Research article

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Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d. 304/916–917) and *Malāmatī*-oriented Sufi Piety during the Third/Ninth Century

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the individual case of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 304/916–917), the early mystic of Rayy whose biography reflects the diversity and complexity of Sufi piety during the third/ninth century. The paper explores Ibn al-Ḥusayn's main spiritual worldviews manifested through a body of statements and letters or letter fragments attributed to him in the sources. His tense relationships with Sufi contemporaries, particularly those of the Baghdadi mainstream led by al-Junayd are also examined. It further investigates Ibn al-Ḥusayn's homoerotic statements and cross-checks them with a wide range of data that portray him as a mystic with a strong *malāmatī* temperament. By focusing on Ibn al-Ḥusayn's image in basic Sufi and non-Sufi biographies, the paper argues that what appears to be homoerotic implications in his provocative statements were a protest against the powerful and patronizing elite of Baghdadi Sufis.

Keywords: Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn, Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī, homoeroticism, *malāmatīyya*, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī

1 Introduction

In the course of the twentieth century, a debate was introduced by Anglo-American psychologists who claimed that the study of individual lives (idiographic studies) should be effectively used alongside the “nomothetic approach,” which is based on the search for general principles or laws arising from classes of individuals. The idiographic discipline is essentially concerned with the particular, individual case. It focuses more on individualized traits and the identification of central themes within an individual's life.¹ The descriptive study of individuals in their particular socio-historical context can enrich our knowledge of the early phase of Sufism, the ascetic-mystical trend of Islam, alongside the scholarly approach in which general or even abstract processes of development control the variability of cases and spiritual experiences.

The image of each Sufi personality of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries can be discerned through a set of statements, anecdotes, verses and extant treatises attributed to the Sufi personality in question. The images of these personalities are documented in the sources and portray different trends in early Sufi piety which developed out of the teachings of certain charismatic masters of Iraq and Nishapur. Referring to that early piety as a homogeneous system of mystical theories and renunciatory practices is very misleading. It is necessary to distinguish individuals as well as their different relationships and connections with the general Sufi ethos, that is the system of mystical ideas and ethical norms generated and propagated by those masters. This ethos had never been put on record. Its constituent elements were scattered throughout different Sufi writings particularly those with explicit ethical and manneristic agenda such as *ādāb* literature (rules of conduct). This common ethos

¹ On the idiographic-nomothetic debate in psychology, see e.g., Wm. McKinley Runyan, “Idiographic Goals and Methods in the Study of Lives,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 51, no. 3 (1983), 413–415.

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differentiated Sufis from other religious groups in the Islamic landscape and its boundaries were portrayed and asserted by the authors of the influential anthologies, biographies and textbooks of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries based on the heritage of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/910) and his milieu, who were known in the history of early medieval Islam as the *ṣūfiyya* of Baghdad.²

Al-Junayd and his circle of companions sought to build an overarching framework that could embed all appearances of individual identity. They did so by blurring their own distinctiveness and uniqueness as much as possible. Instead of ignoring and separating Sufi figures with different yet problematic agendas, al-Junayd preferred to adopt procedures of integration for the sake of protecting Sufism's reputation as an essential and indivisible stratum of Islam. If we follow al-Junayd's agenda throughout his teachings and writings, particularly his *Rasā'il* (letters), we come across his aspiration to establish a Sufi collective identity that combines different personalities with diverse modes of piety under one Baghdadi umbrella. One of the strategies undertaken by al-Junayd in order to do so was to provide some of the most extreme ecstatic statements of controversial figures like Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī (d. circa 261/875) and Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/945) with his own moderate interpretations that conceal all extreme conceptions of *unio mystica* and passionate states of annihilation. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's (d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-Luma'* (Book of Light Glimmerings on Sufism) preserves a great deal of al-Junayd's interpretations of selected ecstatic sayings of the two mystics as well as al-Sarrāj's own interpretations of others including Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. circa 320/932).³ Through such interpretations given by Baghdadi masters, the controversial behavior and statements of certain Sufis managed to gain moral and religious justification, even if these Sufis themselves were disinclined to agree with having intellectual discussions of their forms of behavior.

Another strategy was to compose short treatises on different mystical concepts and conditions, thereby promoting doctrinal bases for concepts such as *fanā'* (annihilation), *ghayba* (spiritual absence) and *tawḥīd* (unification).⁴ Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. circa 285/898) was a Sufi master who gained a position of fame and dignity among the Sufi community of Baghdad during the third/ninth century. Though little is known about his life, al-Kharrāz's legacy is impressive, consisting of sayings, poetry and short epistles. Some of the latter have reached us, while others have only been mentioned and quoted in early Sufi and non-Sufi literature.⁵ This interest in mystical terminology and conditions was enhanced in the course of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries by a massive interest in composing comprehensive Sufi textbooks and anthologies where the Sufi system of thought, renunciatory mode of life and unique collective identity were crystalized and celebrated by charismatic authors.⁶

The collective Sufi ethos that developed during the formative stage of Sufism, between the third/ninth and fifth/eleventh centuries, echoes what I call the community-based elements that existed in the life and teachings of the early masters. Nonetheless, this collective identity and the common and

2 On this group, see Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007), 1–37.

3 See, for example, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *Ṣuḥuf min kitāb al-Luma'*, ed. by A. J. Arberry (London, 1947), 12–16.

4 See al-Junayd, *Kitāb al-Fanā'* and *Kitāb al-Mithāq* in Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London, 1962), Arabic text, 31–43.

5 In addition to al-Kharrāz's *Kitāb al-Sidq* (*The Book of Truthfulness*), which was edited and translated by A. J. Arberry (The text appeared in Islamic Research Association Series No. 6, London 1937), five epistles were edited by Qāsim al-Sāmīrī and appeared under the title *Rasā'il al-Kharrāz*. In addition to these works, some scattered fragments of al-Kharrāz's *Qur'ānic* exegesis, central definitions of the components of the Sufi path, and its terminology are found in a variety of sources, including Sufi monographs and biographical works.

6 Examples of these are Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma'*, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *oeuvre* such as his *Ādāb al-ṣuḥba* (Companionship's Rules of Conduct) and *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Generations of Sufis), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-qulūb* (The Nourishment of Hearts), Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi's (d. ca. 380/990) *al-Ta'arruf li-madḥhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (The Book of Acquaintance with the Path of Sufis), Mutamlī Bukhārī's (d. 434/1043) *Sharḥ kitāb al-Ta'arruf* (The Commentary on *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*); Hujwīrī Jullābī's (d. ca. 465/1072) *Kashf al-mahjūb* (The Revelation of Realities Veiled), and Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *al-Risāla fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf* (The Epistle on the Science of Sufism).

unifying ethos did not necessarily mean that individual tendencies and distinctive spiritual world-views could not exist apart. The study of early Sufism could benefit from a further focus on various individual cases that reflect different modes of piety. Such a focus would be expected to reveal a more sophisticated portrait.

Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d. 304/916–917) was one of the famous Sufis of the third/ninth century. His biography in both Sufi and non-Sufi collections is full of interesting references that help us reconstruct some unknown aspects of early Sufi piety and the ways that piety integrated into broader Islamic thought and life. These references take two forms: the first is a body of sayings and anecdotes collected and preserved by the Sufi authors of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, while the second is a very limited corpus of letters and fragments of letters attributed to him in the biographical sources, such as Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* and the brief reference by al-Qushayrī in his *Risāla*. Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn’s piety was celebrated by the majority of early biographers including Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), who was known for his hostility and severe criticism of Sufi thoughts and practices.⁷ However, while Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s statements on spiritual sincerity and truthfulness (*ṣidq*) are frequently asserted in Sufi textbooks and manuals,⁸ his controversial references to his own homoerotic practices and the statements in which he asserts his impure repentance and weakness in behaving in a contradictory manner to his own teachings are still interesting and, therefore, deserve closer attention.

2 Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī’s life and relationships with his contemporaries

Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī is a distinguished figure in early Sufism with detailed biographical accounts by Sufi and non-Sufi biographers. His biography rests on four major pillars: his association with the renowned Egyptian mystic Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. circa 245/860), his commitment to a roving mode of life (*siyāḥa*) as a major renunciatory custom of his time,⁹ his tense relationships with the people of Rayy, and his correspondence with al-Junayd al-Baghdādī. Besides these accounts, some very early sources, such as those of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī (d. 378/988), refer to Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s provocative statements to his fellow men, according to which he advises them not to imitate his associating with beardless youths. I will refer to this controversial issue in the following discussion.

Yūsuf Ibn al-Ḥusayn was one of the most renowned Sufi masters of Rayy and the region of Jibāl in the north-west of Iṣfahān. He was a close companion of Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz and Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī.¹⁰ Biographers indicate that he also associated with Aḥmad ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī (d. 230/845), Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and others.¹¹ He traveled widely to Syria, Baghdad and Egypt.

7 A great part of Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Talbīs Iblīs* (*The Devil’s Deceptions*) is devoted to critical discussions of Sufi theories and practices. See Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, ed. by ‘Iṣām al-Ḥarastānī and Muḥammad al-Zughlī (Beirut, 1994), 211–509. Besides Ibn al-Jawzī, see the positive references to Ibn al-Ḥusayn in Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar fī khabar man ghabar*, ed. by Muḥammad Zaghlūl (Beirut, 2010), vol. 1, 147–148; Ibn al-‘Imād al-Ḥanbalī, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, ed. by Maḥmūd al-Arnā‘ūt (Damascus, 1986), vol. 4, 25.

8 See for example Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. by Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut, 1998), 151–153; Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā’*, ed. by Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut, 1997), vol. 10, 238–239.

9 On *siyāḥa* as a custom of roving in solitude without provisions undertaken by some early ascetics and Sufis, see A. Salamah-Qudsi, “Crossing the Desert: *Siyāḥa* and *Safar* as Key Concepts in Early Sufi Literature and Life,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2 (2013): 129–147.

10 See for example Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, vol. 10, 151; ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī Haravī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. by Akram Shifā’ī (Tehran, n.d.), 77.

Two anecdotes that frequently appear in the sources indicate that the great Egyptian master Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī might have had an ambivalent attitude towards Ibn al-Ḥusayn. According to the first anecdote, Ibn al-Ḥusayn went to Egypt to visit Dhū al-Nūn. When he entered Dhū al-Nūn's place, the latter did not like how Ibn al-Ḥusayn looked (*istabsha'a manẓarī* lit. "he considered my appearance as ugly") and did not show him signs of respect. Two days later, one theologian (*mutakallim*) came to debate Dhū al-Nūn on one theological issue and actually won the debate. Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn then took up the debate arguing with the man until he, Ibn al-Ḥusayn, was victorious. It was said, then, that Dhū al-Nūn apologized to Ibn al-Ḥusayn and started to venerate him.¹²

The second anecdote relates that Dhū al-Nūn was suspicious towards Ibn al-Ḥusayn who visited him to learn God's greatest name (*ism Allāh al-a'ẓam*).¹³ After one year of association, Ibn al-Ḥusayn asked Dhū al-Nūn to teach him the holy name. In answer, Dhū al-Nūn asked him to take a package to someone in Fustāṭ. Ibn al-Ḥusayn felt the package was very light and he decided to open it only to discover that it had nothing but a mouse! When he asked Dhū al-Nūn for an explanation, the latter said: "I entrusted you with a mouse; yet, you betrayed me. How could I entrust you with God's greatest name?"¹⁴

The first anecdote was narrated by Ibn al-Ḥusayn in the first person. He celebrates his seniority in theology over the Egyptian master. Even if both stories are not authentic in historical terms, they contribute to the image portrayed in the sources for Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn. Dhū al-Nūn's intention to set a trap for his disciple indicates to what extent the latter was seen as impatient and haughty.

Another piece of data provided by some sources sheds more light on the nature of the relationship Ibn al-Ḥusayn had with Dhū al-Nūn. It concerns the fundamental role the maternal uncle of Ibn al-Ḥusayn, 'Abd Allāh ibn Ḥāḍir, played. This man was a *ḥadīth* transmitter who came from Rayy and settled in Baghdad where he was associated with Dhū al-Nūn. Although he was considered to be a weak *ḥadīth* transmitter, he is also said to have transmitted from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.¹⁵ No biographical account dedicated to Ibn Ḥāḍir appears in early Sufi works.¹⁶ From a later period, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī includes a biographical account of Ibn Ḥāḍir where he details Ibn Ḥāḍir's relationship with his nephew. According to Jāmī, Ibn Ḥāḍir himself was one of Dhū al-Nūn's companions and even his most favorable one. It was said that when Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn returned to Baghdad from Egypt, his uncle asked him to throw all his collections of the sayings of the Egyptian master into the Tigris, and

11 See al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa-l-a'lām*, ed. by 'Umar al-Tadmurī (Beirut, 1993), vol. 23, 151.

12 See Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān fī tawārīkh al-a'yān*, ed. by Muḥammad Barakāt et al. (Damascus, 2013), vol. 15, 188; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Dimashq*, ed. by 'Amr al-'Amrawī (Damascus, 1995), vol. 74, 224; Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar tārīkh Dimashq*, ed. by Rūḥiyya al-Naḥḥās et al. (Damascus, 1984–1988), vol. 28, 73–74.

