Published: February 22, 2016
Last Updated: September 28, 2018

QĀʾĀNI

QĀʾĀNI, pen name of Mirzā Ḥabib-Allāh Širāzi (b. Shiraz, 29 Šaʿbān 1223/20 October 1808; d. Rayy, 5 Šaʿbān/3 May 1270/1854; Figure 1), one of the most prominent poets of the Qajar era and a well-known practitioner of the Literary Return (*bāzgašt-e adabi*) style. A panegyrist who served many patrons, Qāʾāni was celebrated for the lyricism and melodiousness of his verses, but also heavily criticized for their lack of substance and exaggerated praise of unworthy patrons.

LIFE

Qāʾāni was the son of a minor poet from Shiraz, Mirzā Moḥammad ʿAli "Golšan." His father's death, when Qāʾāni was only eleven, caused the family to descend into such poverty that "of the luxuries of the world I had nothing except a straw mat and a loaf of bread" (Āryanpur, I, p. 93). Forced to fend for himself and having shown an early talent for poetry, he took his education into his own hands and entered a madrasa in Shiraz. There, by eulogizing the governor of Fārs in a few poems, Qāʾāni obtained a stipend sufficient for his basic wants. As he wrote later, "I applied myself so much to my studies that in two years I surpassed my peers to such an extent that everyone who witnessed my progress was amazed; and although I was ugly, I became beautiful in their eyes" (Āryanpur, I, p. 94). The poet's self-consciousness about his appearance, particularly his pockmarked face, was evidently much on his mind, for it is mentioned frequently in his poems (Maḥjub, p. 34).

Study in a number of fields and service to an ever more prominent series of

patrons were to characterize the remainder of the poet's professional life. Over the next few years, Qāʾāni delved into mathematics, prosody, and different branches of Islamic sciences while in Shiraz and Isfahan. He also continued to compose poetry and wrote commentaries on the *divān*s of Ḵāqāni and Anvari. In 1823, he came under the protection of the prince Ḥasan-ʿAli Mirzā Šojāʿ-al-Salṭana, a son of Fatḥ-ʿAli Shah, who had of late come to Shiraz. The prince rendered him many kindnesses, and when Šojāʿ-al-Salṭana was appointed to the governorship of Khorasan at the end of the same year, he took the young poet with him. Another account of the poet's biography has Qāʾāni and Šojāʿ-al-Salṭana meeting in Khorasan rather than Shiraz. However, as the poet himself remembered the meeting occurring in Shiraz, a meeting in Shiraz seems the likelier scenario. Qāʾāni settled in Mashhad, where he delved more deeply into the study of poetry and, finding "his luck strong, his purse fat, his riches many, his silver and gold enlarged, and his dirhams and dinars multiplied from ones to thousands," he spent a great deal of money collecting the divāns of the classical masters. It was during this period that the poet changed his pen name from Ḥabib to Qāʾāni in honor of the prince's son, Okotāy-Qāʾān (Āryanpur, I, p. 94).

Qāʾāni accompanied the prince to Yazd and Kerman and also traveled to Gilān, Māzandarān, and Azarbaijan, although the dates and circumstances of these journeys are unclear. At some point, apparently after losing his former patron, who had fallen out of favor with the king after making an unauthorized attack upon Yazd from Kerman, Qāʾāni gained access to the court of Fatḥ-ʿAli Shah, where he received a pension and the title "Spiritual Leader of the Poets" (*Mojtahed- al-Šoʿarā*). After that monarch's death, Qāʾāni joined the circle of poets in Tehran who celebrated the 1834 enthronement of Moḥammad Shah, receiving the title "Ḥassān of the Persians" (*Ḥassān-al-ʿAjam,* an allusion to Ḥassān b. Ṯābet, popularly regarded as the poet laureate of the Prophet Mohammad) from the new king. When Moḥammad Shah embarked on his 1837 Herat campaign against the Afghans, Qāʾāni was among his retinue. But the poet fell ill when the king's cavalcade arrived at Besṭām, and he received permission to return to Tehran. He later commemorated the campaign in a long *qaṣida* (Āryanpur, I, p. 95).

In 1843 or 1844, the poet returned to his hometown of Shiraz, apparently with the intent of settling there permanently. At first he enjoyed peace and tranquility, and found the leisure to add English to the other languages with which he was already conversant. But gradually a group of the city's poets

turned against him, and after the sympathetic ruler of the city, Ṣāḥeb-e Eḵtiyār, was replaced by Moʿtamed-al-Dawla Manučehr Khan Gorji, who had little feeling for poetry and delayed paying his salary, Qāʾāni saw no recourse but to return to Tehran. His return to the capital in 1846 coincided with the death of his friend, the poet Veṣāl-e Širāzi. He later satirized the people of Fārs in a *qeṭʿa*; (see below). He again won the friendship of powerful members of the court in Tehran, including the prince ʿAli-Qoli-Mirzā Eʿteżād-al-Salṭana, a great lover of poetry; Mahd-e ʿOlyā, mother of Nāṣer-al-Din, the crown prince; as well as the crown prince himself. After Nāṣer-al-Din was enthroned in 1848, he appointed Qāʾāni poet laureate. As official court poet, he was charged with composing topical panegyrics for ceremonial occasions (*qaṣāʾed-e salām*; Rypka, p. 329).

