KĀSHIFĪ'S POWERFUL METAPHOR:
THE ENERGISING TROPE

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“... by far the most important point is facility with metaphor. This alone is a sign of natural ability, and something one can never learn from another; for the successful use of metaphor entails the perception of similarities.” Thus speaks Aristotle in his Poetics.¹

The ubiquitous Metaphor! The Queen of Tropes! This has perhaps been THE most discussed figure of speech or rhetoric device throughout the history of rhetorical analysis. The word has a Greek origin, literally meaning “transfer,” thus denoting a transitive action, consisting in “carrying something over to something else.” The metaphor can be defined as “a trope, or figurative expression, in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings.”² It may be understood in a general way as the term for a great many figures of speech, or it may be used in a more restricted manner, as in the present article. It is ubiquitous in poetry, but also in literary prose and everyday speech. It pervades most languages and is present in abundance in Persian, contributing, as most would argue, to the beauty and elegance of both the written and spoken word. This rhetorical device is present right at the beginnings of Classical Persian literary language and, over the centuries, it is never absent from either prose or poetry. The fashion for this—and other—figures of speech (‘beauties’ or مماسان (as Vaṭvāṭ names them), or ‘poetical figures’ or صناعي شعرى (as Kāshīfī terms them)) reached an almost unbearable peak in the 15th-century style at the Herat court—almost unbearable for the taste of the 19th and 20th centuries that is—which brought discredit to that particular literary style and what is perhaps mistakenly considered its spin-off,³ the sabk-i hindī.

³ I rest with the accepted view of inheritance by the latter of most of the former’s style, though, a comparative study of the use of tropes in these two literary genres, proving
Judgment on the paragon of this intricate Herat style, the prose of Vā'īz Kāshīfī’s (d. 910/1504–05) Anvār-i Suhaylī, has followed the vagaries of taste. The work, leaving no-one indifferent, has been considered either the absolute height of elegance, or a stylistic nadir of debauchery. E.G. Browne’s discussion of this work is famous for its derogatoriness: “In general, it is full of absurd exaggerations, recondite words, vain epithets, far-fetched comparisons, and tasteless bombast. It represents to perfection the worst style of those florid writers who flourished under the patronage of the Timurids and North Eastern Persia and Transoxiana during the 15th and 16th century of our era…” It is perhaps surprising that Browne in his criticism does not mention metaphors in particular, but rather “far-fetched comparisons.” (Incidentally, in an article analysing metaphors, we are, as it were, duty-bound to salute Browne’s natty use of a double alliterative metaphor taken from the vegetal world!)

But the interest in analysing the use of metaphors in Kāshīfī’s famous prose work goes deeper than just the trend-setting power of this literary text. It so happens that this author, a polymath at the court of Sultan Ḥusayn Bayqarā, also composed a work on Poetics. We can thus examine Kāshīfī’s understanding of this seminal poetical image, and next observe him at work, putting the theory into practice, by analysing several random examples from the Anvār, according to present-day theories. Although some might consider the latter exercise anachronistic, it is actually an attempt to place this rich text within the frame of present-day rhetorical analysis, perhaps going deeper than the medieval Persian theoretical understanding, which the author himself had of his own prose skills.

In the light of this analysis, the present paper will argue that Kāshīfī, although careful to retain the classical view on the metaphor as a Simple...