

SHORT REVIEW

**Love at a Crux – The New Persian Romance in a Global Middle Ages. Cameron Cross (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2023). 370 pages. ISBN 978-1-4875-4727-1.**

Reviewed by Gabrielle van den Berg 

(Received 27 July 2024; revised 13 August 2024; accepted 17 August 2024)

Cameron Cross’s monograph on *Vis-o Ramin* is a highly ambitious and original study into a well-known but not extensively studied Persian romance written by Fakhr al-Din Gorgani in 1054 CE.

Cross’s study opens with an insightful and rich prologue (“Prologue – In Which Love has Many a Tale”), which serves as an introduction to the story of *Vis-o Ramin* and Cross’s proposed mode of engagement. Following the prologue, Cross presents an in-depth discussion of the many dimensions and context of *Vis-o Ramin* in five consecutive chapters, three of which are specifically connected to the story’s main protagonists: Vis (“Ethics – An Affair of Conscience,” chapter 2), Mobad (“Politics – The Prisoner of his Skin,” chapter 3), and Ramin (“Affect – The Limits of Lyric,” chapter 4). These three core chapters are framed by chapter 1, “Phantasy – The Rise of the Romance,” and chapter 5, “History – The Death of Romantic Love,” followed by a concluding chapter entitled “Epilogue – In Which Many a Tale has Love.” This sophisticated structure forms the esthetic frame for a balanced and extremely rich excursion into the (Persian) romance, eloquently written and brimming with fresh views. This study is exceptional in that it foregrounds the genre of the romance in an all-embracing and holistic manner.

In the prologue, the foundations are laid for Cross’s innovative approach to the story. Here, on the basis of several notions broadly related to connected history, as explored in recent scholarship, Cross presents a new framework for the study of *Vis-o Ramin* and texts potentially related to this work. Cross convincingly demonstrates how new dimensions of *Vis-o Ramin*, and the Persian romance by extension, can come to light when viewed and understood through the lens of connectivity and hybridity in place of, or in addition to, the more narrow and exclusive Iranian Studies approach largely prevalent in existing studies.

Following a succinct description of the contents of *Vis-o Ramin* (a full summary is offered in one of three very useful appendices) and perceptive note on some of the more salient aspects of the work, such as the use of “doubles,” Cross sets out his refreshing, if very broad, approach to (literary) history with a view to meticulously map the different layers and functions of the romance as exemplified by *Vis-o Ramin*. Thus, *Love at a Crux* offers an in-depth literary analysis of the text of *Vis-o Ramin* alongside a meta view of the romance and its impact and development in the context of Persian text production and beyond.

In the prologue of *Love at a Crux*, *Vis-o Ramin* is described as a work “on the crossroads of literary history” and a building block of “networks of interrelated texts” informed by Hellenistic learning, Abrahamic monotheism, and the Ancient Novel. Cross introduces the term “Helleno-Abrahamic complex” to frame his inquiry into the interconnectedness of a

set of narrative traditions – an interconnectedness brought about and facilitated by a number of multi-ethnic and transregional empires in a timeframe that Cross, after some hesitation, defines as “a (global) Middle Ages.” One of his main arguments is that these texts played a far more consequential role than they receive credit for in the large area he describes as “medieval Afro-Eurasia,” specifically the larger Mediterranean world.

Cross zooms in on the eleventh and twelfth centuries, convincingly showing how *Vis-o Ramin* exemplifies the successful adoption of an increasingly popular model in Persian literature that connects and embraces an ancient past – in this case, the pre-Islamic, Parthian background of *Vis-o Ramin* – and a medieval, Islamic present, i.e., the eleventh century C.E., when *Vis-o Ramin* was composed. What makes Cross’s work especially attractive and original is that he explains, via a rich analysis of the text of *Vis-o Ramin* in relation to other texts, why specifically *Vis-o Ramin* could become such an effective model and how we should evaluate the implications of this success.

In his study, Cross minutely traces the emancipation and development of the romance or love-story from being seen as pure, even reprehensible phantasy (*khoraḫāt*) in the centuries prior to the appearance of *Vis-o Ramin* up to the eleventh century, when a change in the nature of and appreciation for the romance became perceptible and the genre began acquiring new meanings for its audience. Cross demonstrates how *Vis-o Ramin*’s contents, its protagonists’ actions and decisions, and the formal aspects of its story ultimately form the building blocks of a set of ideas and ideals that can be related to love as a philosophical concept; a concept that became increasingly important in a wide variety of Persian texts, including Sufi poetry.