His tenure was both short and rocky. The poet ran afoul of Mirzā Taqi Khan Amir-e Kabir, Nāṣer al-Din's reform-minded chief minister. In 1849 the latter reduced Qāʾāni's salary and may even have threatened him with bastinado (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 23). The punishment apparently occurred after Qāʾāni recited a poem praising the newly appointed chief minister and criticizing his predecessor, Ḥāji Mirzā Āqāsi, upon whom he had previously bestowed the most adulatory of titles, including perfect man (*ensān-e kāmel*), the lord of two worlds (*ḵʷāja-ye du jahān*), the manifestation of divine essence (*maẓhar-e ḏāt-e bāri*), and the deliverer of the Creator's bounty to the people (*rasānanda-ye fayż-e ḵāleq be maḵluq*). It seems that Amir-e Kabir, who in any case had little liking for poetry, took umbrage at the poet's infidelity toward his former patron (Ādamiyat, p. 322). Family disputes, financial woes, melancholy, over-indulgence in alcohol as well as, apparently, opium had a disastrous effect on the poet's health, and he fell seriously ill in 1854. His friend Eʿteżād-al-Salṭana, who witnessed him in the throes of his penultimate illness, reported that the hallucinating poet addressed invisible figures in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, French, and English. He recovered, but not for long (Maḥjub, p. 35). At the final gathering attended by Qāʾāni, held to celebrate the birthday of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭaleb, the poet recited a *qaṣida* containing the following verse: "I see the joy of life in death of the body; destroy me with wine …" (Maḥjub, p. 35). Listeners rightly worried that the poet was foreshadowing his own imminent passing. After falling ill again, Qāʾāni died in 1854 and was buried in Rayy near the tomb of the twelfth century Qur'anic exegete Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi (Maḥjub, p. 35).

Qāʾāni married twice, both times with disastrous results. His son, Mirzā Moḥammad Ḥasan "Sāmāni," also became a court poet, and his poems are

often inserted in his father's *divān*. Qāʾāni evidently had several other children as well, for in one *qeṭʿa* he calls himself the provider for fourteen family members; and elsewhere, as many as thirty (Maḥjub, p. 9). The turbulence of his home life shows forth vividly in a long letter of supplication written to Nāṣer-al-Din Shah. In it, Qāʾāni implores the king for financial help and heaps execration upon his wives and mothers-in-law, who, he says, have stripped him of all possessions. The letter, which stands as a superb example of his prose, is quoted in full by Moḥammad-Jaʿfar Maḥjub in his introduction to Qāʾāni's *divān* (pp. 10-11).

Qāʾāni was remembered by friends as pleasure-loving, possessed of a prodigious memory, and so generous in distributing the vast sums of money that came into his hands that he was himself often left impoverished. He was also a great devotee of wine, and many of his poems are thought to have been composed in a state of drunkenness. Nevertheless, despite this inclination (or perhaps partly thanks to it), he was so prompt and proficient in composition that stories of his devising long and highly accomplished *qaṣidas* on the fly are legion (Maḥjub, pp. 33, 36-37, n. 2). Indeed, his enormous poetic output, given the brevity of his life and the melancholy that frequently afflicted him, is nothing short of astonishing.

WORKS

Although Qāʾāni was a prolific writer, only a fraction of his poetry survives, thanks to his lackadaisical attitude toward preserving his works. The 21,000 or 22,000 verses comprising the most complete edition of his *divān* may comprise only one-fifth of his total output; the rest has been lost. Notwithstanding these omissions the work is still celebrated in some circles, and has been published repeatedly in Iran and India. The best editions are those based on the manuscript copy compiled by Jalāl-al-Dawla, the Qajar prince and litterateur in 1857, four years after the poet's death, and known as the "Kalhor" manuscript copy after the calligrapher, Mirzā Moḥammad Reżā Kalhor, who transcribed it (online: see Qāʾāni, *Kolliyāt,* Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4). Along with the many *qaṣidas* for which Qāʾāni is best known, his *divān* also contains *mosammaṭs*, *tarjiʿ-bands*, *ḡazal*s, *maṯnavis*, *qeṭʿas*, and *robāʿis*. At least some of the missing poems are likely to have been additional *ḡazals*, since Qāʾāni reportedly threw many of these poems into the fire one cold winter night after a musician sang a *ḡazal* of Saʿdi and the drunken poet felt the deficiencies of his own verses in comparison with those of the master (Āryanpur, I, p. 98; Maḥjub, pp. 27-29).

