



AḲLĀQ AL-AŠRĀF

AḲLĀQ AL-AŠRĀF (“The ethics of the aristocracy”), a satire composed in 740/1340-41, the most important work of ‘Obayd Zākānī. This finely crafted amalgam of scholastic prose and ribald poetry is divided into seven chapters, each devoted to one or more of the traditional virtues: wisdom (*ḥekmat*); bravery (*šajā‘at*); decency (*‘effat*); justice (*‘adālat*); generosity (*saḳāwat*); forbearance (*ḥelm*) and fidelity (*wafā‘*); and pudency (*ḥayā‘*), honesty (*ṣedq*), mercy (*rahmat*), and compassion (*šafaqat*). Each chapter is divided into two parts; the first presents the rejected or outmoded view (*maḏhab-e mansūḳ*) while the second, invariably longer than the first, describes the accepted or contemporary view (*maḏhab-e moḳtār*). In the manner of Erasmus, Zākānī praises the wisdom of his contemporaries who have rejected old values like courage, justice, and generosity, and have attained success through assiduous cowardice, tyranny, and greed.

Both the content and the form of the essay suggest more serious works of Persian literature (see [Aḳlāq](#)). The title, for example, implicates Naṣīr-al-dīn Ṭūsī’s essay on the virtues of ascetics, *Awṣāf al-ašrāf* (see Šafā, *Adabiyāt* III/2, p. 1270). The content, however, replete with serious discussions of cardinal and other virtues and the nature of the human soul, most immediately mimics Ṭūsī’s famous *Aḳlāq-e Nāṣerī*. The sevenfold division of the essay perversely recalls Sa‘dī’s *Golestān*, which “like heaven falls into eight parts” (*Golestān*, *dībāča*). Zākānī creates a hell in heaven’s despite; in Islamic eschatology hell is sevenfold. Zākānī also mimics the style of the *Golestān* by using and in some cases abusing the entire range of belletristic devices employed by Sa‘dī. In the



chapter on decency he explains how the elite have understood the Koranic verse, “Know that the life of this world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry, and boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children” (*Qur’ān*, Pickthall tr., 57:20): “They have interpreted this to mean that it is impossible to achieve the purpose of the life of this world—play and idle talk—without indecency and forbidden means; accumulating wealth without harassing the people, tyranny, and slander . . . is likewise impossible.” In his chapter on honesty Zākānī places many of Sa’dī’s verse and prose aphorisms that advocate “expedient lies over provocative truths” in the mouths of the contemporary nobility. In addition to quoting familiar texts out of context, Zākānī is capable of manufacturing Hadiths to suit his ironic intent, as well as travesty one of the most fertile sources of citation in the entire classical Persian corpus, the *Šāh-nāma*. After reporting that the elite have demonstrated by their own example that high rank cannot be achieved without being bugged (i.e., without anal disintegrity), he cites the “historical” case of Rostam: “As soon as Tahmtan had united his belt. / Before Hōmān the noble hero knelt . . .” (*Aklāqal-ašrāf*: ‘effat).

Although most critics stress the essay’s social message, ignoring its obscene contents, the imaginative clash between its serious format and ribald contents has proved to be its most enduring feature, lending Zākānī’s condemnation a liveliness not found in other Persian complaint literature and placing him in the mainstream of the great satirical tradition in Western literature (on “The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire,” see M. C. Randolph, *Philological Quarterly* 21, 1941, pp. 368-90). The dialectic of Zākānī’s *madḥab-e mansūk* and *madḥab-e moḳtār* corresponds strikingly to the debate between Aristophanes’ naive “True Logic” and sophist “False Logic” (*Clouds*, 11.889-1106). For many, important parts of *Aklāqal-ašrāf* are shockingly obscene, unfit for translation (see for example Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* 3, p. 246), but the title reverberates in subsequent works of Persian literature. The *Dīvān* of Mawlānā Maḥmūd Neẓām Qārī (ed. M. Mošīrī, Tehran, 1359 Š./1980, p. 163) contains the dialectics of different weaving styles in a *madḥab-e mansūk*, *madḥab-e moḳtār* format. A later imitation, *Awṣāf al-awbāš* (“Qualities of the mob”) was written by Rafī‘ā Naqqāš Sepāhānī (M. T. Dānešpažūh, “Fehrest-e pāra-ī az ketābhā-ye aklāq va sīāsāt,” *Noskaha-ye kaṭṭī*, 1, 1339 Š./1960, pp. 211-27, no. 40).



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For a Marxist analysis see M. Radzhabov, *Mirovozzrenie Ubaida Zokoni*, Stalinabad, 1958, ch. 5.