Although Cross’s fresh views on the rise of the romance in the eleventh century are compelling and thought-provoking, the boldness of his claim may be a minor point of criticism: how do the scarcity of Persian source materials and hazards of text transmission feature in his claim that a major shift took place in the eleventh century? This is the century in which text production in Persian really began to take off, as far we know, but Cross does not really dwell on this.

Throughout the work, Cross weighs and discusses the terms and notions he uses, linking them with primary text material and recent scholarship. The terms “medieval,” “middle ages,” “romance,” and “lyric” may be viewed as problematic or even controversial terms, and by reframing these (and others) as “propositions” rather than “definitions,” Cross creates a sound framework for his study; a framework in which the problem of Eurocentricity is sufficiently and carefully addressed.

Each chapter of *Love at a Cruc* has a strikingly captivating opening, masterfully drawing the reader into the topic. In chapter 1, for example, Cross presents a vivid and clever portrayal of Fakhr al-Din Gorgani as a starting point for discussing the literary and historical milieu in which *Vis-o Ramin* was composed, explaining how the romance came to be an increasingly influential medium in the “domain of intellectual inquiry.” In the subsequent chapters, the main protagonists of *Vis-o Ramin* are brought to life through a spell-binding retelling of an aspect of their story and ingeniously connected to an increasingly complex of line of thought, meticulously underpinned by literary theory.

The book’s main argument – i.e., the changing status and elevation of love stories or fictional narratives (framed initially as *khoraḫāt* [superstitions] or *asmār* [evening stories], implying inconsequential phantasy) and their recontextualization as meaningful or useful discourses – is demonstrated in each chapter from a different angle. The idea of useful discourse is framed in light of an interest in and need for practical knowledge, naturally connected to what is generally described as wisdom literature (*andarz*).

A strong feature of the book is Cross’s framing of Persian literature and its role in a broad, connective, and comparative framework by moving effortlessly from ancient and medieval sources in Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin to modern works on literary theory, particularly Bakhtin. Cross’s versatility in eloquently connecting a great variety of sources and texts on the history and contents of *Vis-o Ramin* shows his impressive engagement with the material.

At times, Cross's associative way of arguing and extensive inclusion of modern literary theory, however admirable and brilliant, may come across as slightly distracting and long-winded, especially for readers accustomed to the more conventional treatment of Persian literature, which Cross's whirlwind approach seems to render obsolete. Cross justifiably and commendably aims for different types of audience, including readers with a background in literary studies or Comparative Literature but unfamiliar with Persian. Examples in Persian are sometimes transliterated in order to facilitate understanding for those who do not read Persian. This is, for example, the case in chapter 4, where Cross presents a clear analysis of the role of Ramin and his songs in *Vis-o Ramin* in relation to the genre of the *ghazal* and lyrical poetry.


Likewise, the chapters on Vis's inner motivations and character and Mobad's fatal demise are highly informative and revealing, evidencing Cross's mature understanding of philosophy, literary theory, history, and a variety of text traditions. I was especially impressed by Cross's psychological and philosophical analysis of Vis's actions and considerations as her relationship with the male protagonists Viru, Mobad and Ramin unfolds. Throughout the book, but particularly in chapters 2 and 5, Cross brings Vis to life and brilliantly shows the centrality and impact of her multi-layered and intriguing persona in *Vis-o Ramin* and beyond.

Its multi-disciplinary and truly connective approach is what makes *Love at a Crux* a major contribution to the fields of classical Persian Literature, Comparative Literature, and Intellectual History. Cross's meticulous study offers a wide variety of audiences a set of refreshing ideas on the nature and role of the romance as an intrinsic and pivotal element of the global Middle Ages. In the course of his erudite and elegant study, he skillfully deconstructs the perceived dichotomy between phantasy and history. In addition, the perceptive choice and discussion of passages from *Vis-o Ramin* and other works, presented in both the original language and masterful translation by Cross, perfectly illustrate and strengthen the arguments of his study and are a true pleasure to read.

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.41

## REVIEWS

### **The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction: Farid al-Din 'Attar and Persian Sufi Didacticism. Austin O'Malley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). Pp. 304. Hardcover \$120, paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978147447512**

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(Received 24 June 2024; accepted 24 June 2024)

Many critical traditions posit a distance between literature and reality, a distance marked and measured in different times and places by a range of verbs: literature imitates, copies, symbolizes, enacts, or analogically corresponds to the world. How have scholars, and authors themselves, conceived of the remove between a literary representation of a thing and that thing itself? And how do nonspecialist readers, past and present, mind that gap? Such foundational questions about experiences of reading, the nature of literature, and the structure of