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Dissecting The Ring of the Dove

Adrian Burr
Ohio Wesleyan University

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Dissecting The Ring of the Dove

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) "Signs of Love", "Hints with the eyes", "Keeping the Secret", "the Helping Friend", "Slanderer", and "Separation" (Nykl 78).

In one particular anecdote, Ibn Hazm tells the reader of his "youthful passion" for a slave girl in his family's household. His love for this girl goes through many stages as he matures, first 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 intent, this short text is revealed as a multi-faceted source of knowledge about 11th century Spanish society.

Literary Topoi: Mirrors and Divergences

I can tell you with regard to myself, that in my youth I enjoyed the loving friendship of a certain slave-girl who grew up in our house, who at the time of my story was sixteen years of age. She had an extremely pretty face, and was moreover intelligent, chaste, pure, shy, and of the sweetest disposition...Her lovely face attracted all hearts, but her manner kept at arm's length all who came seeking her; she was far more glamorous in her refusals and rejections than those other girls...

For two years or thereabouts I labored to the utmost of my powers to win one syllable of response from her, to hear from her lips a single word, other than the usual kind of banalities that may be heard by everyone; but all my efforts proved in vain.

(Constable 103, 104)

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 "vein of ardent romanticism in medieval Arab treatises on love", which glorified the martyr-lover. A popular hadith (saying of Muhammad) circulated during this time was "He who loves and remains chaste and conceals his secret and dies, dies a martyr" (Crompton 144). While it is unclear whether Ibn Hazm ever directly reveals his feelings to the girl, her refusal to give him the individual attention he desires heightens his sense of excitement and his determination to pursue her. This is clear when he follows her from balcony to balcony at a party, despite having already spent years fruitlessly attempting to win her affections (Constable, 104). He also romanticizes her chastity, purity, and refusal to entertain the advances of men, (incidentally, the very characteristics preventing him from obtaining her). This fixation on unrequited love and the idealization of the love's virtuous qualities mirrors the courtly love poetry being produced in northern Europe, in which "troubadours romanticized highborn women, consigning them to a place atop a pedestal of virtue and nobility" (Williams, Echols 85).

But even this apparent similarity reveals a divergence of Spanish-Muslim love discourse from the northern-European tradition. "Highborn women" tended to be the object of desire and "wooing" in northern Europe, not slave girls. But in Spanish-Muslim literature, anyone could be the object of desire and idealization. Included in *The Ring of the Dove* are examples 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 also included are implicit mandates to never act on the 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 (Crompton 147).

Love in Slavery

The widespread presence of slave women within these romantic 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 their slaves" (Crompton 156). Slave women were given special status within the household if they became their master's concubines, and the children of these unions were financially supported by their fathers. Therefore Ibn Hazm's pursuit of a slave girl is not merely an example of idealization of unrequited love, but also a demonstration of a common household dynamic of 11th century Spain. This anecdote and others like it are evidence for the fact that cultural differences such as the role of slaves within family dynamics can create divergent literary topoi.

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Othering of Woman

I saw her standing there amid the clamor of mourning, all among the weeping and wailing women. She revived that passion long buried in my heart, and stirred my now still ardor, reminding me of ancient troth, an old love, an epoch gone by, a vanished time...She renewed my griefs, and reawakened my sorrows...my anguish was intensified, the fire smoldering in my heart blazed into flame, my unhappiness was exacerbated, my despair multiplied.

(Constable 105)

Woman as Catalyst and Medium

One of the foundational texts of feminist literary theory is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in which she discusses the mythologizing and "othering" of women by men that results in female characters' lack of subjectivity, "To pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being" (Beauvoir 1266). Bamber, another feminist theorist, applies this concept of the Other to women in Shakespeare in her book, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*. She states that Shakespeare portrays the women in his plays as the type of Other that will "resist, challenge, lead or assist the masculine Self" (Bamber 5). For Bamber, the specific type of Other that the woman embodies is a catalyst for the transformation of the male protagonist (the Self). The slave girl too lacks subjectivity. She is not given a name, nor a voice, but instead acts both as a catalyst for Ibn Hazm's emotional experience as well as his mode of reflection on that experience. Her presence in the story is a means by which the stages of his life and feelings about his present or past are exposed. As the above excerpt shows, she has the ability to call forth and exacerbate whatever emotion he is already feeling. *She is the medium through which he expresses himself.*