13 Knowing God's names and attributes is considered one of the most important constituents of the Islamic creed. The path towards gaining knowledge of "God's greatest name" is often attributed in Sufi literature to renowned Sufi figures such as Ibrāhīm ibn Adham [See Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (Cairo, 1940), 8] and Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī [See Michael Ebstein, "Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and Early Islamic Mysticism", *Arabica* 61 (2014), 593]. On God's names in the *Qur'ān*, see for example Wafa Abu Hatab, "God's Divine Names in the *Qur'ān*", in *Onomastics between Sacred and Profane*, ed. by Oliviu Felecan (Delaware, 2019), 3–14. On the concept of *ism Allāh al-a'ẓam*, see G. C. Anawati, "Le nom supreme de Dieu (*Ism Allāh al-A'ẓam*)", in *Atti del Terzo Congresso di Studi Arabi e Islamici* (Naples, 1967), 9–58.

14 The English translation is mine. The Arabic text reads: "i'tamantuka 'alā fa'ratin fa-khuntanī fiha, fa-kayfa a'-taminuka 'alā ismi Allāhi al-a'ẓam?". See e.g., Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān fī tawārīkh al-a'yān*, ed. by Muḥammad Barakāt et al. (Damascus, 2013), vol. 15, 188–189.

15 See Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ibn Abi Ya'la, *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, ed. by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Uthaymīn (Mecca, 1999), vol. 2, 25; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. by Bashshār Ma'rūf (Beirut, 2001), vol. 11, 112–113; 292–293.

16 Al-Sulamī refers to him once in the biography of Ibn al-Ḥusayn as a *ḥadīth* transmitter. See al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 152.

warned him of telling anyone in Rayy that he had been associated with Dhū al-Nūn.¹⁷ Assuming the authenticity of the anecdote, one sees that the uncle sought to undercut the strong relationship between his nephew and Dhū al-Nūn. Attempts to disparage influential Sufi masters as means to praise other, less famous figures were made by some early biographers. Both ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī Haravī (the fifth/eleventh century) and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (the eighth/fourteenth century), on certain occasions in their works, praise two members of the *ṣūfiyya* group of Baghdad in the third/ninth century, Ruwaym ibn Aḥmad (d. 303/915) and Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz, at the expense of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī who was their most charismatic leader and most outspoken representative.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, Ibn al-Ḥusayn was also one of the close companions of Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz who was most probably an introverted Baghdadi Sufi.¹⁹ Ibn al-Ḥusayn used to associate with al-Kharrāz and Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī during the custom of renunciatory roving (*siyāḥa*).²⁰ The latter was a widespread renunciatory custom among the early mystics of Islam, being a practical proof for their sincere dependence on God (*tawakkul*). It involved roving in solitude without provisions. It seems that the rigorous renunciatory custom of *siyāḥa* was the reason for Abū Turāb’s tragic death in the desert, according to sources.²¹

It is relevant to note that Abū Turāb was the master of the founders of the *malāmātiyya* school of Khurāsān.²² There are many references in early biographies and historiographies that imply that Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn was most likely influenced by particular *malāmātī* codes of behavior which angered the people of Rayy.²³ The frequency of the ideas of *ikhhlās* (sincerity) and *isqāt al-taṣannu‘* (leaving out artificiality) in the sayings attributed to him in the works of al-Sulamī, al-Iṣfahānī and al-Qushayrī strengthens this notion of *malāmātī* influence. One of the main *malāmātī* principles asserts that in order to avoid conceit, good deeds should be concealed.²⁴ This principle was thoroughly embraced in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī’s sayings and extant fragments of letters. According to some non-Sufi biographies, such as those of Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, the group of *zuhhād* of Rayy accused him of heresy (*zandaqa*). Al-Dhahabī quotes from al-Sulamī who says: “The people of Rayy abandoned Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn in spite of his wide knowledge and spiritual perfection and they, particularly the ascetics (*zuhhād*) among them, attacked and falsely accused him.”²⁵ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī reports that Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Darrāj left Baghdad to visit Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn in Rayy. When he entered the city and asked the people about Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s place, they wondered why he would want to visit a

17 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, ed. by Mahdī Pūr (Tehran, 1918), 98–99.

18 Both Anṣārī and Jāmī emphasize the higher spiritual rank of Ruwaym ibn Aḥmad compared with that of al-Junayd by indicating that one hair of Ruwaym is better than a hundred Junayds. See Anṣārī Haravī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*. Cf. A. Salamah-Qudsi, *Sufism and Early Islamic Piety* (Cambridge, 2019), 195. On other occasions, al-Junayd’s reasonability and “scientism” was criticized by both authors. See Anṣārī Haravī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 49; Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, 74.

19 See Salamah-Qudsi, *Sufism*, 156.

20 See e.g., Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 24.

21 See, for instance, Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar tārikh Dimashq*, vol. 17, 54; Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazrī, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārikh*, ed. by ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmuri (Beirut: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1997), vol. 6, 167.

22 See Abū al-‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī, *al-Malāmātiyya wa-l-ṣūfiyya wa-ahl al-futuwwa* (Beirut, 2015), 42. On *malāmātiyya* see also Christopher Melchert, “Sufis and Competing Movements in Nishapur,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 39:1, 237–247.

23 See Anṣārī Haravī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 77; al-Dhahabī, *Tārikh al-Islām*, vol. 23, 152; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārikh Baghdād*, vol. 16, 462. Cf. al-Junayd, *Rasā’il wa-rudūd*, in *Tāj al-‘arīfīn: Dirāsāt wa-nuṣūṣ manshūra wa-ghayr manshūra*, ed. by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo, 1987), 345.

24 On *malāmātiyya* and its principles and doctrinal system see Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, “Risālat al-malāmātiyya,” in Abū al-‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī, *al-Malāmātiyya wa-l-ṣūfiyya wa-ahl al-futuwwa* (Cairo, 1945), 71–120; Cf. F. de Jong, “Malāmātiyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, vol. VI, 223–224.

