

Hakīm Sanā'ī, First of the Great Persian Sufi Mystical Love Poets

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Hakīm Sanā'ī was a medieval Muslim Sūfī poet-sage of vast influence for later Persian Sūfism, especially the eminent later Sūfī poet-saints Farīd al-dīn 'Aṭṭār (d.1221) and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (1207-73), both greatly inspired by Sanā'ī. Born in the last quarter of the 11th century in Ghazna (eastern Afghanistan), where he died, *circa* 1131, Sanā'ī spent much of his life in the great cities of Khorāsān (eastern Iran). A minor secular poet with little success in his homeland, he had come to this more spiritual area, still in his youth, and evidently attained renown by bravely cutting most (if not all) ties to secular patrons and sparking demand among the pious for a fresh genre of spiritually inspired poetry. “Sanā'ī carved out a niche for a new kind of poetry with an alternative source of patronage—religious didactic poetry recited in gatherings of religious scholars, preachers and canon lawyers, specifically those with an inclination to ethical and metaphysical speculation.” (Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past & Present, East & West*, p. 327-8). Sanā'ī composed a huge *Divān* of lyrical and often deeply spiritual poems “containing specimens of all the forms and genres familiar from the secular tradition of Persian poetry as it had developed up to his time.” (J.T.P. de Bruijn, “Comparative Notes on Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār,” *Sufi*, No. 16, Winter 1993, pp. 13-9).

Sanā'ī spiritually transformed the frivolous *ghazal* “ode to love” poetry sung at the Persian court, and created “the first sizable collection of this kind of [*ghazal*] poetry known in the history of Persian literature.” (de Bruijn) He turned the *qaṣīda* poetic form into a vehicle for religious instruction on asceticism and mysticism, and, after writing in his youth an entirely secular *mathnawi* poetic work of rhyming couplets, filled with panegyrics and satire, he later wrote a more spiritual *mathnawi* of less than 800 verses (often strongly allegorical) in honor of his patron and evident spiritual guide, Muḥammad ibn Manṣūr, a famed preacher of Sarakhs, Khorāsān.

In his old age, back at Ghazna, now living in greater seclusion, Sanā'ī wrote his magnum opus, *Hādīqat al-Ḥaqīqa*, “Walled Garden of Truth,” a *mathnawi* of over 5,000 couplets rich with spiritual wisdom interspersed with anecdotes, fables, parables, proverbs, etc. (it was originally known as the *Fakhri-nāma*, an honorific name for his patron, Ghaznavid Sultan Bahrām-shāh). 'Aṭṭār's five *mathnawi* poems and Rūmī's single huge *Mathnawi* took up where Sanā'ī left off, with greater poetic flourish. The *Hādīqat al-Ḥaqīqa*, more simple and direct in its wisdom counsels than the poetic works of 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī, comes to us in several versions differing in arrangement and number of verses—apparently Sanā'ī died before fixing a final version of his poem.

(See J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion & Literature in the Life & Works of Hakīm Sanā'ī of Ghazna*, Leiden: Brill, 1983; *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems*, London: Curzon, 1997; and “The *Qalandariyyāt* in Persian Mystical Poetry, from Sanā'ī Onwards,” in L. Lewisohn [Ed.], *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism*, London: KNP, 1992, reprinted as *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 2, UK: Oneworld, 1999. See also F. Lewis, “Reading, Writing & Recitation: Sanā'ī and the Origins of the Persian Ghazal,” Ph.D. diss, U. of Chicago, 1995; and coverage of Sanā'ī in books on Sūfism by Schimmel, Arberry, Nasr, et al.)

Sanā'ī's teachings here are from *The Walled Garden of Truth, Ḥadīqat al-Ḥaqīqa*, translated and abridged by David Pendlebury, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1976 (from a 1910 translation of the first part of the *Ḥadīqat* by Major John Stephenson—available at www.sacred-texts.com/isl/egt/.)



Why claim to be somebody in this village of yours? ... You may think you are something, but that something is nothing. You think you amount to something? —So do the dots on a dice!

Unself yourself ... Until you see your self as a speck of dust you cannot possibly reach that place.

This is the dust's supreme attainment: that it can speak in praise of You.

Man and his reason are just the latest ripening plants in His garden. Whatever you assert about His nature, you are bound to be out of your depth, like a blind man trying to describe the appearance of his own mother.

We tried reasoning our way to Him: it didn't work; but the moment we gave up, no obstacle remained.

When on the path you have slain your self, you will at once be shown God's favour.

He introduced himself to us out of kindness: how else could we have known Him? Reason took us as far as the door; but it was His presence that let us in.

But how will you ever know Him as long as you are unable to know yourself?

Error begins with duality; unity knows no error.

My friend, everything existing exists through Him; your own existence is a mere pretence. No more nonsense! Lose yourself, and the hell of your heart becomes a heaven.

Become non-existent; non-existent even to the notion of becoming non-existent. ... And when you have abandoned both individuality and understanding, this world will become that.

Melt yourself down in this search: venture your life and your soul in the path of sincerity; strive to pass from nothingness to being, and make yourself drunk with the wine of God.

Whoever is hot on the trail of love, the key to the door is renunciation.

Leave this abode of birth and decay; leave this pit, and make for your destined home. This heap of dust is a mirage, where fire seems like water.

