," and yet another conjecture states that Shams left Rumi in the night to "become the wandering, wild bird that he was,"²¹ that is, to continue the *tariqa* on his own in

order to achieve *fana*. Shiva claims that Rumi refused to believe any of these rumors for forty days; after that, Rumi concluded Shams was dead and dressed fully in black from then on to outwardly express his grief.²² In losing Shams, Rumi not only lost his spiritual master, but he lost what he considered to be the earthly embodiment of God.

Contexts

Homosexuality in the Hellenized Eastern Mediterranean

Many scholars who focus on sexual acts in a different culture and a different period than the ones in which they are writing are careful to not assign sexual identities to the people they study. Mazo Karras outlines the two prevailing schools of thought: essentialism and social constructionism. Essentialism argues that within each culture are people of different sexual orientations; it further argues that sexual orientation is biological and is not chosen.²³ Social constructionism has two camps; one argues that scholars cannot assume sexual identities based on their sexual acts, while the other holds that sexual identities were irrelevant until nineteenth-century Westerners created the concept.²⁴ This article will adhere in part to essentialism and in part to the first camp of social constructionism. This work will hold to the belief that modern-day readers cannot know the sexual identities of the people it aims to understand as those individuals did not have the words to self-describe their orientation; but it acknowledges that queer people existed throughout history whether or not the word to describe them had yet been invented.

To understand homosexual activity in the Hellenized Middle East better, an explanation of sexual constructs in the Greek Empire is necessary. The Greek Empire fell in 146 BCE to the Romans, but the cultural influence of Greco-Roman civilization persisted throughout the former empire even as successive waves of Christian and Islamic forces took hold.²⁵ This was especially the case in the eastern Mediterranean, including modern-day Turkey where Rumi spent most of his adult life from 1207 to 1273. Scholars can therefore explore the sexual conventions of Rumi's day by first looking back to the deep cultural roots of the Greeks.

Many scholars believe that, in the Greek Empire, passive and active sexual roles were of primary importance when discussing sexual acts. The penetrated, or the passive partner, was deemed feminine, regardless

of the sex of the person.²⁶ On the other hand, the penetrator played the active role and was the considered masculine.²⁷

In her article arguing for the inclusion of art depicting homosexual sex, Whitney Davis writes about vase painting in the Greek Empire. She writes that many “Greek painted vases depict scenes of homosocial relationships and homosexual courtship or sexual activity and were actually made as love gifts to be passed between men.”²⁸ She notes that an older Athenian male courted a young, passive boy and that this system was continuous, meaning the older man was once a young boy, himself, being courted. Davis writes that young Athenian men advance in this system by first taking on the “passive homosexual role, which was not supposed to provide bodily pleasure but was an accepted ritual of apprenticeship in wisdom.”²⁹ K. J. Dover, a scholar at the forefront of the discussion on Greek homosexual behavior, writes that the “younger partner is said to ‘grant favors’ or ‘render services’.”³⁰ They then become the “man’s adult, active homosexual role” where he reaps the benefit of his “full status as a man of affairs, of real economic, political, and sexual power.”³¹

Dover also writes of the political ramifications of male-male sexual activity. If an Athenian man accepted money in exchange for sexual favors, he was stripped of his voting rights. Dover writes that “to play the role of a prostitute was, as it were, to remove oneself from the citizen-body” since most prostitutes were non-citizens or slaves.³²

K. A. Kapparis, however, provides a contrasting voice to the scholars who have dominated the field of Greek homosexual activity. He fervently disagrees with Dover’s conclusions about Greek homosexuality, stating that Dover uses insufficient evidence to draw his conclusions about Greek homosexual love.³³ He writes, “This forced interpretation of such scanty evidence is fueled by modern taboos about anal intercourse, domination, penetration and shame, which the ancient world obviously did not share.”³⁴ He further argues that homosexual sex was not viewed as inferior to heterosexual sex; it was “simply a matter of preference.”³⁵ This particular view of Greek homosexuality also diverges from the prevailing view of passive-active roles in sex.