25 Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, ed. by Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ et al. (Beirut, 1985), vol. 14, 250. The English translation is mine. The Arabic text reads: “*hajarahu ahlu al-Rayy wa-takallamū fihī bi-l-qabā’ih, khuṣūṣan al-zuhhād*.”

heretic like Ibn al-Ḥusayn and endeavored to frustrate his desire. Al-Sarrāj's anecdote goes on to relate that al-Darrāj did not give up till he succeeded in reaching Ibn al-Ḥusayn. Al-Darrāj was then asked to recite poetry and Ibn al-Ḥusayn was overwhelmed by his recitation. At that point, Ibn al-Ḥusayn wept and told his visitor that his excitement in listening to the love verses was much greater than that he used to feel when reciting the *Qur'ān* itself.²⁶ This part was also mentioned by al-Dhahabī.²⁷

It is not clear, based on these references in the works of al-Sarrāj and al-Dhahabī, why the ascetics of Rayy were so hostile to Ibn al-Ḥusayn. Some of shocking codes of behavior played a certain role in his tense relationships not only with the men of Rayy but also with some renowned Sufi personalities, the most outspoken of which was al-Junayd. This could also explain the kind of disrespect shown to him by Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī. In Ibn Manẓūr's *Mukhtaṣar tārikh Dimashq*, Ibn al-Ḥusayn himself is quoted as saying that the Egyptian master ignored him the first time he saw him because of his ugly appearance (*"istabsha'a manẓarī wa-lam yaltafit ilayya"*).²⁸

In order to reconstruct the main components of Ibn al-Ḥusayn's character and renunciatory-mystical worldviews, it is important to examine the set of sayings and fragments attributed to him in Sufi and non-Sufi sources. The following are the key elements of his legacy which require a special focus: his provocative statements in relation to beautiful beardless youths, his confession that he himself was inclined to the commonly deemed custom of associating with beardless youths and his *malā-matī*-oriented teachings reflected in many of his sayings and letter fragments.

Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn's legacy consists of statements and letter fragments ascribed to him in works like those of al-Sarrāj, al-Khargūshī, Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī and, from the non-Sufi side, historians and authors such as al-Dhahabī, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Ibn 'Asākir, and Ibn al-Jawzī (see the Appendix). Of special significance are two letters that were wrongly attributed to al-Junayd by both Louis Massignon and A. J. Arberry²⁹ and are now considered to be response letters of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn to al-Junayd. These two letters are parts of the Istanbul Şehid Ali Paşa 1374 manuscript which includes al-Junayd's *Rasā'il* (letters) and treatises on different Sufi themes. The first letter appears at the very beginning of the manuscript.

Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, the editor of al-Junayd's letters and treatises, explains what motivated him to consider the two letters as response letters of Ibn al-Ḥusayn to al-Junayd rather than original letters of al-Junayd to Ibn al-Ḥusayn.³⁰ In addition to the tone, the discourse's structure, and the statements embedded therein, which correspond with statements attributed to Ibn al-Ḥusayn in *Hilyat al-awliyā'* and Qushayrī's *Risāla*,³¹ the word *jawāb* (response) appears at the top of the manuscript's first folio. The first response letter appears in MS. Şehid Ali Paşa, 1374, fols. 1a-1b (begins on line 9: *"bi-abī anta mā aqūlu"*);³² while the second appears in fols. 1b-3a (begins on line 10: *"katabta a'azzaka Allāh 'an satr Allāh wa-āfiyatihi"*).³³

26 See Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Luma' fī al-taṣawwuf*, ed. by R. A. Nicholson (Leiden, 1914), 291.

27 See *ibid.*, 249.

28 See Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar tārikh Dimashq*, vol. 28, 73. The English translation is mine.

29 See A. J. Arberry, "Junayd," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3 (1935), 499. It is here where Arberry relies on Massignon's analysis of the manuscript that includes al-Junayd's treatises and letters (*Rasā'il*); L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954), 273–279.

30 See Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Tāj al-ārifīn*, 347.

31 In the second letter, the following statement appears: *"lā adhāqaka Allāh ṭa'ma nafsika"* which is the same statement attributed to Ibn al-Ḥusayn as part of his letter to al-Junayd in al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* (see Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 24) and non-Sufi biographies and historiographies: al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 14, 249; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab*, vol. 4, 25.

32 Cf. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Tāj al-ārifīn*, 347–351.

33 See *ibid.*, 338–346.

Figure 1: MS. Şehid Ali Paşa 1374, fol. 1a

3 Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn's legacy

3.1 His exchange of correspondence with al-Junayd

Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn was one of the key figures to whom the great master of Baghdād, al-Junayd, addressed letters (*rasā'il*) as part of his attempt to establish contacts with Sufis in the eastern parts of the Muslim world (another was Yahyā ibn Mu'adh al-Rāzī, d. 258/872, an earlier personality of Rayy to whom al-Junayd addressed one of his letters). There was an exchange of correspondence between al-Junayd and Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn, according to various sources: Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma'*,³⁴ Abū

³⁴ See Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 239.

Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*,³⁵ and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī’s *Nafaḥāt al-uns*.³⁶ The above mentioned MS. of Şehid Ali Paşa is a prominent source for this exchange of correspondence.

The first editor of al-Junayd’s *Rasā’il*, Hassan Abdel-Kader, mentions the relationship between al-Junayd and Ibn al-Ḥusayn; however, he does not discuss the contents of this correspondence. It is most probable that the one who initiated this controversial correspondence was al-Junayd and that Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn’s letter, or even numerous letters to al-Junayd, came in response. At the end of al-Junayd’s letter, he clearly indicates that he initiated the correspondence: “*bada’tuka bi-kitābī*.”³⁷ In his initial letter, al-Junayd asserts the rarity of those who rightfully possess knowledge, in spite of the many who claim to possess such knowledge, and that “most people are ignorant [...] and lack special knowledge. For, alas, most men’s attention grips tight on the material world as they seek what their hands can hold.”³⁸ Al-Junayd addresses Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn in his letter several times using the phrase “O my brother” (*yā akhī*) and, in the last part of the letter, explains that which is expected from a truthful Sufi guide who has an influential position and great responsibilities over his disciples: “So – may God have mercy on you – turn to your disciples and give them your full attention, face them and concentrate on them, give them of the knowledge which has been vouchsafed to you, grant them your kindness, and privilege them with your guidance.”³⁹

The patronizing tone of al-Junayd is underlined in the latter part of the letter and continues until the final word, where al-Junayd urges his addressee to speak only after he, the addressee, is sure that he knows his listeners.⁴⁰

Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī reports that Ibn al-Ḥusayn wrote a letter in response to al-Junayd.⁴¹ Unfortunately, no original handwritten forms of Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s letters survive and no complete texts of these letters have been preserved in any of the available, published sources. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī preserves a very short passage that is a response letter.⁴² Furthermore, al-Qushayrī indicates that Ibn al-Ḥusayn wrote to al-Junayd and recommended that he keep himself away from “tasting his lower soul’s flavour” because “by doing so he would never obtain any goodness”.⁴³ This statement is a rebuke of the letter of al-Junayd, which is also found in the same response letter of Ibn al-Ḥusayn preserved in the aforementioned Şehid Ali Paşa manuscript.⁴⁴ The latter is one of two response letters that were preserved in the Süleymaniye Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi in Istanbul. Though there is no reference to the recipient’s name in either letter, a careful reading strengthens the assumption that the sender addressed these letters to one charismatic master whose initial critical letter was hurtful. The first scholar to publish these two letters was Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, in his 1978 edition of al-Junayd’s texts.⁴⁵

Ibn al-Ḥusayn opens one of these two letters by praising his addressee; however immediately afterwards he blames and criticizes the addressee for causing him pain: “you beat me and caused me pain” (*ḍarabta fa-awja’ta*). Further on in the letter, Ibn al-Ḥusayn defends himself against his implied portrayal by the addressee as an insolent (*‘atī*), ignorant (*jāhil*) little boy.⁴⁶ In order to refrain from any personalized antagonism, Ibn al-Ḥusayn speaks to his addressee using very brotherly structures

35 See Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, vol. 10, 240.

36 See Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, 97.

37 Al-Junayd, *Rasā’il*, in Abdel-Kader, *Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, Arabic text, 30; Cf. al-Sarrāj, *Luma’*, 239.