God is his friend, who is no friend of self; no man with eyes on self has eyes for God.

You, who have brought nothing back but foam from the ocean ... you have not grasped the essence of the pearl, being forever engrossed in the oyster shell. Leave these muddy shells alone; bring up the pure pearl from the ocean depths.

All mankind is asleep, living in a desolate world...

If you yourself are upside down in reality, then your wisdom and faith are bound to be topsy-turvy.

Better fill your heart with light than with a hundred thousand words. ... All your talk is so much wordplay as long as you remain ensnared.

Silence is praise—have done with speech; your chatter will only bring you harm and sorrow!

Step, then, beyond life itself and reason, till you arrive at God's command.

Bruise yourself for months and years on end; leave it for dead, and when you have done with it, you will have reached eternal life. ... And when you've reached the stage of smiles and kisses from the Friend, count His poison honey, and His thorns a flower.... For the wise one, evil and good are both exceeding good. No evil ever comes from God; whenever you think to see evil proceeding from Him, you were better to look on it as good.... Whatever befalls you, misfortune or fortune, is unalloyed blessing... How should the author of "Be, and it was" ever bring down evil on his own creation? "Good" and "evil" have no meaning ... they are mere names, coined in the world of "me" and "you"; in God's creation there is no such thing as evil.

Why should darkness grieve the heart?—for night is pregnant with new day.

Malice and rancour are unknown to God: anger is a sign of impurity; you cannot speak of 'the wrath of God,' for He has no such attribute ... From the creator comes nothing but mercy; He is the veiler of His servants' sins.

He is no tyrant: for everything He takes, He gives back seventy-fold; and if He closes one door He opens ten others to you....He treasures you more than you do yourself.

At His door, what is the difference between Muslim and Christian, virtuous and guilty?

What is paradise to me, compared to Your presence?

To burn in Your fire is paradise; but most men settle for mere sensual delight.

Lord, everything is You, both good and bad; and, the marvel is, no evil comes from You.

Everything is the work of God alone, and happy is the one who knows it!

He heals our nature from within, kinder to us than we ourselves are.

You have broken faith, yet still He keeps His faith with you: He is truer to you than you are to yourself.

He is your shepherd, and you prefer the wolf. ... Oh, well done, you senseless, upstart fool!

From him forgiveness comes so fast, it reaches us before repentance has even taken shape on our lips.

You who shepherd this flock with Your mercy... —But what words are these? Shepherd, flock, mercy—all are You!

How could I befriend other than You? They are dead: You my sufficient friend. But what is the sense of this duality—believing that I am I and You are You? What is all this smoke beside Your fire? Since You are, let all else cease to be.

How can one grieve, possessing You; or, lacking You, how can one prosper?

What am I that I should count as good or evil? Accepted by You, my evil becomes good; rejected by You, my good becomes evil.

Be clear about this: at the last day, a man's condition will be unaltered: whatever he chooses will be set before him; he will see there what he takes from here.

If you are at God's door, stay there; if not, make your way there now. ... The way is not far from you to the friend: you yourself are that way, so set out along it. ... The way is only long because you delay to start on it: one single step would bring you to him: become a slave, and you will be a king.

You have to realize that it is His guidance that keeps you on the path, and not your own strength.

As long as you cling to your self, you will wander right and left, day and night, for thousands of years. ... But, if, once freed from your self, you finally get down to work, this door will open to you within moments.

God will not be yours as long as you cling to soul and life: you cannot have both this and that.

If you do wrong, there are two ways of seeing it: either you think He doesn't know—and I wonder at your lack of faith—or else you think He knows, yet still persist,—and I wonder at your vile impertinence. It may be true that no man knows your secrets; but God knows them... Then turn away from this wrongdoing, lest on your final day you drown in the sea of your own shame.... He always knows what is in men's minds: you would do well to reflect on this.

Your understanding is muddled by self and existence; it is blind to the Eternal.

When He admits you to His presence, ask from him nothing other than himself. ... There's no duality in the world of love: what's all this talk of 'you' and 'me'? How can you fill a cup that's full already?

Love's conqueror is he whom Love conquers.

The Royal Road leading your soul to God is nothing but the cleansing of the heart's mirror. (de Bruijn, tr.)

First I wrote books with painstaking care—Eventually I broke my pens in complete bewilderment. (Sanā'ī's *Divan*, 801; Schimmel, tr.)

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Sanā'ī quotes Hazrat 'Alī, Prophet Muḥammad's son-in-law: “The beginning, the end, the manifest and the hidden. / The seer and the listener, all is Him, / He is in everything yet He is beyond, / There is nothing else, everything is Him; / Abandon the duality of me and you, / See one, there aren't two at all, / Understand this and disappear in it; / When you are not, then truly He is.”

Farīd al-dīn 'Aḥḥār wrote of Sanā'ī: “Although the sun belongs only in heaven, Its 'splendor' (*sanā*) can be seen in Sanā'ī.”

Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, a more “ecstatic,” “drunken” (God-intoxicated Sūfī) observed of the more “sober” Sanā'ī: “I've given up *tasawwuf* (Sūfism) half finished; hear it complete (in full) from Ḥakīm of Ghazna, Sanā'ī.”