

## REVIEWS

## Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry. Domenico Ingenito (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 697 pp.

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To reframe a figure as central to a classical canon as Sa'di is to Persian literature is a bold endeavor. Domenico Ingenito's *Beholding Beauty* is a magnificent achievement of multiple broad reappraisals that decisively reconfigure “the open landscape of Sa'di's balanced contemplation of the beauty of the world” (p. 3). For centuries, Sa'di's works have been associated with a style of smooth, limpid minimalism (*sahl-i mumtana'*) conveying an elegant moral vision (or, less charitably, a wisdom that has been made to feel prim, safe, even arid). Although love is unmistakably a central theme throughout his corpus, Sa'di himself does not supply crisp definitions of lust or love or passion; nor does he offer systematic taxonomies or theories of the erotic (p. 48). Reconstructing Sa'di's “aesthetics of desire,” Ingenito convincingly shows how Sa'di effects a complex coalescence of “homoeroticism, lyricism, and political insight” (p. 92). One of the book's main claims is that it is philologically unsound to diminish or prudishly overlook the sensuality and homoeroticism at the core of Sa'di's ethical teaching. When Sa'di lingers on physical beauty as an embodiment of a patron's princely qualities, this “sexualized representation of political power” creates a vital “synergy between the erotic and encomiastic” (p. 98). Ingenito untangles such synergies with philological rigor, scrupulous contextualization, and critical care, offering a fresh, urgent, and tremendously exciting reassessment of the shaykh of Shiraz.

Part 1 reveals the porousness between modalities and genres across Sa'di's corpus, attuning readers to shimmering interplays between reality and fiction, verse and prose, literary convention and factual representation—attending in particular to fluidities of gender and desire. By rehabilitating Sa'di's pornographic poems (hitherto almost entirely neglected by scholarship) and reading Sa'di's obscene poems as counter-texts to the amatory lyric, Ingenito shows how seemingly opposed entities—courtly and pornographic lyric poetry; politics and lust; spiritual devotion and carnal passion—together constitute a flexible, interdependent system that accommodates diverse approaches to desire. For instance, conventionally, the beloved in medieval poetry is a beautiful boy who captures the gaze of an older man; but Sa'di's poems also describe encounters with a beloved who is conspicuously *not* younger (“a strong man who has long since crossed the threshold of manhood”; p. 199). Sa'di's willingness to write against the grain of convention is especially evident in his obscene poems. Pornographic poetry in Sa'di's era trades primarily in bawdy humor and lewd description; in contrast, Ingenito reveals how Sa'di's pornographic poems can harbor indeterminate intimacies, as in the following line from an obscene poem, translated by Ingenito with lapidary restraint: “How could I be fulfilled by just looking at you? Other actions I have in mind, but none of them can I say to you” (pp. 163–72). Such amatory lyric delicacy here, in the middle of an obscene poem, is startling—and perhaps more shocking in its incongruity than any flagrant violation of decorum. Simultaneous exposure to such different sides of the lyric spectrum equips readers with habits of hermeneutic openness, allowing them to experience the spiritual and the erotic as events that cannot be decoupled.

One of the most important contributions here is Ingenito's injunction to mind the gap between contemporary assumptions about desire, lust, and sexuality, and premodern varieties of human experience that are inadequately picked out by modern terms. Ingenito makes the case that if we "grant these texts their partial alterity with respect to us and our categories," it is possible to discover that Sa'dī's concepts of love and lust are "much more unsettling, disturbing, and confusing than we would have ever imagined. But also more alluring, modern, cosmopolitan" (p. 53).