Kapparis claims that the Athenian state avoided legislating the morals of its citizen-body, “so long as their actions did not interfere with important issues of public life.”³⁶ He writes that in Athens, the (free) people

may do whatever they please so long as it does not infringe upon the common good.³⁷

The prevailing scholars who study Ancient Greece and Premodern Islam discuss the sexual roles each party plays, in other words, the active or passive roles. Kapparis does not agree with this widely accepted view, in part because of the lack of evidence. But El-Rouayheb offers evidence within a legal context that a man playing the passive role might have actually had a consequence within pre-modern Islam.

Homosexual relations in pre-modern Islam

In the pre-modern Islamic world, “religiously sanctioned marriage, the patriarchal household, reproductive imperatives, and women’s enclosure within domestic space” functioned as the norm, according to Babayan and Afsaneh.³⁸ However, El-Rouayheb argues that the “heterosexual libido was blocked in [the] premodern Middle East” due to factors such as public gender segregation and arranged marriages.³⁹ This implies that homosexual activity not only had plenty of space to thrive, but that heterosexual relations might have been suppressed. Indeed, male-male sexual encounters were typically between an older man and a young beardless boy or between two men, one of whom is portrayed as afflicted and pathological.⁴⁰ As a result, male-male sexual relations are prevalent in Islamic literature, and homosexual activity is clearly evident by the sheer number of legal cases addressing it, but that does not imply its acceptance in society.

Sex, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual, can be viewed either as a unifying experience or as “deeply polarizing...distinguish[ing] the dominating from the dominated.”⁴¹ This aggressive view is evident early in the Ottoman Empire, where male success was intricately tied to his gender role. “Succeeding in this world was to succeed as a male, to live up to the demands of masculinity.”⁴² When one man comes out on top, another man loses. The winner metaphorically “screws” the loser, robbing him of his chance to succeed at being a good man, thus feminizing him.⁴³ While this “screwing” was not sexual in action, it contains explicit sexual undertones between men.

In the pre-modern Middle East, there was also symbolic significance tied to the act of male homosexual activity: anal intercourse. The penetrator, or the *lūtī*, was the more dominant party. The term derives from the

story of Lot (Arabic: *Lūt*) in the Qur'an which features sodomized boys and anally raped male trespassers.⁴⁴

In Shari'a law, a *lūtī* is a man who commits *liwāt*, anal intercourse with another man regardless of the role he played (active or passive).⁴⁵ In the thirteenth-century epic *Sīrat Baybars*, originating in Egypt, a *lūtī* describes adult men "who make sexual advances to beardless youths."⁴⁶ According to Shi'a scholar Muhammad al-Hurr al-Āmilī, a *lūtī* traditionally refers to a man who sodomizes boys, where sodomy refers to a "crime against nature."⁴⁷ This included anal or oral intercourse between humans or between a human and an animal.⁴⁸ The key difference between these two definitions of a *lūtī* is the age of the actors. Shari'a law describes a *lūtī* as a man engaging in intercourse with another man, while Shi'a scholar al-Hurr al-Āmilī posits that a *lūtī* is a man who has intercourse with a young boy. Both cases are represented in the literature.

While a *lūtī* was punished by the courts, a man who desired anal sex was punished socially. Those who desired penetration were called *mukhannath*, *ma'būn*, or *ilq*.⁴⁹ The *ma'būn* was believed to be suffering from a disease called *ubnah*, which was a popular idea throughout the later Ottoman Empire.⁵⁰ "Treatise on the Hidden Illness," a medical journal attributed to Ar-Razi (854-925), was the first comprehensive report on *ubnah*.⁵¹ *Ubnah* was believed to be inherited or spread through anal penetration. It was an anal itch that made you seek and desire anal intercourse.⁵² The person afflicted with *ubnah* was typically effeminate with certain distinguishable characteristics, such as a "languid look, dried lips, and a large posterior."⁵³ These accounts describe a man who desires anal intercourse.

