

25 July, 2022

Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies,
University of Toronto,
4 Bancroft Ave, Toronto, ON M5S 1C1

Dear Professor Tavakoli-Targhi,

My name is Abolfazl Moshiri, and I am applying for the postdoctoral fellowship position at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies. I received my PhD in November 2021 from the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto. My specialization is Persian mystical literature and intellectual history, with focus on medieval and early modern Sufi sources of the Persianate world.

Persian is my native language, and reading classical Persian, alongside Quranic and classical Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, has been part of my foundational academic training. For several years, I have worked with a wide range of medieval Persian and Ottoman manuscripts, lithographs and archival materials. Also, as a research assistant, I edited and translated ethical manuals as well as several medieval and modern gnostic Isma‘ili Shi‘a and Sufi treatises.

My former position as a research associate and senior content developer on the University of Toronto’s e-Campus digital humanities team involved working with a group of researchers under the supervision of Dr. Shafique Virani. The team was developing online interactive modules for various courses on Islam and Muslim civilization that will be offered across Ontario universities at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

I intend to publish my PhD thesis as a monograph. The tentative title of this monograph will be *The Devil’s Advocates: The Exoneration of Iblīs in Persian Mysticism*. This work explores the portrayal of Satan, known in Islam as Iblīs, not as a demonic figure, but as an ardent monotheist, a hidden saint, and an unapologetic lover of God, in pre-fourteenth-century Islamic sources, especially the mystical ones. In order to understand Iblīs, one must be aware of the accounts of him in the Qur’an. In Chapter 1, I therefore begin with an in-depth analysis of Quranic verses pertaining to Satan/Iblīs, and of Sunni, Shi‘a, and Sufi Quran commentaries on those verses. Since the Quranic accounts of Satan were heavily influenced by Jewish and Christian traditions, in Chapter 1, I also extensively investigate and incorporate the interreligious representation of Satan, especially in Jewish and Christian pseudepigrapha and apocryphal texts. Chapter 2 is dedicated to examining the portrayal of Iblīs in early Perso-Islamic sources, with emphasis on general histories, heresiologies, and the legends of the prophets. By examining how Iblīs is described in such texts, the chapter shows that the ambiguous or even positive portrayal of Iblīs was a widespread phenomenon, and not limited to mystical or Sufi sources.

In Chapter 3, I examine the portrayal of Iblīs in early Sufi sources, with the main focus being on the *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn* by the great mystic martyr Abū al-Mughīth Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), and on the two Persian-language works by the Persian Sufi martyr Abū al-Ma‘ālī ‘Ayn al-Quzāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), namely the *Tamhīdāt* and the *Nāma-hā*. In discussing these works, I first establish that the Iblisology of both of these mystics was influenced by a number of

individuals whom I dub “Iblisophile Sufis,” i.e., Sufis who to varying degrees had an affinity for or were intrigued by Iblīs and his story. I then interpret the Iblisology of al-Ḥallāj and ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt and demonstrate that the most poignant examples of Iblisophilic writing about Iblīs belong to these two authors. Furthermore, I demonstrate that ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt remains the best exegete of al-Ḥallāj’s often cryptic and esoteric Iblisology. In Chapter 4, I discuss the portrayal of Iblīs in Persian mystical poetry, with emphasis on the writings of two Sufi poets, Farīd al-Dīn Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ‘Aṭṭār Nīshābūrī (d. ca. 618/1221) and Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (d. 672/1273). For ‘Aṭṭār, I examine the portrayal of Iblīs in his four *maṣnavī* works, namely the *Ilāhī-nāma*, the *Asrār-nāma*, *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, and *Mūṣibat-nāma*. I also demonstrate that some of ‘Aṭṭār’s ideas about Iblīs represented his own exposition of ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt’s Iblisology. As for Rūmī, I discuss the influence of his teachers on his Iblisology and examine his *Dīvān* as well as his magnum opus, *Maṣnavī-yi ma‘navī*, to assess how he viewed Iblīs.

All the chapters of this monograph are interconnected, and the argument of each chapter is in large part the foundation for the framework of the next chapter. The story of Iblīs begins in the Qur’an (Chapter 1), but it appears that the Qur’anic account was too brief to satisfy the curiosity of medieval Persian authors. Therefore, they began to add many non-Qur’anic elements to the story of Iblīs. These stories are found in extra-Quranic sources, such as the legends of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*), general histories, books of heresiology, and other genres (Chapter 2). Based on these two types of sources—Qur’anic and extra-Qur’anic—the early Sufis began to esoterically interpret many elements of the story of Iblīs which were discussed in the above-mentioned genres, and added a third, esoteric, dimension to the account of Iblīs (Chapter 3). The Persian mystical poets then based their own expositions about Iblīs on these three genres, namely the Qur’an, extra-Qur’anic literature, and early Sufi works (Chapter 4).

I am confident that the postdoctoral fellowship at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies at my alma mater will provide me with excellent support to turn my thesis into a published book in a timely manner, and to conduct new research, especially on Iranian women poets, as described in my statement of research interest. Thank you, and I look forward to working alongside the researchers at the institute!

Sincerely,

Abolfazl Moshiri