38 Al-Junayd, *Rasā’il*, Arabic text, 28–29; Abdel-Kader’s translation, 149.

39 Ibid, Arabic text, 29–30; Abdel-Kader’s translation, 150.

40 See ibid., Abdel-Kader’s translation, 151.

41 See Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, vol. 10, 240.

42 See ibid.

43 al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 24.

44 MS. Şehid Ali Paşa, 1374, fol. 2b.

45 See al-Junayd, *Rasā’il wa-rudūd*, 228–251.

46 See ibid., 339–340.

such as “O my brother and delight of my eye” (*akhī wa-qurraṭ ‘aynī*), “my dear” (*‘azīzī*) and “my beloved” (*ḥabībī*). On other occasions where the letter is mentioned, Ibn al-Ḥusayn goes on to assert that the addressee had well-meaning intentions in giving him advice on how to relate to people and how to treat his own disciples. The comparison between the aforementioned letter of al-Junayd and this response letter of Ibn al-Ḥusayn is very interesting. Al-Junayd’s reference to the way his addressee needs to treat his companions corresponds with the following reference of Ibn al-Ḥusayn on a similar theme:

*wa-dhakarta yā ‘azīzī annahu shara‘at laka ilayya ḥājatun ammaltanī lahā wa-hiya an ajtaniba mu-jālasata ghayri abnā‘i jinsī, wa-dhakarta, ḥāṭaka Allāhu kalāman hādhā ma‘nāhu. fa-laqaḍ rafaqta wa-talaṭṭafta.*⁴⁷

Oh my dear. You mentioned that what motivated you to write to me was the need you felt to urge me to avoid associating with people who are not of my own kind. You sought to express this idea and, thereby, you chose to do that gently and leniently.⁴⁸

In spite of the implicit defensive tone in the first part of the letter, Ibn al-Ḥusayn does not hesitate to emphasize his inferior position due to his own ignorance of his duties as a Sufi master. The text is fraught with apologies and self-blame that keep reminding us of the impact of the *malāmātiyya* on him, even though he was not mentioned in any of the sources as being among the most outspoken leaders of *malāmātiyya*. Ibn al-Ḥusayn points to a situation implying a clear paradox in which some *malāmātī* figures used to boast of their ability to self-blame. Ibn al-Ḥusayn blames himself for acting in a way that did not conform with the ethical system presented by his addressee in his initial letter; however, he still does not seek to receive any public praise for this self-blame. He writes: “I seek refuge with God for being adorned with self-blame” (*a‘ūdhu bi-llāhi min al-tazayyuni bi-lawmi al-nafs*).⁴⁹ He insists that his addressee’s requirements were completely sincere and that he himself does not deserve the title “one of the most pious at his age,” which was originally mentioned by his addressee in the former letter.⁵⁰ Ibn al-Ḥusayn presents very sophisticated *malāmātī* teachings here. To avoid self-conceit, one needs to conceal good deeds. For him, one needs also to conceal self-blame itself, which is considered a good deed. When it is concealed, the mystic should not feel any satisfaction with the very act of concealing. A satisfaction of this type might be another trigger for self-conceit.

The exchange of letters between Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn and al-Junayd al-Baghdādī alone cannot provide any clear reference to the actual nature of the relationship between them. However, if one takes into account the structures of expression, the tone of discourse, and the use of particular terminology including metaphors and pronouns, one can glean certain aspects of that relationship, especially when cross-checked with further pieces of data in other sources. For instance, when Ibn al-Ḥusayn refers to his addressee using the phrase *zayyantānī bi-kitābika* (you adorned me with your letter), he does so immediately after criticizing self-conceit and the act of “being adorned (*tazayyun*) with self-blame.”⁵¹ Is it possible then to assume that this usage implies Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s criticism of his addressee’s arrogance and tendency of “showing off” by initiating this letter in addition to other letters addressed to many other figures of his time. Ibn al-Ḥusayn, rather, writes that, if he could enjoy a situation of sobriety like his addressee, he would completely benefit from the instructions and advice provided in his former letter to him. Unfortunately, however, sobriety is not part of his makeup. After praising his addressee for being the undisputed leader of the wise, Ibn al-Ḥusayn leaves us a very in-

47 Ibid. 342.

48 The English translation is mine.

49 Ibid., 345.

50 Junayd, *Rasā’il*, Arabic text, 29; Abdel-Kader’s translation, 150.

51 See *ibid.*, 345.

teresting passage that might shed light on some of the circumstances of writing the letter. This passage reads:

*wa-lam ashukka, a‘azzaka Allāh, anna ba‘da man ghashiyaka min nāḥiyatinā min al-nussāki wa-l-mā’ilina ilā al-taqallul istazādūnā, wa-la-‘amrī anā fī mawḍi‘i al-mustazād?*⁵²

I had no doubt that some of the recluses (*nussāk*) and those who tend to renunciation who visited you from my region asked me to step up. By my life! Am I able to be in the position of the one who is urged to step up?⁵³

The verb *istazādūnā* in the text carries the meaning of “being asked to augment or to step up something.” Ibn al-Ḥusayn refers to the controversy that he had been involved in with a group of ascetics in his homeland Rayy. These ascetics could not bear Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s *malāmatī* behavior, according to which he never publicly demonstrated his renunciatory exercises and austerities. He goes on to write that it is impossible to satisfy everyone and that the best thing to do is to purify one’s inner truth so that God, in response, will purify his relationships with everyone.⁵⁴

