

The Fabulous Gryphon

[R Hodges](#), Summer Solstice © 2022

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE) wrote over 600 books. At least half a dozen of them are seminal masterworks of Sufi thought and practice. He is revered by most Sufi orders as Shaykh al-Akbar, “Greatest Teacher”—the latinized term “Akbarian” is a standard scholarly reference to the works of Ibn Arabi. His *Anqâ’ mughrib* (العنقاء المَغْرِب), was translated by notable Sufi scholar Gerald Elmore as *The Fabulous Gryphon*. See <https://ibnarabisociety.org/alchemical-marriage-of-intellect-and-soul-gerald-elmore/>

The *Anqa* or Gryphon was a female bird with eagle head, lion body, and frequently canine ears (Elmore’s Introduction, p. 184).



Bronze Gryphon from Fatimid Egypt, 5th-11th century CE
Now in Campo Santo, Pisa

The word *mughrib* has a number of connotations: “strange, foreign”, “distant, remote”, “west,” “sunset.” It expresses the enigma as well as the unreality associated with the creature.

It seems related, archetypically and in some cases by provenance, to other birdlike symbols: the Sphinx; the Hellenic Gryphon and Phoenix; The Simurgh (“Thirty birds”) in the *Shah-Namah* of Firdawsi and Attar’s

Mantiq al-Tayr (Conference of the Birds, c. 1177); Dante's great Eagle; the Native American Thunderbird; Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent of Teotihuacan and of the later Aztecs and Mayans.



The Simurgh from Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr*

Strangely, nowhere in Ibn Arabi's *'Anqa' Mughrib* is there any hint as to precisely what the "Fabulous Gryphon" is meant to signify. But in his *al-Ittihad al-Kawni* (*The Universal Tree and the Four Birds*) he has the Anqa declare:

I am the one with no existent entity
the one who lacks no quality
"Fabulous Gryphon" is the name they give me
but the door of my existence is sealed shut

This passage is reminiscent of Aristotle's description of a *chimaera* as "a word which has a definite meaning but does not denote anything that exists in reality." Thus, in Muslim philosophy, the *'Anqa' Mughrib* became a stock emblem for the philosophical *materia prima*, the unformed.

Elmore asks: "Is Ibn al-'Arabi, who declared himself 'Seal of the Saints,' himself the Fabulous Gryphon?" When he says in his mystical love poem, the *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, (*Interpreter of Desires*) "My heart has become capable of every form" is he speaking of something like the pre-form nature of the *Anqa*?

Here is a poem from *The Fabulous Gryphon* (pp. 320-322):

I marveled at an Ocean without shore,
and at a Shore that did not have an ocean;
And at a Morning Light without darkness,
and at a Night that was without daybreak;
And then a Sphere with no locality
known to either fool or learned scholar;
And at an azure Dome raised over the earth,
circulating 'round its center -- Compulsion;
And at a rich Earth without o'er-arching vault
and no specific location, the Secret concealed

I courted a Secret which existence did not alter;
for it was asked of me: "Has Thought enchanted you?"
-- To which I replied: "I have no power over that;
I counsel you: Be patient with it while you live."
But, truly, if Thought becomes established
in my mind, the embers kindle into flame,
And everything is given up to fire
the like of which was never seen before!
And it was said to me: "He does not pluck a flower
who calls himself with courtesy 'Freeborn'."
"He who woos the belle femme in her boudoir, love-beguiled,
will never deem the bridal-price too high!"

I gave her the dower and was given her in marriage
throughout the night until the break of Dawn --
But other than Myself I did not find. -- Rather,
that One whom I married -- may his affair be known:
For added to the Sun's measure of light
are the radiant New Moon and shining Stars;
Like Time, dispraised - though the Prophet (Blessings on him!)
had once declared of your Lord that He is Time.

As is often the case, Ibn Arabi's meaning is a puzzle.

The first stanza is well-known: it is Ibn Arabi as master paradoxologist. The second stanza is remarkable in its evocation of a condition of mind that exceeds the ordinary by inner burning with spiritual fire. The concluding thoughts in the third stanza evokes the Sufi trope, familiar from Rumi's "wedding night," his memorial service celebrated every December 17th: "marrying" one's secret lover Infinity (God, Allah), which turns out to be oneself. A wedding which is consummated as death—of the body or of the ego. Here is the passage, slightly edited for focus:

I gave her the dower and was given her in marriage
But other than Myself I did not find—Rather,
that One whom I married:
Like Time, dispraised - though the Prophet
once declared that He [i.e. the secret lover] is Time.

The translator provides an important footnote to the word “dispraised” (now archaic: used by Shakespeare in the 17th century, its latest citation in the OED is from 1839):

Ka-l-dahri madhmumun [RH note: this Arabic phrase translated as “dispraised” is literally “like an evil old man”]: The sun, like time, was frequently reviled by Muslims on account of its having been worshipped by the pagan Arabs.

I detect here the “dispraising” of the ancient Iranian sun god Mithra, whose worship as God of Gods is ancestral to Zoroastrianism and to other traditions including the Abrahamic and the Brahmanic. Mithra was traditionally born of a virgin who was inseminated by a god. The Father was, strangely perhaps, Mithra himself! God, son of God. His birthday has been celebrated for over 5000 years on December 25.

Christianity, and also Islam, or so it seems from Elmore’s footnote, has long been embarrassed by its possible provenance in ancient cult and ”dispraised” Mithra so much that he is now almost forgotten.

In Mithraism and in Yezidi tradition *Zurvan*, primordial boundless time, is depicted as a lion-headed winged man (a Gryphon-related image) with the protocosmic snake Ouroboros wrapped around his body.



Ouroboros biting its own tail symbolizes the creation of the cosmos in an endlessly repeating cycle of self-eating. Does God sexually engendering himself as son carry a similar idea?

We note the seal of the Theosophical society which combines Ouroboros with other familiar cosmogonic symbols:



the inscription reads:
“There is no religion higher than Truth”

In the cosmogony given in Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales* (chapter XXXIX “Purgatory”) one might compare Gurdjieff’s “dispraising” of Time as the “Heropass,” the defeat of which was the motive for Creation. The cosmos was created by a process called “Trogoautoegocrat,” “self-eating ruler”—another Ouroborian image?