

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Beholding Beauty: Sa‘di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry

**Domenico Arturo Ingenito (Leiden: Brill, 2020). Pp. 697. \$132.00 hardback. ISBN: 9789004435896**

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Writing a monograph is usually a time-consuming enterprise, requiring one to work for several years on one topic to advance our knowledge of it. Some authors of monographs are so intensely engaged with their topics that the reader can immediately see their fascination with their subject and this passion has an infectious effect on the reader. Domenico Arturo Ingenito’s *Beholding Beauty: Sa‘di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* certainly belongs to this category as it is written in such an ardent style that it stimulates the reader to continue to read. This enthusiasm shines out through the pages of this book in a prismatic way. The book is about the thirteenth-century poet Sa‘di, one of the first Persian sages who became known in Europe as early as in the seventeenth century and remained popular until the Enlightenment, inspiring figures such as Voltaire, who wrote his *Zadig* as if it were a translation from Sa‘di. *Beholding Beauty* is not about the poet’s reception in modern times but a profound analysis in three parts of Sa‘di’s writings, especially his poetry. As Ingenito admits, the book “might be read as three different monographs constantly referring to each other” (p. 3). It is a successful attempt to examine Sa‘di’s writings within Persian ethico-philosophical and mystico-religious traditions. The subjects Ingenito focuses upon are all in one way or another related to beauty and aesthetics, whether sensual, mystical, intellectual, or political.

The book consists of an introduction, three parts, and a short epilogue. It also has an appendix in which all the original Persian texts cited are collected. After the introduction (pp. 1–42), outlining the organization of the book and Sa‘di’s biography, we enter Part 1, which consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 is devoted to “Homoerotics of Political Power and the Emergence of Gendered Desires,” discussing the relationship between praise poetry and lyricism whereby homoeroticism plays a central role in the politics. Chapter 2, “On Movements and Gazes in the Rose Garden,” discusses various aspects of Sa‘di’s *Rose Garden* (*Gūlistān*) in terms of homoerotic gaze, desire, and love. For Ingenito “the imagery of the rose garden represents the gamut of phenomenological possibilities of the lyric subject’s contemplation of the world as an act of cognition of the self with respect to the creative power of words and images” (p. 100). Despite Sa‘di’s centrality in Persianate culture, not much has been written about him and the *Rose Garden*. This work is regarded as a book of ethics, but Ingenito provides a fresh treatment of this masterpiece, searching for “sensual subtexts and [to] put them in conversation with Sa‘di’s lyric production” (p. 104). Chapter 3, “The Obscene Revisited,” is devoted to Sa‘di’s pornographic literature, a subject which is understudied, and Ingenito’s analytical take is a welcome contribution to Persian erotic literature. After a definition of the term “pornography,” the author commences his analysis of Sa‘di’s reasons for composing such facetious texts. In a typical style, characteristic of Sa‘di, he says that he wrote them because he faced “the threat of

being executed” by a sultan and “as salaciousness in speech is like salt with food” (p. 156). As in the other chapters of the book, Ingenito amply engages with primary and secondary Persian sources and theoretical and methodological publications. In this chapter we see, for instance, how the author rightly connects Sa‘di’s facetious writings with the poet Sana‘i (d. 1131) as an originator of such genre in Persian poetry, writing bawdy poetry to question the piety of the religious hierarchy. Ingenito also elaborates on the notions of lust and desire, connecting them to Ghazali’s treatment of these subjects.

Part 2, “Through the Mirror of Your Glances: The Sacred Aesthetics of Sa‘di’s Lyric Subjects,” commences with an introduction and consists of five chapters. In the introduction, Ingenito discusses, among other things, the notion of *imitatio*, and comes to the conclusion that Sa‘di’s ghazals in relation to Sana‘i’s poems show that they express another form of spirituality. In Ingenito’s own words, “This comparison, along with other analyses that will follow, urges us to read the so-called ‘mystical’ dimension of Sa‘di’s works as the product of a conflation of specific strands of a ‘sober’ Persian Sufi tradition with psychological and epistemological approaches that, by percolating through literary and non-literary texts that circulated between Baghdad and Fars in the early 13th century, indirectly influenced the novelty of the poet’s lyric voice” (p. 211). Ingenito sees a Sufi line of thought between Sa‘di and Ghazali, tracing how Sa‘di follows Ghazali’s “spiritual and aesthetic interpretation of the Avicennian epistemological legacy in the context of the relationship between the perusal of the visible world and the quest for supernal beauty and truth” (p. 211). In the chapters that follow Ingenito engages extensively with various ethical and mystical texts, including Hujviri’s *Kashf al-mahjub*, to show how authors such as Hujviri and Ghazali deprecated sexual and sensual connotations of the beloved’s body when the beloved is praised in an amatory poem and the poem is used as a song at musical gatherings of the mystics. The remaining chapters deal with Sa‘di’s depiction of an *arif*, a gnostic, emphasizing that this poetic persona in Sa‘di’s poetry is self-referential. Inspecting Avicenna’s sensorial regime, Ingenito shows how man perceives the beloved using the external senses and imagines all the other invisible qualities and realities through internal faculties, that is, through the five internal senses. In contextualizing the mystical dimensions of Sa‘di’s poetry, Ghazali plays a central role for Ingenito, as he appears in several chapters of the book, and passages of Ghazali’s works are translated to demonstrate how a certain mystic idea is introduced by him and how Sa‘di has integrated it in a poetic manner in his own writings. So, one entire chapter, “Spiritual Cardiology,” is devoted to the heart. Ghazali was a key figure in creating a synthesis of a shari‘a-based Sufism with a lived theology in which system the heart played an essential role. The heart is the central organ, the seat of God’s secrets, which could reflect the whole universe. Ingenito digresses in his chapters to pay attention to the intellectual tradition that produced figures such as Sa‘di. Sometimes these digressions are lengthy, but they are inserted to give a broad context in which to appreciate the ideas behind Sa‘di’s poetry.