The second letter that we have from Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn was published by Muṣṭafā, while some of its passages appear in both al-Sulamī’s *Ṭabaqāt* and Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*.⁵⁵ This letter is shorter than the first, and its language is more vague. Ibn al-Ḥusayn attempts to defend himself against an implied accusation of practicing intoxication and spiritual insanity and letting these states dominate his own language and ecstatic statements. In this letter, he writes: “Oh my dear. You asked me to avoid writing to you in irrational language (*hadhayān*) as well as to avoid the talk of (both) the insane (*kalām al-ma’tūh*) and the one who suffers from pleurisy (*mubarsam*).”⁵⁶ In his letters, al-Junayd frequently calls on his addressees to be examples to their disciples.⁵⁷ This is a very common theme in his *Rasā’il* as well as the numerous passages attributed to him in the general biographies and historiographies of early medieval Islam.⁵⁸

Al-Sarrāj’s *Kitāb al-Luma’* is the earliest encyclopedic manual for studying Sufism. In order to reconstruct the image of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī as conceived by the fourth/tenth century authors, coupled with how his image and other early personalities’ images were all integrated into a broader portrait of Sufi piety, we need to follow the references to him/them in early Sufi textbooks and anthologies. These references include quotations, statements, anecdotes and sometimes even poetry attributed to them. In the case of Ibn al-Ḥusayn, he was referred to nineteen times in the *Kitāb al-Luma’*.⁵⁹ Six of those times, he is mentioned with Dhū al-Nūn. Quotations from him relate to key Sufi terms and conceptions such as oneness (*tawḥīd*), poverty (*faqr*), companionship (*ṣuḥba*), and truthfulness (*ṣidq*). On one occasion, Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn is quoted as having addressed his companions with a very daring piece of counsel concerning the controversial custom of companionship with youth in early Sufism. It was reported that he said: “imitate every act you see me doing except in two things: do not incur debts in your relationship with God, and do not hold company with youths (*lā tastadīnū ‘alā Allāh wa-lā taṣḥabū al-murdān*).”⁶⁰ As will be demonstrated later in this paper, this is not the sole controversial statement attributed to Ibn al-Ḥusayn.

Truthfulness, according to Ibn al-Ḥusayn, is based on one’s tendency for seclusion and a full integration between one’s inner and external selves. This can be attained only through controlling one’s

52 Ibid., 346.

53 The English translation is mine.

54 Ibid. Cf. MS. Şehid Ali Paşa, 1374, fol. 3a.

55 See Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, vol. 10, 240; al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 153.

56 Al-Junayd, *Rasā’il wa-rudūd*, 349–350.

57 See Junayd, *Rasā’il*, Arabic text, 29.

58 See, for example, Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, vol. 10, 260.

59 See al-Sarrāj, *Luma’*, 28, 30, 108, 178, 198, 207, 216, 220, 226, 232, 236, 237, 239, 246, 255, 258, 263, 291, 363.

60 al-Sarrāj, *Luma’*, 264.

lower soul, devoting oneself totally to God's will, and ignoring people.⁶¹ Self-criticism was for the most part one of the main characteristics of Ibn al-Ḥusayn. He confesses his own inclination to worldly desires, or what he himself calls the "unacceptable attributes of which I am not satisfied,"⁶² which confirm again his *malāmatī* temperament. Furthermore, his references to those who are in fact opponents and who cannot be entrusted with the pure souls of their companions (*aḍḍād*)⁶³ leave us with the impression that Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn had problematic relationships with some of his contemporaries, most probably due to extreme *malāmatī*-based behavior, ecstatic statements or what appear to be homoerotic expressions.

It should be noted that male attraction to youths was a common theme in the writings of Muslim moralists and jurists in the later Abbasid era. In the *Qur'ān*, homosexual acts are clearly condemned. During the first centuries of Islam, an increasing number of *ḥadīth* traditions were attributed to the Prophet that emphasize the punishment that awaits sinners.⁶⁴ Some of the *ḥadīth* traditions emerged in response to the appearance of pederasty as an open theme in early Abbasid poetry. The actual cases of sodomy and pederasty were not as popular as the literary theme itself.⁶⁵ While medieval Islamic literature seemed to have a free hand in praising the high ideal of masculine beauty, homosexuality was excluded from the general Islamic social and religious norms. Recent scholarship has differentiated between sodomy, which was harshly condemned in Islamic law, and homoerotic sentiment, which was considered very common.⁶⁶ This differentiation explains why pederasty and homoerotic sentiments towards boys could not harm the social status of the adult man.⁶⁷

3.2 Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn's provocative statements on association with youths and his *malāmatī* temperament

In his biographical account in al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī is reported to have said to his disciples: "Copy whatever you see me do except associating with youth, for it is the most terrible of temptations" (*kullamā ra'aytumūnī af'aluhu fa-if'aluhu illā ṣuḥbat al-aḥdāth fa-innahu aftanu al-fitan*).⁶⁸ This saying echoes the aforementioned quotation provided in al-Sarrāj's work. In the same account in al-Sulamī's work, Ibn al-Ḥusayn is quoted to have said:

‘āhadtu rabbi akthara min mi’ati marra allā aṣḥaba hadathan, fa-fasakhahā ‘alayya ḥusnu al-khudūdi wa-qawāmu al-quḍūdi wa-ghunju al-‘uyūn wa-mā sa’alanī Allāhu ta‘ālā ma‘ahum ‘an ma’ṣiya.⁶⁹

More than a hundred times have I vowed to my Lord that I would associate with no lad, but the beauty of the cheek, the erectness of the stature, and the languishing of the eyes have caused me to break my vow. Yet God has never had to question me concerning any offence committed with them.⁷⁰

Al-Sulamī was the only biographer to mention this quotation. Other biographers quoted another statement in which Ibn al-Ḥusayn warns his contemporary Sufis of three illnesses (*āfāt*), according to

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, 216.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 236.

⁶³ See the following discussion.

⁶⁴ See Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford, 2010), 73–127.

⁶⁵ See James Bellamy, "Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. by Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot (Malibu, California, 1979), 40.

⁶⁶ See Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago, 2005), 6; 79.

⁶⁷ See Sabine Schmidtke, "Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Islam: A Review Article," *Bulletin of the School of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 62,2 (1999), 260–261.

⁶⁸ al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 154. The English translation is based on Margoliouth's translation of Ibn al-Jawzī's *Talbīs Iblīs* (see Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs (Delusion of the Devil)*, trans. by David Samuel Margoliouth (New Delhi, 2011), vol. 2, 82.

⁶⁹ Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 179.

