CHAPTER ONE

APPROACHING JĀMĪ’S SALĀMĀN VA ABSĀL AS A PERSO-ISLAMIC BOOK OF ADVICE FOR RULERS

Over four centuries after its composition, the poem Salāmān va Absāl by Nūr al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) and its evocative narrative involving an illicit romance between a pubescent prince and his wet-nurse still appears to discomfort modern literary historians of classical Persian belles-lettres. Largely dismissed by its critics, including Edward G. Browne, A. J. Arberry, and Jan Rypka, as “curious,” “silly,” “crude,” and even “grotesque,” the tale of Salāmān va Absāl has come to be regarded as one of Jāmī’s lesser achievements, a bizarre aberration in his corpus of otherwise straightforwardly mystical and didactic poems.1 Another reason for its relative obscurity is that it was dedicated to a Türkmen ruler, Abū al-Muẓaffar Yaʿqūb b. Üzün Ḥasan (hereafter Yaʿqūb; d. 896/1490), leader of the Āq Qoyūnlū tribal confederation, whose reign has received little attention in comparison to his Timurid and Ottoman contemporaries.2


To be sure, the scandalous romance, one that is incestuous and thus religiously proscribed, might at first glance distract casual readers from apprehending the mystical significance of the tale and the esoteric didacticism of its anecdotes. However, it is precisely through the indelicate, if not shocking, theme of the narrative that the subtleties of mystical transformation and esoteric allusion find their veiled expression. With this in mind, an abbreviated overview of the narrative itself is in order.

The Narrative Context of Salāmān va Absāl

The tale opens with the description of a King (shahryār, shāh) of ancient Greece who succeeds in making a Sage (ḥakīm) his companion in both “solitude” (khalvat) and “society” (ṣuḥbat). Adhering to the direction (tadbīr) and instruction (talqīn) of the Sage, the King conquers the entire world, its inhabitants prospering under the foundation of his justice (ʿadl) and munificence (jūd).

Contemplating his condition (ḥāl), the King realizes that, although he has acquired the good fortune of rulership (daulat), he remains without a son to succeed (khalaf) him. Speaking with the Sage, the King relates his desire for a worthy heir, declaring that there is no greater blessing (niʿmat) than a son. The response of the Sage is a withering condemnation of carnal lust (shahvat) which, in his opinion, only serves to sever wisdom (khirad) from the heart (dil) and light (nūr) from the eyes. Women, much like wine, are the locus of this lust and must therefore be avoided. To produce an heir, the Sage draws semen from the King’s spine and deposits it in a place other than a female womb. Jāmī is careful to note that the seminal...