Woman as Symbol: the Civil War

This brings us to another important facet of the narrative. Many scholars have read this anecdote as an allegory for the fall of Cordoba during the civil war of Al-Andalus, and the slave girl as a symbol for Cordoba itself. Therefore Ibn Hazm's life is not only differentiated between periods of maturity, but the different stages of his infatuation 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.

Ibn Hazm was born in 994, right at the end of a period of great prosperity in which the Caliph army under the direction of al-Mansur successfully conquered and held large areas of northern Spain, including the important pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela. Ibn Hazm's father was a vizier under this regime, and Ibn Hazm's childhood was one of stability, wealth, and education. When Ibn Hazm recalls his early years of infatuation with the slave girl, he situates her within his idealized recollections of his own childhood home, and the two sources of nostalgia become one and the same. For example, he recounts how at one of his parents parties (the attendants of which are all "thoroughly nice and jolly folk") he pursued the girl from bay window to bay window, and makes a point to tell the reader that through these bay windows the guests were able to enjoy "a magnificent view of the whole of Cordoba" (Constable 104).

After the death of al-Mansur's son in 1007, the country was torn apart by different parties vying for power. According to *A History of Islamic Spain*, "the years 1008 to 1031 was one of the most tragic quarter-centuries in all history. From the pinnacle of its wealth, power and cultural achievements Al-Andalus fell into the abyss of a blood civil war" (Watt, Cachia 73). While measuring "tragic" is a subjective exercise, we can certainly feel the depth of Ibn Hazm's anguish when he states "civil war waged far and wide; all classes suffered from it's dire effects, ours in particular", and then proceeds to describe how his old love awakens in him painful memories of "periods perished, days forever past, obliterated traces" (Constable 105). It is not only memories of his youthful love that the sight of her awakens, but memories of his blissful childhood home, now dogged by war. The connection is perhaps the most clear when Ibn Hazm describes his return to Cordoba after his family has fallen from political grace and been exiled. Since his last view of the girl (which incidentally coincides with his last visit to Cordoba) the city has been sacked, and is now but a shadow of its former glory. The lines between his old love and his old city become blurred as he describes how greatly the girl has changed, "gone was her radiant beauty...Only a fragment of the whole remained, to tell the tale and testify to what the complete picture had been. All this had come to pass because she took too little care of herself, and had lacked the guardian hand which had nourished her during the days of our prosperity" (Constable 106). Her "fragmented" state could also be read as an allusion to the literal breakup of Al-Andalus into several different taifa (party) kingdoms. Cordoba itself had lost its place as the capital of the emirate become one of many smaller city-states when Ibn Hazm finally returned.

It is interesting to note that this civil war was the beginning of the end of Muslim domination of Spain. The Christian princes of northern Spain took advantage of this moment of internal strife and began to retake sections of land. 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. Knowledge of the importance of this turning point in Muslim-Spanish history certainly adds depth and flavor to Ibn Hazm's tale.



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 treatise itself was written circa 1021 at the request of one of Ibn Hazm's close friends, despite Ibn Hazm's own personal misgivings about writing something that could be used by his political enemies to ridicule him. Ibn Hazm's justification for its creation was that it would distract him from his recent misfortunes so that his "soul could be strengthened". Ibn Hazm ends the treatise with this motto, which recalls the sense of resignation and bittersweet longing felt at the end of his anecdote about the slave girl,

*I have made of despair a fortress for myself and a coat of mail,
And I did not put on the garb of one who complains of injustice;
And more than all the people, in my estimation,
One easy thing has protected me more than all the creatures:
So long as my religion and honor are right,
I shall not worry about what has gone by;
Yesterday is gone—and tomorrow? I do not know whether
I shall reach it; hence, why should I be grieved?*

(Nykl 77, 78)