⁷⁰ The English translation is mine.

him, common among Sufis: association with youths (*suḥbat al-aḥdāth*), association with those who are hostile to Sufis (*addād*, “opponents”), and the acceptance of support from women (*qubūl arfāq al-niswān*).⁷¹ Sufis of the early phase used to warn their disciples about those incapable of understanding Sufi themes. In light of the famous inquisition of the Sufis of Baghdad (*miḥnat al-ṣūfiyya*) in the late third/ninth century, many of the renowned masters of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries called for avoiding speaking about Sufi ideas in public out of fear of persecution. This inquisition was initiated by the traditionalist preacher Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888), who was raised in an environment that had both gender mixing and mingling between adult males and male adolescents at Sufi gatherings practiced by Sufis of his time.⁷² The biography of another Sufi figure of that time, Sumnūn ibn Ḥamza (d. 298/910–911), also cites the allegations of sexual misconduct by Ghulām Khalīl against the Sufis of Baghdad. It was reported that one woman used to attend the preaching sessions of Sumnūn. After the latter refused to marry her, she went to Ghulām Khalīl and accused Sumnūn of rape.⁷³

The controversial practice of association with youths was first mentioned in the Sufi textbooks and anthologies of the fourth/tenth century. Quotations from Sufi masters who warn their contemporaries against falling prey to this illness are frequently provided.⁷⁴ This practice was usually engaged in by gazing at beardless boys and youths and it was widely condemned. Beside the fear of pederasty and sodomy, gazing at beardless boys (*murd*, *murdān*) and associating with them could bring one to *fitna*, a temptation to commit prohibited sexual acts. It is interesting to note that the debate over these practices and the tendency of anti-Sufis to take advantage of them in their attack on Sufis did not happen during the early period of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn. While quoting the aforementioned statements of Ibn al-Ḥusayn, al-Sulamī was certain that, by doing so, he was celebrating Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s piety and ability to protect himself from sliding into errors and sins while being in the company of youths. It is most probable that for al-Sulamī, what we consider to be provocative statements of Ibn al-Ḥusayn are nothing but proof of his ability to fight against his lower soul. One could also suggest that al-Sulamī wanted to emphasize Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s sincerity in guiding his disciples even at the expense of putting himself at shame.

Critical references to Sufis’ so-called inclination to the custom were witnessed in the writings of later jurists and *ḥadīth* scholars. In his *Aḥkām al-naẓar ilā al-muḥarramāt*, Abū Bakr al-‘Āmirī (d. 530/1136) surveys the juridical provisions against gazing at the forbidden, and criticizes those who allowed themselves to gaze at both women and *murdān* claiming that they are protected from sin.⁷⁵ Furthermore al-‘Āmirī warns Muslim men of authority and rulers against allowing those who are false ascetics and Sufis to deceive youths and women by associating with them in *samā’* gatherings. He, furthermore, indicates that those who claim to be completely protected from temptation are like one who drinks wine and claims that wine has no negative effect on him.⁷⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī criticizes Muḥammad ibn Ṭāhir Ibn al-Qaysarānī, a *ḥadīth* scholar of the *ẓāhirī* school of law, for his permission to gaze at *murdān* and to associate with them under certain conditions.⁷⁷

71 See Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 24. In some general historiographies, the third illness appears as *rifqat al-niswān* which could also indicate “associating with women.” (See Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh Dimashq*, vol. 74, 222; also Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar tārikh Dimashq*, vol. 28, 72).

72 See Karamustafa, *Sufism: the Formative Period*, 23.

73 See ‘Alī Ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī l-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, translated by R. A. Nicholson (London, 1976), 137.

74 This was the case in al-Qushayrī’s *Risāla* where al-Qushayrī considers this practice as proof of God’s willingness to humiliate the mystic. (al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 201). Jullābī Hujwīrī severely criticizes the act of gazing at youths and considers the one who thinks it is allowable as unbeliever (*kāfir*). See Jullābī Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, 416.

75 See Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb al-‘Āmirī, *Aḥkām al-naẓar ilā al-muḥarramāt wa-mā fihi min al-khaṭar wa-l-āfāt*, ed. by Mashhūr Salmān (Beirut, 1995), 33; 42.

76 See *ibid.*, 81–83.

It was Ibn al-Jawzī also who referred to the problematic behavior of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn in the detailed chapter devoted to criticizing the Sufi custom of *ṣuḥbat al-aḥdāth* in his *Talbīs*. Ibn al-Jawzī classifies the Sufis who engaged in this custom into seven categories, and the case of Ibn al-Ḥusayn appears in two of them: in the fifth category, of “those who associate with youths while protecting themselves from committing sins as a means to struggle against their lower souls,” and in the seventh category, of those “who are aware that it is unlawful to associate with or gaze at the beardless, only that they are unable to abstain therefrom.”⁷⁸ In his discussion of the seventh category, Ibn al-Jawzī first quotes two statements attributed to Ibn al-Ḥusayn, that reveal his so-called personal inclination to youth, in addition to three verses cited by the Abbasid poet Ṣarīʿ al-Ghawānī (d. 208/823) that Ibn al-Ḥusayn was said to have relayed in the biographical work of al-Sulamī. Afterwards, Ibn al-Jawzī explicitly accuses Ibn al-Ḥusayn of ignorance (*jahl*), since “he [Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn] foolishly supposes that only a guilty act is a sin. Had he possessed any knowledge he would have known that associating with them and gazing at them are also sinful.”⁷⁹ In his biographical works, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* and *al-Muntaẓam*, on the other hand, Ibn al-Jawzī ignores Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s references to association with youths and presents a very pious portrait of him.⁸⁰ Both Ibn al-Jawzī and other *ḥanbalite* biographers such as Abū Yaʿlā, the author of *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, were eager to celebrate Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s religious position in spite of his sayings for two main reasons: the first is that he was in fact guiltless of sliding into adultery, and the other is that Ibn al-Ḥusayn was reported to have sought to learn *ḥadīth* under Ibn Ḥanbal.⁸¹

Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s association with youths, as well as his controversial statement in which he declares his inclination towards the beauty of youths, could serve as evidence for his well-grounded commitment to *malāmatiyya*, even though none of the sources pay any attention to the role he might have played in the development of this significant trend in the history of early Islamic piety. Furthermore, early Sufi literature leaves no evidence concerning the actual approach of Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s contemporaries towards his controversial statements. When we cross-check the available data, we find that many elements in his character imply a *malāmatī* temperament that could explain the hostility of the people of Rayy as well as the criticism addressed to him by al-Junayd in an exchange of letters. On one occasion in Ibn ʿAsākir’s historiography, someone asked Ibn al-Ḥusayn: “*law tajammalta qalilan*” (why haven’t you adorned yourself?). This might imply controversial behavior that motivated that person to ask him to be committed to more socially and religiously acceptable behavior. Ibn al-Ḥusayn answered: “People do not cease visiting my place with their jugs seeking to receive my blessings and prayers, and you call me to adorn myself?”⁸²

The controversial behavior of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn and his provocative statements were most likely the reasons for the hostility and criticism against him. The homoerotic implications in these statements, even if unaccompanied by any illegal sexual behavior, might have challenged the Baghdad-oriented Sufi piety led by al-Junayd and his milieu. It is true that medieval sources present us with a society in which homoerotic relationships were widely practiced by many, including those in key intellectual positions; however, we should keep in mind two significant remarks. The first is that the pervasive homoerotic notions in Arabic sources are not always proof of actual sexual mores, and the second is that homoerotic notions in early Abbasid literature were sometimes mere literary ex-

77 Ibn al-Jawzī attributes to Ibn al-Qaysarānī a treatise in which the latter permits the controversial customs. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 217. Al-Dhahabī follows Ibn al-Jawzī in this regard. See al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 19, 364.