However, most male-male sexual activity documented in the literature did not fall within the aforementioned category. Homosexual relations in medieval Islam were almost always between a man and a young beardless boy.⁵⁴ When asked why homosexuality was forbidden, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali answered that if men were permitted to sleep with beardless boys, they would not desire women and would no longer procreate.⁵⁵ The boy is referred to as *amrad* (beardless boy), *ghulām* or *sabī* (boy), *fatā*, *shābb*, or *hadath* (male youth).⁵⁶ Because of his lack of a beard, he was not yet culturally or socially regarded as a "man." Stature and honor was asserted by facial hair throughout history, from the Greek Empire through the Ottoman Empire, and it was deeply related to masculinity.⁵⁷ El-Rouayheb writes that male youths' visible lack of a beard

was emphasized even more heavily because women normally covered their features with veils in public.⁵⁸ Gender segregation in the pre-modern period did not inhibit male-male sexual encounters the way it did with heterosexual suitors. However, if the pursued boy “display[ed] too much enthusiasm for his role as a coveted object,” it was at the peril of his own reputation.⁵⁹

According to Bruce W. Dunne, “lawful sexual intercourse” in Islam exists only between a woman and a man, but one can infer from the remaining literature and Islamic holy texts that homosexual activity occurred throughout the pre-modern Islamic world.⁶⁰ For the woman, lawful sex means sex with “her husband only, for the man [it is] with his wives and slave girls.”⁶¹ Dunne also notes the condemnation of sodomy in the Qur’an and hadith, implying that male-male sexual intercourse happened at the time in which both of these religious works were composed, estimated to be in the seventh-century CE.

Texts

Sexual imagery in Rumi’s writings

Rumi’s primary life works are *Dīwān Shamsi Tabrīzī* and *Mathnawī*.⁶² It is important to note that Shams is not directly mentioned in every story or stanza of these works, but all of Rumi’s poetry is addressed to his spiritual guide. This is an extraordinary testament to his teacher, as the *Dīwān Shamsi Tabrīzī*, also referred to simply as *Dīwān*, itself contains more than 40,000 verses, which is well beyond the scope to include within this article.

Rumi has therefore written thousands of verses, some about sex between men and women and some about sexual encounters between two men. Scholars in the field of mysticism studies have amply addressed the sexual nature of Rumi’s poetry. Mahdi Tourage specifically finds that “crude imagery and tales must be considered as indispensable to the mystical significance of the *Mathnawī*.”⁶³ This crude imagery includes sexual interactions with both married and unmarried women and even between humans and animals. One such case is the story of the slave girl and the donkey in *Mathnawī*. One translation of the story begins as follows:

There was a maidservant
who had cleverly trained a donkey
to perform the services of a man.⁶⁴

The maidservant trained the donkey to have sexual intercourse with her. In order to avoid injury, she created a protective device from a gourd to cover the donkey's penis. The mistress saw the maidservant and the donkey together, and she wanted to experience that pleasure for herself. She sent the maidservant away and attempted to have sex with the donkey, ultimately resulting in her bloody death.

The maidservant returns and says, "Yes, you saw
my pleasure, but you didn't see the gourd
that put a limit on it. You opened
your shop before a Master
taught you the craft."⁶⁵

Rumi teaches his reader the importance of balance and knowledge. He warns against indulging oneself in absolute pleasure without first seeking knowledge. Had the mistress known about the gourd, sexual intercourse with the donkey would not have resulted in her death. However, she simply saw the act taking place and made her own assessment of the situation without first asking for the maidservant's guidance. She prioritized pleasure over knowledge, and the result was fatal. Although the story is vulgar, it contains a lesson and a deep meaning. Rumi's poetry often takes this style.

Academics have also directly addressed the homoerotic themes in Rumi's poetry. El-Rouayheb writes of Rumi's personal relationships with his mother-in-law and her family, which were so tumultuous that they lead to his divorce from his wife. At the end of his work *Dīwān Shamsi-Tabrīzī*, Rumi writes that he is going to avoid women altogether once his marriage ends and pursue beardless men, according to El-Rouayheb.⁶⁶

Rumi also writes about a sexual encounter between a man and young boy in his work *Mathnawī*.

