



## EPIGRAM

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**EPIGRAM**, originally a Greek word meaning “inscription” and denoting in Western literatures a genre of short poems characterized by their contents and style rather than by a specific prosodic form. The term epigram is most often used for satire and light verse, but it has also been applied to aphoristic poetry (cf. the German equivalent *Sinngedicht*, literally “poetic maxim”). A proper epigram should be concise and pithy, with a display of wit which provides the poem with a pointed conclusion.

The term itself has no equivalent in Persian. It is not difficult, however, to find poems that can be categorized under this heading in the literature of the Persians, who have been called “a people much given to the epigram” (Arberry, p. 315). Generally speaking, the atomized structure characteristic of Persian classical poetry fostered the use of an epigrammatic style. A single line or a short sequence of lines often constitutes a largely independent unit. Such units encompass the statement of a single idea, one or two illustrations using imagery or proverbial sayings, and a concluding point (*nokta*). The beauty of some poetical forms is particularly suited to the epigram.

One of these forms is the quatrain (*robā'ī*), although not all quatrains fit the definition outlined above. Two of the four patterns recognized by Bausani (pp. 531-32) in early Persian quatrains are relevant to the epigrammatic style. The “triangular” structure is marked by a development of an initial idea, expressed in the first two lines (hemistiches) of the poem, and by the introduction of a second idea in the third line, which is usually unrhymed. The fourth line then returns to the original idea with a concluding statement, deriving its



poignancy from the latter idea. In the “quadratic” type of quatrain, an inversion of statements provides the required point to the epigram.

The “fragmentary” poems (*moqaṭṭa’āt*, *qeṭ’as*), which may be of varying lengths, are equally important forms of the epigram. Many of these poems are of a topical nature and may have initially been improvisations. However, the *qeṭ’a* was also widely used for gnomic verse with a more general aim. Ebn Yamīn (685-769 /1286-1368; q.v.), who chose it as his main form of expression, is one of the most important epigrammatists of Persian literature. His effective use of imagery, wit, and rhetorical finesse is exemplified in the following specimens:

*Do mošfeq-and ṭabīb o adīb bar sar-e to,*

*Negāh dār ba-’ezat del-e ṭabīb-o adīb.*

*Be-dard kasta šavī gar benālad az to ṭabīb,*

*Be-jahl basta šavī gar beranjad az to adīb.*

“Two special friends about thy person dwell, / Honor thy Doctor and thy Tutor well. / Thy Doctor hurt – thou canst recover never, / Thy Tutor wronged – thou art a fool for ever”).

*Mard bāyad ke dar jehān kod-rā*

*Meṭl-e šaṭranjbāz pendārad;*

*Harča yābad az ān-e kašm barad*

*V’ān-če dārad negāh mīdārad.*

“In this great world a man should think himself / As a chess player in a game of chess; / From his opponent taking all he can / And firmly holding all he doth possess” (Rodwell, pp. 5, 19).

Single lines, called *fards*, were occasionally written as very brief poetic



statements, especially by 17th- and 18th-century poets writing in the Indian or Safavid style (*sabk-e hendī*). They are, in fact, epigrams and sometimes were culled from already existing poems. A collection of *fards* assembled from the *gāzals* (q.v.) of Šāʿeb Tabrīzī (1010-88/1601-77) show the independence of the single line at its most extreme (see the section of *fards* in *Kollīyāt*, pp. 821-84 and Browne, *Lit. Hist. Pers.* IV, pp. 270-76). One of the best known of these epigrams is:

*Rīša-ye naḵl-e kohan-sāl az javān afzūntar-ast;*

*Bīštar del-bastagī bāšad ba-donyā pīr-rā*

“The roots of the aged palm tree exceed those of the young one; / the old have the greater attachment to the world” (Browne, IV, p. 270).

The delicate texture of prose and poetry in Saʿdī’s *Golestān* provides the best example of the use of the epigram within the framework of a narrative work. The poems Saʿdī inserted in his text included all three forms of the epigram just mentioned. The importance of the epigram to the Persian literary tradition is, no doubt, related to the important place of the gnomic genre. Part of didactical *maṭnawīs*, such as Sanāʾī’s *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa*, Neẓāmī’s *Maḵzan al-asrār*, ʿAṭṭār’s *Asrār-nāma*, and Rūmī’s *Maṭnawī-e maʿnawī*, were written in an essentially epigrammatic style.

The use of the epigram as an improvised poem is demonstrated in several of the anecdotes related by Neẓāmī-e ʿArūzī. The wit displayed in short poetical repartees saves a precarious situation (after Sultan Maḥmūd, in a fit of pious remorse, cuts the beautiful lock of Ayāz), helps a poet in his career (when Moʿezzī succeeds in attracting the attention of the Saljuq Sultan as the new moon rises and the month of fasting ends), and serves another poet in reciprocating a rival (i.e., ʿAmʿaq, who had called Rašīdī’s poetry “tasteless” [*bīnamak*]). The cathartic force Neẓāmī-e ʿArūzī gives to the epigram is shown in the case of the would-be ruler who was stimulated to conquer greatness when these words were spoken to him:

*Mehtarī gar be-kām-e šīr dar-ast,*



Šow *kaṭar kon ze-kām-e šīr bejūy*.

“If power lies in the mouth of a lion, / go and take the risk: seek it from the lion’s mouth” (*Čahār maqāla*, respectively, pp. 55-57, 65-69, 73-75, 42).

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