



MOQTĀR-NĀMA

MOQTĀR-NĀMA, a wide-ranging collection of quatrains (2088 in number) attributed to the mystic poet Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār (q.v.; ca. 1145-46/1221). It is divided into fifty thematic chapters of differing length, preceded by an introduction in prose which sets out the motives and the method underlying the composition of the work (*Moqtār-nāma*, 1996, pp. 69-74; all subsequent references will be to this edition). The work marks an important landmark in the history of Persian *robā’i* and Sufi poetry. It is not clear why ‘Aṭṭār uses the term *moqtār* for the title of his collection. This title is generally translated as “The book of choice,” which may refer either to the selection made by the poet in putting together this compilation as a florilegium, or to the choices available to the reader, thanks to the thematic organization of the work.

The great German scholar Hellmut Ritter was the first to bring the importance of the *Moqtār-nāma* to the attention of Western readers (Ritter, 1938, pp. 151-57; Idem, 1955, p. 503; Idem, 1961, pp. 195-228). More recently, J. T. P. de Bruijn has drawn attention to this text in his introductory book on Sufi poetry, quoting various excerpts and commenting upon them, noting that ‘Aṭṭār’s poetic production is “more varied than is usually known to Western readers” (de Bruijn, pp. 21-3). And yet, the *Moqtār-nāma* has not received much attention in the standard works on literary history. A passing reference to the *Moqtār-nāma* as “a remarkable collection” appears in Jan Rypka’s *History of Iranian Literature* (p. 239). It also appears in a cursory manner in other literary histories (Bertel’s, p. 521; Arberry, p. 134). [Alessandro Bausani](#), however, deals with the book far more extensively (Bausani, pp. 574-76),



prompted perhaps by his own perennial interest in the *robāʿī* genre. As far as comprehensive literary histories in Persian and Urdu are concerned, the book is dealt with in a summary fashion: Ḍabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā includes the *Moqtār-nāma* in his list of ʿAṭṭār’s works, without delving into its structure and contents (Ṣafā, II, p. 862). Šebli Noʿmāni, in his *Šeʿr al-ʿajam*, does not provide a full descriptive list of ʿAṭṭār’s work and does not even mention the *Moqtār-nāma*. It must be added that even in Badiʿ-*al-Zamān* Foruzānfar’s detailed monograph on the life and works of the poet, *Moqtār-nāma* is not given an extensive account (Foruzānfar, pp. 85-6). The *Moqtār-nāma* is, however, treated with renewed interest in more recent studies on the history of the *robāʿī* genre, in particular by Sirus Šamisā (Šamisā, pp. 82-87 and *passim*).

After a long period of time when the authorship of the text of the quatrains and its prose introduction was taken for granted, interest in the *Moqtār-nāma* was rekindled when this assumption was questioned, thus resulting in a scholarly debate. While the most recent editor of the book, Moḥammad-Rezā Šafiʿi Kadkani, remains convinced of ʿAṭṭār’s authorship (*Moktār-nāma*, pp. 60-66), ʿAbd-al-Ḥooseyn Zarrinkub maintained that the *Moktār-nāma* belonged to a later period and could not be attributed to ʿAṭṭār (Zarrinkub, 1996, pp. 333-35; Idem, 1997, pp. 179-87; Idem, 1999, p. 13, 23, 62, 78 and *passim*). Šafiʿi Kadkani’s arguments appear to be better documented and more convincing and, in the absence of new elements it can be assumed that this work, despite all the unresolved textual questions, is by ʿAṭṭār (cf. also Mir Afzali, pp. 32-43; Šamisā, pp. 189-98). An unresolved question remains concerning the number of authentic quatrains in the text. The printed edition provides a supplement (*afzuda-hā*, in *Moktār-nāma*, pp. 347-72) that contains 191 quatrains registered in various manuscripts, but not in the Istanbul manuscript of 826 A.H. on which the printed text is based. In the opinion of Mir Afzali (p. 43), almost all these *robāʿī*s could be attributed to ʿAṭṭār, because they are consistent in style and have not been attributed to other authors. But the fact that they may be by ʿAṭṭār, as seems likely, does not imply that they were part of the original nucleus of the *Moqtār-nāma*.

