Introduction

Love romances present a substantial output in the medieval Persian literary tradition. They flourished mostly in the courtly milieu, the earliest extant texts coming from the eastern parts of the Iranian world and dating from the reign of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (r. 998–1030) whose capital became a significant centre of the dialogue among various intellectual traditions. The rise of the romance brought about the gradual decline of the heroic epic, which reflected a “growing disaffection with the social values embodied in epic”, as well as changes in literary taste. Formally the versified romances are written in the mathnavī form and encompass a variety of poetic metres. In most cases their immediate sources are elusive.

In what follows I offer a chronological survey of available texts confining myself to the textual production of the 11th–13th centuries. At the end I present a synthesis of possible sources and influences on the medieval Persian love romances discussed in the survey.

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1 See Meisami, Poetry, pp. 79–80.
2 Ibid., pp. 80–81.
3 In addition to courtly love romance, another strand which replaced the heroic epic was a kind of chivalric geste, i.e., tales of heroes whose exploits bore a legendary and fantastic character entwined with romantic adventures. Post-Firdausian epics belong to this category. See Molé, “Épopée”; de Blois, Persian Literature, 5/2, pp. 562–67, 568–76, and most recently and exhaustively, Van Zutphen, Farāmarz, pp. 62–138.
4 Mathnavī, meaning “doubled”, is a Perso-Arabic term for a long poem in which every distich (bayt) has an internal rhyme that changes with each following line.
a) Romantic Poems by ʿUnṣūrī. Vāmiq-u ʿAdhrā
Abū al-Qāsim Ḥasan b. Aḥmad ʿUnṣūrī (d. 1039/40) was a prominent poet at the court of Maḥmūd of Ghazna.5 Bearing the venerable title malik al-shuʿārāʾ (“the poet laureate”), ʿUnṣūrī exerted substantial influence among his fellow court poets and was considered primarily as a masterful panegyrist. Besides panegyric odes (qaṣīdas) devoted chiefly to his patrons, Sultan Maḥmūd, the latter’s brothers and minister, ʿUnṣūrī is credited with composing three poems Khing but-u Surkh but (“White Idol and Red Idol”), Shād-bahr-u ʿAyn al-Hayāt (“Happy of Fate and Spring of Life”), and Vāmiq-u ʿAdhrā (“The Ardent Lover and the Virgin”), all three titled according to the names of their male and female protagonists.6 ʿUnṣūrī’s poems have survived only partially: poetic treatises and lexicological works preserved a handful of verses from the Khing but-u Surkh but and about sixty isolated verses from the Shād-bahr-u ʿAyn al-Hayāt.7 As for the Vāmiq-u ʿAdhrā, more than 500 couplets were recovered altogether, which enables reconstruction of the subject-matter and source of the poem. The poem seems to have started fading into obscurity in the 13th century,8 or even earlier, to which the discovery of a manuscript fragment used to stiffen the binding of an Arabic theological manuscript dated 1132 bears eloquent

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5 Information on his life is scarce; for summary, see EIr, “ʿOnṣori”.
6 A certain connection exists between ʿUnṣūrī’s three poems and the prose works – no longer extant – of his contemporary Abū Rayḥān Birūnī (d. after 1050). Birūnī mentions that he translated three stories “out of folly and ridicule” (min al-hazl wa al-sakhf). One may only speculate about Birūnī’s source; it seems most likely that the three books were a translation of ʿUnṣūrī’s poems from Persian verse into Arabic prose. In that case Birūnī turns out to be the first known reader (and critic) of these poems. Apud Shafi’, Vāmiq-u ʿAdhrā, pp. 4–5; cf. de Blois, Persian Literature, 5/1, pp. 232–33. See Hägg and Utas, Virgīn, p. 19, referring to Strohmaier, “Al-Birūnī”.
7 Hägg and Utas, Virgīn; EIr, “ʿOnṣori”. For the verses supposedly belonging to Shād-bahr-u ʿAyn al-Ḥayāt, see ʿUnṣūrī, Divān, ed. M. Dabīr-siyāqī, Tehran 1984, pp. 363–70. Some clues as to the nature of the two extinct poems can be gathered from a folk prose romance (dāstān), the anonymous Iskandar-nāma (“The Book of Alexander”; see Iskandar-nāma, ed. Afshār, pp. 288–89; 430–31). On the compilation and redaction of this text, see in detail Rubanovich, “Reconstruction of a Storytelling Event”; eadem, “Tracking the Shāhnāma Tradition”, pp. 23–24, as well as the chapter on the Persian Alexander tradition in this volume p. 224 and n. 27 there. For a full translation of the relevant passages, see Hägg and Utas, Virgīn, pp. 197–99.
8 See Shafi’, Vāmiq-u ʿAdhrā, pp. 7–10. One of the possible explanations for this is a conspicuously pagan character of the poem which made it unpalatable to the later Muslim audience; see ibid., p. 9.