The man said: Don't be afraid, my beautiful boy!
If you want, you can be also on the top!
If you are afraid of me, you should know that I am a
mokhannas [a passive homosexual],
So sit on me and ride me as if I was a camel!⁶⁷

This passage highlights the crude nature of Rumi's poetry. While readers today cannot extrapolate biographical information from such a vague

excerpt, and therefore cannot know who Rumi was referring to in this passage, we are able to infer that he was writing about a man and a young boy. Many scholars would deem the older man more masculine since he was typically the penetrator and the dominant party. However, Rumi writes that this man is willing to concede his masculinity by letting the boy, considered by many to be effeminate until showing a beard, “ride [him] as if [he were] a camel.”⁶⁸ This excerpt shows that active/passive sexual roles perhaps were not as defined as some scholars may have believed. This poem implies that there is more fluidity in the roles one party performs, and it may change per act or per partner. For example, Rumi writes that the man said the boy may “also be on top.”⁶⁹ This can be read as the man telling the boy that he is comfortable being penetrated by him instead of what might have been typical during male-male sex; it could also mean that the man consents to both penetrating the boy and being penetrated by the boy; in other words, both parties will perform both roles during the encounter.

Rumi writes much of his poetry in *ghazal* verse. A *ghazal* is a form of Arabic love-themed poetry that is often sung.⁷⁰ Many verses of this nature are written to unidentified persons. Rumi writes in *ghazal* to both men and women in an “unseemly and indecorous” nature.⁷¹ One example is when Rumi responds to those who made fun of him for being effeminate:

May God punish everyone who says that I am effeminate
 By my sleeping with his mother for one night- not for three.
 If he were to see-watched man!-how her field is ploughed.
 While she blazed and panted at the heat of my glans.
 He would know whether it was a man or a woman who covered
 her.⁷²

Here, Rumi writes in the first-person narrative. While we cannot know if he was actually referring to himself when writing this passage, Rumi does convey a certain appetite for revenge when a man, “I” in the passage, is referred to as “effeminate” in this selection.⁷³ It is also noteworthy that the means of revenge is of the sexual nature, as opposed to violence, for example. Rumi could have threatened to harm anyone who called him, the “I” in the passage, feminine; instead, he chose to assert his masculinity by threatening to have sex with their mother(s).

This poem lends credence to El-Rouayheb's view of pre-modern Islam where masculinity was connected to success through gender roles. The man Rumi writes about seeks to disprove his femininity by demonstrating his masculinity. He does so by threatening to dominate people's mothers and therefore succeed at what is expected of him as a man.

Rumi again writes of sexual activity, but this encounter is with a boy:

Many a boy, whose face did not disgrace him. . .

... Sometimes I make him kneel down, Sometimes I lay him on his front

Sometimes I lay him on his back

Both curing him of his illness and wounding him.

With a full glans that pierces him like a weapon.⁷⁴

Rumi is again using the first-person narrative in this excerpt when writing about sexual intercourse with a young boy. The illness Rumi might have been alluding to is *ubnah*, which was discussed previously.⁷⁵ If Rumi was in fact referring to *ubnah*, then the implication, at least within the context of pre-modern Middle East, is that the boy actively desired anal penetration. From the context, one might infer that the man from whose perspective Rumi is writing was the active, insertive, dominant party and the boy was the passive, vulnerable party. Further, the reader can infer that the narrator, "I" in the passage, did not pay the boy for sex because the boy actively desired it. In this case, the sexual encounter is more closely related to *ma'būn* as opposed to *lūti*.

Rumi writes explicitly of sexual encounters both between men and women and between men and boys. The encounters he describes are crude in nature, but often contain a lesson, such as the poem about the donkey. Rumi's poetry about Shams-Tabrizi, on the other hand, is much more longing and loving. Shams is the physical embodiment of God on earth for Rumi since Shams is his spiritual master. Rumi's poetry reflects his desire and longing for God, which manifests as his adoration for his master.