In addition to poetry, Qāʾāni also wrote several prose works, although, like his poems, many of these have perished. The most famous extant work is *Parišān* (Distracted and disheveled), a collection of more than 100 stories, poems, and maxims, many of them bawdy or satirical, in prose interspersed with verse. Though the poet states in the introduction that the work was modeled after Saʿdi's *Golestān*, and many critics have accepted this assertion as fact, the scholar Natalia Tornesello convincingly demonstrates that the work bears much closer resemblance in both structure and content to the *Resāla-ye delgošā* of ʿObayd-e Zākāni, to the point that it repeats some stories almost verbatim (Tornesello, pp. 196-200). Along with mostly cynical counsels to kings and princes, the work presents accounts of the poet's own life, including descriptions of his father's death and his sojourn in Khorasan, and it is often mined for autobiographical material. The poet and scholar Moḥammad-Taqi Bahār, in his famous oeuvre on the evolution of Persian prose and stylistics, *Sabkšenāsi*, also speaks of treatises by Qāʾāni on geometry, magic, and divination which were in his personal collection (Bahār, III, p. 333). Qāʾāni is thought to have written many others which were never published, or whose existence remain unrecorded.

Critical reception. It is difficult to imagine a Persian poet whose writing has sparked as mixed a critical reception as that of Qāʾāni. The vitriolic attack on him by some near-contemporary critics is in sharp contrast to the enthusiastic praise of others, who placed him within the ranks of the greatest Persian poets. In many ways, these contradictory responses reveal more about the state of literary criticism in Iran in the 19th and early 20th centuries than they do about Qāʾāni himself. As intellectuals of that period began to assess poetry chiefly according its ability to reflect and affect social reform, Qāʾāni's seemingly slavish pandering to corrupt patrons formed a convenient target for their fire (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 32). For example, the politician and litterateur, ʿAli Dašti, vilified the poet for immersing himself "into a cesspool of flattery to the very top of his head" (Pārsinežād, p. 35); the playwright and social critic Mirza Fatḥ-ʿAli Āḵundzada called his *divān* "full of … nonsense" (Pārsinežād, pp. 33-34, n. 1); and even Yaḥyā Āryanpur, in his judicious and balanced account of the poet, points to some of his failings: "[i]n praising the least worthy men of the court, and even servants, he brings into play characteristics that no one had ever applied to them before"; and he accuses him of a lack of compassion toward the people of Iran and their sufferings (Āryanpur, I, p. 99). Critics likewise attacked Qāʾāni's inconstancy and fickleness toward his patrons. Edward G. Browne, for example, tartly noted his tendency to "flatter

great men while they are in power, and turn around and rend them as soon as they fall into disgrace" (Browne, IV, p. 329). Even when a scholar lauded Qāʾāni's fluency in one moment, he disparaged his meagerness of content in the next. Āryanpur, for example, writes that "notwithstanding [Qāʾāni's] power of expression and dexterity in description and metaphors and scene-setting, the majority of his *qaṣidas* are poor and insignificant with regard to subject matter" (I, p. 97).

Beyond his major sins, critics catalogued a host of minor transgressions. One is repetition: descriptions of wine, beautiful boys, the difficulties of travel, spring, fall, night and day appear in his verses with numbing regularity. As Maḥjub writes, "The beloved is always arriving tired from the road with a dusty face and disheveled hair. He pounds on the door. Qāʾāni opens it, embraces him warmly, seats him in the festivities, and serves him wine. The beloved then delivers the glad tidings of the arrival of such-and-such a commander or governor" (Maḥjub, p. 43). Another is carelessness, which resulted in errors in grammar, usage, and meter, as well as great inconsistency in the quality of his poetry. The sexual innuendo of many of his poems, as well as the coarseness of his language when speaking about wine-drinking or love-making, also drew disapproval.

Praise of the poet's works tended to center around the sweetness and lyricism of his language, the wide range of his vocabulary, and his inventiveness. Bahār, who defended him against the charges of servility by observing that currying favor with the powerful was simply the means by which poets earned their keep in that era, spoke of the freshness of Qāʾāni's style and regarded him as one of the greatest poets of his time (Bahār, 1958, III, p. 338). Bahār likewise maintained that Qāʾāni was responsible for the invention of a new style (*sabk-e Qāʾāni*) reflecting not only the influence of the Khorasani style, known for its dignity and strength, but also the *Erāqi* style, characterized by its subtlety and use of common expressions—a contention that others vigorously refuted (Āyanpur, I, p. 97).