78 See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 351.

79 Ibid., 357.

80 See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā and Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut, n.d.), vol. 13, 171–172.

81 See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrikh Baghdad*, vol. 16, 462; Muḥammad ibn Abi Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 2, 561–564.

82 See Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrikh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 74, 227.

pressions of satire and criticism rather than expressions of actual tendencies and behaviors. The latter was argued by J. W. Wright Jr., who draws upon Jaroslav Stetkevych's discussion of paradox and Arabic hermeneutical terminology to suggest that homoerotic imagery in early Abbasid poetry was, in many cases, the literary expression of social, political and even religious protest.⁸³

A central Sufi figure like Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn, who succeeded in gaining a broad recognition from the most renowned theoreticians and authors on both the Sufi and non-Sufi sides could not have raised any doubts concerning his commitment to Islamic mores and sexual chastity. His own references to associating with youths emphasize his modesty and abstinence from sliding into any illegal sexual practices. He asserted the essential difference between the beginner Sufi, whose spiritual weakness exposes him to sexual seduction, and the Sufi whose success in attaining the highest levels in the Sufi path grants him spiritual immunity and the mental and physical capacities to protect himself and maintain chastity.⁸⁴ Lack of sexual desire in the presence of human beauty is very often asserted in *zuhd* literature of early medieval Islam and, under its impact, in early Sufi textbooks. One famous statement, which is frequently attributed to different Muslim scholars and ascetics in the works of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and al-Muʿāfā ibn ʿImrān (d. 185/801), reads: "I reached a state in which I do not differentiate between a woman or a wall" (*mā ubālī imra'atan ra'aytu am jidāran*).⁸⁵ Based on this idea, ascetics could encounter human beauty without being seduced by it. In the Christian monastic tradition of the Middle Ages, the quelling of sexual desire was one of the main battles ascetics were expected to undertake. It is there that the idea of a mystical, that is a miraculous and metaphorical rather than physical, castration appears. After this kind of castration, the saint would be able to meet devout matrons and widows, to put his hands on their heads and even to embrace them.⁸⁶

Ibn al-Ḥusayn's association with youths is a mirror both of his *malāmatī*-based piety and of the conception of the differentiation between the beginner Sufi and the one who has attained the final destination of the path and is therefore able to keep himself away from fornication, sodomy or pederasty. Furthermore, his provocative statements, as well as those of other controversial figures of early Sufism, can be seen as a protest against the widely accepted norms and ethics set and largely dominated by the elite of Baghdadi Sufis. The aforementioned references to the response letters to al-Junayd and the corpus of anecdotes and sayings attributed to him are filled with evidence that his individual case illuminates many hidden perspectives on the lives, practices and relationship networks of the early mystics of Islam.

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83 See J. W. Wright Jr., "Masculine Allusion and Structure of Satire in Early 'Abbāsid Poetry", in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. by J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York, 1997), the editors' introduction, xv.

84 See e.g., Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1967), vol. 5, 150–151.

85 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, ed. by ʿAbd al-Salām Shāhīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 180; al-Muʿāfā ibn ʿImrān al-Mawṣili, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, ed. ʿĀmir Ḥasan Ṣabrī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 1999), 312. The same statement is attributed to Maʾrūf al-Karkhī (d. ca. 200/750) in: Abū Nuʾaym al-Isfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, vol. 8, 366.

86 On quelling sexual desire in Christian monasticism of the Middle Ages, see e.g. Jacqueline Murray, "The Battle for Chastity: Miraculous Castration and the Quelling of Desire in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2019), 108.

Appendix

Sources that constitute the basis of the study of Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn's statements and letter fragments.

Author	Book's title	Edition	Sample references
Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī	<i>Kitāb al-Luma'</i>	Ed. by R.A. Nicholson (Leiden, 1914).	Statements: pp. 28; 30; 108; 178; 198; 207; 216; 220; 226; 232; 246; 255; 258; 263; 291; 363. Letter fragments: pp. 236; 237.
Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī	<i>Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya</i>	Ed. by Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998).	Statements: pp. 151–156.
Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī	<i>Ḥilyat al-awliyā'</i>	Ed. by Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997).	Statements: vol. 10, pp. 238–243. Letter fragments: vol. 10, p. 240.
Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī	<i>Ta'riḥ Baghdād</i>	Ed. by Bashshār Ma'rūf (Beirut, 2001).	Statements: vol. 16, pp. 462–466.
Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī	<i>Al-Risāla</i>	Cairo: al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1940.	Statements: p. 24. A letter fragment: p. 24.
Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī	<i>Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'</i>	Ed. by Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt et al. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1985).	Statements: vol. 14, pp. 249–250.
Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī	<i>al-'Ibar fī khabar man ghabar</i>	Ed. by Muḥammad Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2010).	Statements: vol. 1, 147–148.
Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī	<i>Tārīkh al-Islām</i>	Ed. by 'Umar al-Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1993).	Statements: vol. 23, pp. 151–154.
Ibn 'Asākir	<i>Tārīkh Dimashq</i>	Ed. by 'Amr al-'Amrawī (Damascus, 1995).	Statements: vol. 74, pp. 220–230.
Ibn Manẓūr	<i>Mukhtaṣar tārīkh Dimashq</i>	Ed. by Rūḥiyya al-Naḥḥās, Riyāḍ Murād and Muḥammad Muṭṭir (Damascus, 1984–1988)	Statements: vol. 28, pp. 71–78.
Ibn al-Jawzī	<i>Talbīs Iblīs</i>	Ed. by 'Iṣām al-Ḥarastānī and Muḥammad al-Zughlī (Beirut, 1994).	Statements: p. 351.
Ibn al-Jawzī	<i>al-Muntaẓam</i>	Ed. by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā and Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut, n.d.).	Statements: vol. 13, pp. 171–172.
Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī	<i>Mir'āt al-zamān</i>	Ed. by Muḥammad Barakāt et al. (Damascus, 2013).	Statements: vol. 15, 188–189.
'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī	<i>Nafahāt al-uns</i> ,	Ed. by Mahdī Pūr (Tehran, 1918).	Statements: pp. 97–99.