Rumi's Love Poetry to His Master

It is well established that Rumi wrote sexual poetry about men and women alike. But Rumi's poetry to Shams is much different from any

sexual writings previously discussed; the love Rumi had for his master transcends any sexual relationship, and it is evident in Rumi's writings.

In one of the verses Rumi speaks of Shams, he writes of him lovingly:

You are the bait and the trap/ You are the path and the map/ While
in search I remain

You are poison and the sweet/ You are defeated and defeat/ Sword
in hand I remain

You are the wood and the saw/ You are cooked, and are raw/ While
in a pot I remain

You are sunshine and the fog/ You are water and the jug/ While
thirsty I remain

Sweet fragrance of Shams is/ The joy and pride of Tabriz/ Perfume
trader I remain."⁷⁶

Rumi again writes of the necessity of seeking knowledge, as he did with the story of the slave girl and the donkey.⁷⁷ The *tariqa* Rumi followed was led by Shams, his spiritual guide. Rumi remained eager to learn until *fana* was achieved. The first line of the above stanza is "I need a lover and a friend/All friendships you transcend."⁷⁸ As Rumi's master and personification of God, Shams-Tabrizi transcended friendship and became much closer with Rumi as Rumi followed the *tariqa*. Shams-Tabrizi encompasses all aspects of Rumi's life, from sunshine to fog to poison to sweetness. All the while, Rumi remains in search for the answers that only Shams is able to provide him, ultimately providing him with the tools necessary to achieve *fana*. Rumi is vulnerable in his relationship with Shams because only Shams can fill the void missing in Rumi's life and answer his many questions.

Rumi again writes of Shams in the *Dīwān*, this time speaking of his physical appearance:

This hidden face, gorgeous lashes

The arched brow, eye that flashes

The moving brow and talking eye I know not, I know not

Powerful arm, the nimble bow,

Put in flight temporal arrow

Bow and arrow and arm and time I know not, I know not
 Shams-e Tabrizi, to you I'm brought
 With your hardness I am distraught
 That shining gem, this hard rock, I know not, I know not.⁷⁹

The line "I know not" repeated might indicate the apophatic knowledge that Rumi seeks to gain through his spiritual master. Rumi recognizes his own ignorance and inability to achieve *fana* without the help of Shams, which is why he emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge in a great deal of his poetry.

In this passage, Rumi writes of Shams' physical appearance, mentioning his lashes and arms. It is possible that, at this point, Rumi had already achieved *fana*; but because of mystical experience's ineffable quality, he was unable to describe the experience itself. Instead, he describes his spiritual master who taught him the *tariqa* and represents everything he has come to understand about Sufism and the divine.

After an unknown yet uninterrupted period of time spent alone with Rumi, Shams-Tabrizi vanished. As previously stated, no one can be sure exactly what came of Shams-Tabrizi after he left Rumi, whether he was murdered or if he simply left Konia.⁸⁰ Regardless of Shams-Tabrizi's fate, he was gone from Rumi's life forever. Rumi wrote poetry of his absence, longing for his spiritual master:

Thy face is spring like, thy fire sorrows fight
 How long burn in this solstice of separation, candle-like?
 From the memory of thy light, every night flames take flight
 If only my heart fire would burn, my soul desire candle-like.
 How long burn thyself Shams-e Tabrizi, thy love beaming bright
 We know of nothing other than burning up, candle-like.⁸¹

In this stanza, Rumi aches for Shams' return, unknowing if he will ever come back to Konia. He begins by again admiring Shams' appearance, noting that it is "spring like," and wonders how long the two will be apart.⁸² He writes of Shams' positive qualities, noting that he is a "fire" that fights away sorrow and describes him as a "light" and "candle-like."⁸³ Rumi writes, "How long burn in this solstice of separation."⁸⁴ It is possible that Shams left Rumi because he knew Rumi needed to continue to follow the path on his own, unhindered by a master.

