

ON THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC POLYMOATH AVICENNA ON GRAIL LEGENDS IN EUROPE

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I am not a historian, and this note will not have the polish of a historian. The interest I developed about the influence of Islamic polymath Avicenna on the Grail Legends in Europe arise from noting a blindness in Joseph Campbell, who was strongly biased towards a sort of Eurocentrism that did not allow him to appreciate that the Western notions of Romantic love and Chivalry had been strongly influenced by theories of Romantic love developed by Avicenna in Persia. I will attempt to establish this thesis in this note. This might be well-known to Middle Eastern scholars but it is not popular knowledge.

First of all, let us bound the times in order to establish reasonableness of the hypothesis. Avicenna lived between 980–1037, and the Grail Legends in Europe developed 1100–1300 roughly, starting roughly a century later. Among various ideas that Avicenna had written on included tracts on the ennobling qualities of Romantic love. Although Avicenna himself was strongly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, and had studied *Catogories* of Aristotle as well as *Almagest* of Ptolemy and *Elements* of Euclid, he held much more regard for Romantic Love between a man and a woman than the Ancient Greeks. Indeed, I was reading the book by Jonathan Haidt recently, *The Happiness Hypothesis* and agree with him that *Symposium* of Plato gives short shrift to love between man and woman and devalues care for the young as not lofty. Avicenna had theorised the spiritual basis of Romantic love that did not have such a denigrating view of love as 'animal'.

1. THE LOVER LANCELOT APPEARED AFTER AVICENNA'S ROMANTIC LOVE THEORY SPREAD

The Arthurian Legends did not always have the Knight Lancelot who is the lover of Guinevere, the queen of Arthur till Chrétien de Troyes' Erec and Enide (1170). This is profoundly important, for the separation of romantic love from marriage as something that has value in and of itself was not present at all in European Civilisation until Avicenna's doctrine's had influence in Europe. In other words, purity of Romantic Love was pioneered by Avicenna before they influenced Europe and from this point eventually they dominated the Western conceptions of all romantic unions and 80% of American marriages cite 'love' as the primary reason for marriage.

2. TRANSMISSION MECHANISM CRUSADES

Crusades are those to the Holy Land in the period between 1095 and 1291 that were intended to recover Jerusalem and its surrounding area from Islamic rule. Avicenna's works and ideas were influential in Islamic world after his death in

Date: October 22, 2021.

1037, and it is significant that Europeans had access to these from the beginning of the Crusades. Thus it is my theory that Europeans brought the ideas back and this sparked the particular ideas that lead to notions of Courtly Romantic Love in Europe.

3. PIONEERING INVESTIGATIONS OF ALEXANDER DENOMY

I began writing this note with the hope that I would transform the entire Western Civilisation with a new discovery that notions of Romantic Love were pioneered by Avicenna. I have remained gracious and not fallen prey to bouts of envy at finding that Father Alexander Denomy had already discovered this in 1944. He had written *The Heresy of Courtly Love* from his researches that were published. Grunebaum [1] gave further insight about the topic.

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE

The influence of notions of Romantic Love pioneered by Avicenna is a dominant force in the entire Western Civilisation so that almost every romantic relationship has these concepts ingrained and today 80% of marriages in America cite "love" as the reason for the union. This is tremendous success of a viewpoint that never existed in the world before Avicenna formulated it within 980-1037 AD. And so I am quite surprised that this is not well-known to everyone in the West.

Our Modern American Valuations Over the thousands of years around the world and for the past five centuries, the notions of what is high and low within us, and in others has been influenced by original Greek ideas about the Soul having lower and higher functions. The lower animal parts and higher rational parts. Aristotle and Plato was then absorbed by Thomas Aquinas – strongly influenced by Avicenna as well – into notions of Christian Virtues. So even today, our notions of how to a man ought to behave with a lady when there is romantic interest, what feelings he ought to amplify within, the ennobling qualities of romantic love within a man, these things are still following the innovative ideas of Avicenna.

REFERENCES

- [1] G. E. Grunebaum, "Avicenna's Risala fi'l-isq and Courtly Love", J. Near Eastern Studies, 11(4), 1952