In the *divāns* of most Persian poets, a section is usually allotted to their quatrains; but ʿAṭṭār is an exception. The figures that the poet himself gives us in the introduction show how, like all Persian mystic poets, ʿAṭṭār had a special preference for the *robāʿī* genre: “Bearing in mind the desire of our companions in religion, and as the quatrains that had been written totaled 6,000 verses, we purged around 1,000 verses that were not worthy of This World and we sent



them to the Other World—then, out of the approximately 5,000 remaining verses we picked this much that appears in this collection, organized in the present manner, and the rest we placed in the *Divān*. We gave this collection the title *Moktār-nāma* and I am confident in my supposition that no poet has ever succeeded in compiling a collection like this; for if he had, we would have heard about it” (*Moktār-nāma*, p. 71). The evident preference for the *robāʿī* genre is not surprising, while the presence of a preface in prose, the selection of the poems (from 6,000 to just over 2,000) and the division of the poems into single-theme chapters are all innovative phenomena in the context of the previous and contemporary literary tradition of the *robāʿī*. Furthermore, on two occasions in his introduction ‘Aṭṭār quotes all the poetic works that are generally attributed to him with some certainty: *Kosrow-nāma*—identified with the *Elāhi-nāma* according to Šafiʿī-Kadkani (*Moktār-nāma*, editor’s preface, pp. 38-44)—*Asrār-nāma*, *Ṭoyur-nāma*, *Mošibat-nāma* and the *Divān*, and it is probable that the *Moktār-nāma* is the last poetic text edited by him before his demise. This would therefore be a book composed at a time of full maturity, when compositions written during different moments of the poet’s life are brought together. He felt the need to collect them, choose from them, and to organize them into themes. This chronological point, while telling us nothing about the ‘history’ of the composition of the individual quatrains or chapters, is an important element as it implies that these texts were gathered and organized by the poet through meditated reflection, unaffected by the extemporaneity typical of this poetic genre.

The introduction in prose to the *Moktār-nāma* is divided into seven parts. The first part is the conventional invocation and praise of God. The second describes how the work came to be written, using the literary topos of prompting and encouragement from friends and confidants. The third section describes the methods chosen for the selection of the quatrains, apart from the more complex verses, which are discussed later. The fourth part describes the substance of the work: the poet highlights the spiritual meaning of the composition of the *Moktār-nāma*, its didactic-religious value and the personal experience behind it. The fifth part, one of the most interesting, strikes a cautionary note. Here ‘Aṭṭār advises his reader against two pitfalls: the first is presuming to have understood the verses that might well prove beyond the understanding of some of them; the second danger lies in failing to detect the metaphoric and symbolic value of some of the images in the quatrains. ‘Aṭṭār directly suggests, therefore, an allegoric reading of all the poems that draw on the erotic or Anacreontic imagination (in particular the last 20 chapters of the



collection). The sixth part of the introduction meets the classic canon of poetic boasting (*fakr*), where the poet eulogizes his own craftsmanship. The last section contains the chapter headings for the *Moktār-nāma*, specifying the theme of each chapter.

In Sufi communities, the practice of dividing quatrains according to their subject was perhaps widespread even during ‘Aṭṭār’s life and had, first and foremost, the practical aim of making it possible to recognize at once the material most suited for meetings of Sufi brotherhoods during which the quatrains were read out loud.

Apart from meeting the elementary criterion of a division into themes, a wider perspective underlies this organization of the *Divān*. The first three chapters contain invocations similar to those found in the opening sections of long narrative poems (praising God, glorifying the Prophet and the merits of his Companions); chapters 4 to 28 deal with the uniqueness of God, Sufi pantheism, annihilation, and mystic madness; chapters 29 to 39 cover the different aspects of the theme of love, describing the state of the lover, the behavior of the beloved, enumerating the parts of the beloved’s body, etc.; chapters 40 to 43 speak of the agonies suffered by the lover; the next 7 chapters are dedicated to subjects typical in lyrical poetry (blame and unbelief, wine, rose, dawn, moth and candle) while the last one ruminates on the poet’s own state.

In the *Moktār-nāma* a coherent group of mystical and religious subjects is outlined (search for union, sense of uniqueness, distancing from the world, annihilation, amazement, pain, awareness of death, etc.), and an equally rich group of themes typical of lyrical poetry of erotic inspiration adopted by mystical literature (the torment of love, impossible union, beauty of the loved one, stereotypes of the love story as weakness, crying, separation). It can therefore be said that in composing the *Moktār-nāma*, ‘Aṭṭār concludes his work of building the lexis of mystical poetry by providing an important *trait-d’union* between poetic works and the spiritual path of ascesis.



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