Dissecting The Ring of the Dove

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The Martyr-Lover

Throughout the anecdote, Ibn Hazm emphasizes the unrequited nature of his love for the girl. This is an example of what Louis Crompton calls the “sentences of torment” in medieval Arabic literature on love, which glorified the martyr-love. A popular hadith (saying of Muhammad) circulated during this time was “He who loves and remains unrequited will have a place in paradise” (Crompton 144). While it is unclear whether Ibn Hazm ever directly reveals his feelings to the girl, he certainly gives the impression that he desires happiness for some of the other women in his life. This is clear when he describes her to his guard at the house as a “true friend” (Constable 104). He also romanticizes her divinity, purity, and love of her, as well as her refusal to allow him to pass on the true meanings of love to others (Constable 104). This fixation on unrequited love and the idealization of the love’s virtuous qualities mirrors the influence of rapid Islamic military expansion, which created a large number of new slaves out of the conquered peoples. Unlike Christianity, Islam “granted men sexual access to women” (Cachia 143). This is a legacy of homosocial desires expressed in these narratives. For Ibn Hazm and his contemporaries, “all love is psychologically one and the same,” therefore love was expected to exist between individuals of various genders and social spheres (Constable 147).

Love in Slavery

The widespread presence of slave women within these Roman anecdotes also emphasizes the important role that slaves played within medieval Spanish society. This is a legacy of rapid Islamic military expansion, which created a large number of new slaves out of the conquered peoples. Unlike Christianity, Islam “granted men sexual access to women” (Cachia 143). This is a legacy of homosocial desires expressed in these narratives. For Ibn Hazm and his contemporaries, “all love is psychologically one and the same,” therefore love was expected to exist between individuals of various genders and social spheres (Constable 147).

Introduction

The Ring of the Dove is a treatise on love written by Ibn Hazm, an 11th century Muslim philosopher and poet from Cordoba, Spain. It is comprised of anecdotes from Ibn Hazm’s own life and the lives of many of his friends and acquaintances. Chapter titles include (but are not limited to) “The Ring of Love,” “Hunts with the eagle,” “Keeping the Secret,” “The Beloved Friend,” “Shades,” and “Seclusion” (Nyst 76).

In one particular anecdote, Ibn Hazm tells the reader of his “lustful passion” for a slave girl in his family’s household. This love for this girl goes through many stages as he matures, from naive idealism, then passionate longing, and finally cynicism and bitter acceptance. Upon first reading, the excerpt seems to be merely a reflection about the instructive nature of unrequited love. However, when scrutinized with some care, the short text reveals itself to be a multi-layered, multi-faceted source of knowledge about 11th century Spanish society.

Literary Topoi: Mirrors and Divergences

Ibn Hazm is a witness to the act of desire and “testing” in northern European, not slaves, but to Spanish-Muslim literature, anyone could be the object of desire and idealization. Included in The Ring of the Dove are anecdotes of romantic love between men and women (both women of their own social class as well as slaves) as well as romantic love between men (although he also includes an implicit mandate to never act on these homoerotic desires expressed in these narratives). For Ibn Hazm and his contemporaries, “all love is psychologically one and the same,” therefore love was expected to exist between individuals of various genders and social spheres (Constable 147).

Othering of Woman

Ibn Hazm’s story about a slave girl is a metaphor for the transformation of the male protagonist who grows up in our house, who at the time of my story was sixteen years of age. She had an extremely pretty face, and was very intelligent, charming, pure, shy, and of the most exquisite disposition. Her lovely face attracted all hearts, but her manner kept her arm length all who came after her; she was far more glamorous in her refined manners and resistances than those other girls.

For two years or three years I allowed the amount of my money to win a valiant outcome of love from her to bear her a single word, other than the usual kind of banteries that he may be heard by everyone; but all my efforts proved in vain.

Conclusion

As stated previously, this recollection of Ibn Hazm’s love for a slave girl is but one of many personal anecdotes from The Ring of the Dove. The treatment itself was written circa 1021 at the request of one of Ibn Hazm’s close friends, despite Ibn Hazm’s own personal struggles about writing something that could be used by his political enemies to ridicule him. Ibn Hazm’s justification for creating it was that it would distract him from his recent ill-health so that he could be strengthened. Ibn Hazm ends the treatise with this note, which reveals the sense of resignation and bitterness lingering at the end of his anecdote about the slave girl.

I have made of despair a fortress for myself, and a seat of withdrawal. And I did not put the garb on who came on reparation; and more than all the people, in my estimation. One may thing has protected me more than all the creatures: So long as we and he are in peace, we do not need to worry about what has gone by. Even more is gone—what is more? I do not know whether I shall reach it; hence, why should I grieve?

(Nyst 77, 78)

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Knowledge of the importance of this turning point in Muslim history certainly adds depth and flavor to Ibn Hazm’s tale. As stated previously, this recollection of Ibn Hazm’s love for a slave girl is but one of many personal anecdotes from The Ring of the Dove. The treatment itself was written circa 1021 at the request of one of Ibn Hazm’s close friends, despite Ibn Hazm’s own personal struggles about writing something that could be used by his political enemies to ridicule him. Ibn Hazm’s justification for creating it was that it would distract him from his recent ill-health so that he could be strengthened. Ibn Hazm ends the treatise with this note, which reveals the sense of resignation and bitterness lingering at the end of his anecdote about the slave girl.

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It is interesting to note that this civil war was the beginning of the end of Christian domination of Spain. The Christian princes of northern Spain took advantage of this moment of internal strife and began to make inroads into the south. Over the next four and a half centuries Christians would slowly reconquer the entire peninsula. Cordoba itself would fall in 1236 to the armies of Ferdinand III, King of Castile and Leon, and Ibn Hazm’s story about a slave girl is a symbol for Cordoba itself. Therefore Ibn Hazm’s life is not only differentiated between periods of tranquility, but the different stages of development with the slave girl can also be explained by the shifts in the political and social status of Ibn Hazm’s family within the evolving power structure of the city.

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