Rumi could have written this passage about Shams' absence. Rumi could also have a deeper aching and longing for God. Shams embodied God for Rumi, and one day Rumi woke up and Shams was gone. Rumi was left to attempt to achieve *fana* all on his own. This passage could be interpreted as Rumi expressing his adoration and yearning for God through Shams-Tabrizi. Rumi never learned what came of Shams, so he might have spent his entire life aching from this separation.

Conclusion

Rumi is one of the most well-recognized mystics in Islam, as his poetry has gained renown across the globe. His spiritual master Shams-Tabrizi has less name recognition, though he was extremely important to Rumi's development as a prominent Sufi poet.

This article has examined the social roles of ancient Greece and pre-modern Islam that provide cultural contexts for Rumi's poetry. Most scholars in the field write that active and passive sexual roles were tied to masculinity and femininity, respectively, and that whomever was penetrated was deemed feminine and whomever was penetrating was deemed masculine, regardless of sex. Davis and Dover write that male-male sex was cyclical and transactional in ancient Greece,⁸⁵ and they describe a normalized culture of older men providing insight and wisdom to young boys in exchange for sex. Kapparis rejects this view as well as the larger view of active/passive roles, and writes that the ancient Greeks did not have much regard for who slept with whom, so long as they performed their duties to uphold the common good.⁸⁶

This article then discussed male-male sex in pre-modern Islam and the potential consequences that followed. A man having sex with men or boys, depending on the legal system, is called a *lūṭī* and is punished by the courts. A *ma'būn* was punished socially, as he was a man who actively desired anal sex and was believed to be afflicted with a disease called *ubnah*.⁸⁷ Rumi even alludes to *ubnah* in one of his poems about a man and a boy, where the man is "curing him [the boy] of his illness" with anal penetration.⁸⁸

The manner in which Rumi writes his sexual poetry, regardless of the parties involved, is typically crude, vulgar, and extremely detailed. Rumi also wrote countless passages about his master Shams, his embodiment of the divine. While this homoerotic poetry contained some

mention of Shams' physical appearance, it did not compare to the vulgarity of the sexual poetry Rumi wrote about other individuals. The poetry written to Shams was homoerotic love poetry about a disciple eager to learn from his master and seek answers about the *tariqa*. As Shams was the means by which Rumi was able to achieve union with God, the two men became very close. But Rumi's love poetry was not only directed toward Shams, it was also for a genderless God. Shams was somewhat of a representative of the Divine as he was a spiritual master in Sufism. Rumi might not have been able to describe Allah, but he was able to admire Shams' face, brows, arms, and overall appearance. Provided the long-standing Greek conventions of male-male sexual relations in medieval Turkey, Rumi's most prevalent sexual theme is homoerotic, directed at his older, wise teacher, Shams-Tabrizi.

Notes

1. DeSouza, Wendy Noel, *Scholarly Mysticism and the Mystical Scholars: European and Iranian Intellectuals at the Dawn of Modern Sexuality and Gender* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2010).
2. Losensky, Paul, 2009, "Poetics and Eros in Early Modern Persia: The Lovers' Confection and The Glorious Epistle by Muhtasham Kāshānī." *Iranian Studies* pp. 745-764.
3. El-Zein, Amira, *Spiritual Consumption in the United States: The Rumi Phenomenon* (Routledge, 2000), p. 71.
4. Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), p. 138.
5. El-Zein. "Spiritual Consumption in the United States..." 71.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.; Rumi is not the only one to have adopted the name of his country as his own. Shams-Tabrizi appears to have done the same. Shams is from Tabriz, one of the largest cities in Iran.
8. Lewis, Franklin D., *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: the Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl Al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), p. 272.
9. Ibid, 273.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Lewis. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West...*, 274; El-Zein. "Spiritual Consumption in the United States..." 71.
13. Lewis. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West...*, 274.
14. Katz, Steven, *Understanding Mysticism: Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 44.
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