Today, the question of whether Qāʾāni founded a new school no longer burns with the same relevance, and the accusation of pandering no longer delivers the same sting. Read without those screens, his *oeuvre* reveals many notable poems, some memorable for their explicit homoeroticism, others for their stylistic experimentation with diction, and still others for their apparently sincere devotion. One poem noteworthy for its sexual innuendo records Qāʾāni's coy refusal of a friend's advances (Browne, IV, pp. 329-30).

Although best known for his unctuous praise, the poet's use of invective bristles in a poem written in contempt of the people of Fārs, which begins, "Don't be surprised if I feel a stranger in Fārs / For in a string of donkey beads, I'm a pearl" (*gar dar diyār-e fārs ḡaribam ʿajab madār / k'andar darun-e rešte-ye ḵar mohra gowharam*). He complains that no one has invited him to dinner—"so afraid was he that I'd eat a morsel from his table" (*az bim-e ān gomān ke z'ḵʷān loqma'i ḵʷoram*)—and concludes with threats to satirize his oppressors to the king: "I'll brandish the dagger of the tongue against these few, / and fire will flame out like hell from my throat. / With such a dagger spreading fire on the sky, / you'll not see me worry about armor!" (*z'in čandtan-e goḏašta kešam ḵanjar-e zabān / v'āteš kešad zabāna ču duzaḵ ze ḥanjaram / bā ḵanjari čonān ke kešad šoʿla bar sepehr / parvā nabini az zereh o ḵud o meghfaram*; cited in Maḥjub, pp. 45-6.) Another *qeṭʿa* punctuating a bawdy story in *Parišān* satirizes desire thusly: "When a woman falls captive in the trap of lust, / An ass is better, in her eyes, than a peacock. / Likewise, in the eyes of a lustful man / A demon is equivalent to a celestial houri ...." (*čun zani dar dām-e šahvat šod asir / ḵar b'čašmaš beh ze ṭāvus-e nar ast / hamčonān dar čašm-e šahvat mard rā / div bā hur-e behešti hambar ast* ...) (Qāʾāni, 1959, p. 25).

Qāʾāni's innovative experiments with dialogue also bear mention. One well-known *qeṭʿa*, intended to be humorous, consists of a conversation between a boy and an old man, both afflicted with a stammer (Qāʾāni, 1957, pp. 971-72). An elegy written for the occasion of ʿAshura describes the death of the Imam Ḥosayn in a clipped and staccato conversation that effectively conveys the horror of the tragedy: "What rains down? Blood! Who? The Eye! How? Day and Night! Why?/From grief! What grief? The grief of the Monarch of Karbalá!" (*bārad če? ḵun! ke? dida, česān? ruz o šab, čerā?/az ḡam, kodām ḡam? ḡam-e solṭān-e karbalā*) The elegy continues in like vein, describing the vicious perpetrators of the deed and the woes of those who survived, and observing that neither pagan nor Magian nor Jew nor Hindu nor idolater would be capable of the harshness shown by Muslims to the descendants of the Prophet. It concludes with the poet imploring God for mercy on the Day of Judgment (Browne, IV, pp. 178-81).

Like Moḥtašam's elegy on the same topic (Browne, IV, pp. 172-77), the poem's emotional intensity is perhaps the reason for its abiding popularity; Annemarie Schimmel, for example, wrote of the lasting impression it made upon her (p. 29). In its plain-spoken rehearsal of answers to a series of rapid-fire questions, the poem stresses the unimaginable horror of the events

surrounding Ḥosayn's death and the pain and incredulity they occasion; it accurately conveys the "feelings a pious Muslim experiences when thinking of the martyrdom of the Prophet's beloved grandson at the hands of the Umayyad troops" (Schimmel, p. 29). Its apparent depth of religious fervor, and the innovativeness of its diction, help exonerate Qāʾāni of charges that he was a mere panderer or imitator.

Likewise, a *qaṣida* written in praise of a messianic figure who has come to renew the world continues to attract attention and commendation. The poem lauds its unnamed subject—identified by Bahais as Sayyed-ʿAli-Moḥammad (d. 1850), known as the Bāb (Gabbay, pp. 131-48; Browne, 1891, p. 199)—as "[t]he glorified one of the verses of the eternal Invisible" (*mafḵar-e āyāt-e ḡayb-e sarmadi*), who has appeared with "two God-beholding eyes" (*du čašm-e ḥaqq negar*) and "two pearl-scattering hands" (*du dast-e dorr fešān*) (cited in Gabbay, pp. 137-41). Like Qāʾāni's many poems composed in honor of the family and descendants of the Prophet, this ode evinces an evidently deep and genuine religious sentiment that contrasts sharply with the poet's frequent irreverence and coarseness.

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