Part 3, “The Lyrical Ritual (*Samā‘*) as the Performative Space of Sacred Eroticism,” consists of an introduction and two chapters. These chapters focus on the genre of lyrics, their performative and ritualistic aspects. Ingenito wishes to give an all-embracing analysis of the Persian lyrics. The author tries to offer an alternative understanding of how to read the ghazals differently. For instance, he says, “In spite of the common prejudice that invites one to read the spiritual dimensions of Sa‘di’s ghazals as a vaguely mystical exercise of observation of the divine detached from any mundane experience of beauty, it is not possible to conceive of the metaphysics of Sa‘di’s lyric subject without taking into account its psychological involvement with the phenomenal world” (p. 444). In this engagement music plays a part, especially in how such poems were performed by professional singers at mystical gatherings aimed at enabling the mystic to commune with the divine. Ingenito suggests referring to “samā‘ as a ‘lyrical ritual,’ thus accounting for the poetic and spiritual ‘performativity’ that this practice usually entailed, both as performance proper and as a ‘thing’—in Austin’s terms—that its words ‘do’” (p. 445).

It is not easy to discuss many of the qualities of this book in this short review. I certainly recommend the book to students of Persian, Middle Eastern, and medieval studies as it has many virtues, ranging from an aesthetic, mystical, and performative analysis of Sa'di's poetry to novel discussions of Sa'di's understudied facetious corpus, and a fascinating discussion on love and desire, and poetry's indispensable role in society. Sa'di is a complex and central poet in the constellation of the Persian literary, ethical, and moral universe. Anecdotes from his *Rose Garden* and *Orchard* (*Būstān*) as well as many lines of his poetry and his adages have become part of the Persian language. Sa'di's definition of the ethics of desire, love, lust, and beauty and his Machiavellian codes of behaviour have become part and parcel of Persian culture. For instance, Sa'di justifies lying for the best interest of a person or, as Ingenito phrases it, truth has a "relative nature ... in the face of ... beneficial falsehood" (p. 135). Sa'di defends the proposition that being rich is better than living in poverty like a renunciant dervish. Ingenito's multilayered analyses of Sa'di as a convoluted medieval intellectual deserves much praise. His painstaking and complex monograph is a must for anyone interested in Persian medieval art, literature, and culture.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823000387

## Cairo in Chicago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893

István Ormos (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2021). Pp. 462. \$120.00 cloth, \$96.00 e-book. ISBN: 9782724707663

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It is no coincidence that some of the most evocative and influential early examples of historical analysis of the architecture of colonialism in the Middle East and Africa used world expositions as one of their primary objects of study. Arguably, these international displays were relatively unfiltered representations in architectural form of the geopolitical ambitions of the most powerful Western empires, and as such their critical analysis has offered a compelling basis for the examination of architecture in colonial lands. This work was influenced by the emerging field of postcolonial studies, which has sought to recognize the way Western institutions, practices, and manners of thought exerted control over the non-West. One such example is historian and political theorist Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), in which the first chapter "Egypt at the Exhibition" explores how the idea of the "world-as-exhibition" tied to such displays reflects a new ontology of representation within the modern world. A second case is architectural historian Zeynep Çelik's *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), which offers an expansive exploration of world expositions to disrupt the tendency to read binary and oppositional relationships in the interpretation of Islamic architecture by Western architects.

These two foundational examples provide an important backdrop to a review of the present book by István Ormos, *Cairo in Chicago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893*. However, due to the book's focus on the Chicago world exposition, an example from the field of American studies also bears mentioning—Robert W. Rydell's *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Rydell's arguments attend to the racial connotations of these