Part 2 situates Sa'dī's sacred eroticism within the wider medieval intellectual world. These chapters chart affinities (not necessarily direct or explicit causal links) between Sa'dī's thought, al-Ghazālī's aesthetics and epistemology, and Ibn Sīnā's rationalism and psychology. Situating Sa'dī's aesthetics of desire within these systems without invoking narrow principles of influence allows Ingenito to move beyond deflationary scholarly tendencies that align Sa'dī with only one Sufi order or compress his thought to fit it within a single doctrine or system. Ingenito argues that, for Sa'dī, sensual experience and pious devotion are not mutually exclusive: they coexist in a state of provocative, necessary, and productive collusion. Just as al-Ghazālī allows for many paths to the divine (rational contemplation, but also visionary experience), Sa'dī too explores multiple ways of accessing higher truth—without resolving tensions that arise between them. What accounts for Sa'dī's seemingly fractured allegiance to incompatible forms of desire? As Ingenito puts it, "the body of the beloved turns into a space of semiotic conflict, in which multiple desires and possibilities converge—especially with respect to the fictional world of the text and its points of contact with external reality" (p. 242). By lingering on the beloved's body as a space of plural hermeneutic possibility, Sa'dī demonstrates for readers how they too can contextualize desire in multiple ways. The affinities educed by Ingenito between Sa'dī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Sīnā clarify the contours and stakes of beholding beauty in the physical world. These thinkers all admit multiple pathways to the divine, while allowing for inevitable, messy collisions between embodiment, lust, and spiritual yearning. Ingenito builds a convincing case that Sa'dī's approach comes sharply into focus when situated within this larger ecosystem of philosophical ideas.

In part 3, Ingenito offers a rich theorization of the lyric genre. Sa'dī's ghazals are analyzed as performance spaces, arenas of experience in which readers are guided through varieties of desire. Ingenito presents a highly exportable theory of the lyric, where the ghazal is "a form of psychological training" (p. 508): audiences visualize "the spiritual understanding of beauty" and learn to transform "spiritual bewilderment into aesthetic ecstasy" (p. 507). Central to this theory of the lyric is the idea that Sa'dī's poems serve as textual analogues or transcripts of the Sufi practice of musical audition (*samā'*). Ingenito translates *samā'* as "lyrical ritual," which partially untethers this concept from familiar devotional parameters; this allows him to analyze Sa'dī's lyric poems as spaces where diverse audiences experience a "fluid system of values" and a "broad spectrum of ethical attitudes toward the practice of erotic poetry" (p. 454). Sa'dī's lyric appropriation of *samā'* allows readers to "bridge the gap" between the pious and the mundane, "regardless of the overarching religious agenda that might contextualize a given [*samā'*] session" (p. 470). Ingenito also argues that Sa'dī's "ostentatious defense of *shāhid-bāzī*" (p. 490)—the practice of beholding beautiful young men for spiritual ends—is the culmination of a reconstructible trajectory of creative development. By carefully placing gleanings from Sa'dī's biography alongside relationships with specific courts and patrons, Ingenito traces Sa'dī's evolution into an increasingly "unapologetic" advocate for the enjoyment of "human beauty" (p. 458). A brief epilogue discusses Sa'dī's broad humanistic appeal. Sa'dī's commitment is to guiding readers through a rich gamut of experiences ("political, erotic, courtly, metaphysical, ludic, etc.;" p. 519), and Ingenito argues that the enduring value of Sa'dī's ethical teaching rests on this fusion of the sacred, the aesthetic, and the erotic.

Unstable balances between truth and fiction, nuanced moral realism, the psychological complexity of the lyric subject: these hallmarks of Sa'dian thought as reconstructed by

Ingenito will be of great interest to scholars beyond Persian studies. In *Beholding Beauty*, Sa‘dī emerges as a refreshingly complex figure whose works constitute an open framework for experimentation, akin to what Gordon Teskey, borrowing from Adorno, calls open thinking—a style of improvisational, exploratory inquiry undertaken through imaginative literature, where the shape of thought is dynamic and open-ended.<sup>1</sup> Ingenito shows that Sa‘dī’s works are not vehicles for predigested ideas or precisely defined meanings; indeed, Sa‘dī has been a timeless source of wisdom precisely *because* of his open style of thinking. Like Sa‘dī, Ingenito does not settle for easy or stable definitions. One of the book’s strengths is its insistence on embracing textual, conceptual, and aesthetic ambivalences; Ingenito describes his method as “navigat[ing] through a cluster of islands without the aid of maps—an experience of the literary territory that is rhizomatic rather than cartographical” (p. 52). Running to just over five hundred pages, Ingenito’s exploration of Sa‘dī’s terrain is by no means a quick day trip; but the frequent recurrence of interlinked conceptual signposts and the organizational clarity of the book’s three parts ensures that the voyage does not flag. Ingenito writes with an ardor that kindles, spreading from page to reader; in a characteristically arresting analogy, Ingenito compares Sa‘dī’s poems to Rothko paintings: both are “made of delicate simplicity, balanced contrasts of mood, and gradual variations across the spectrum of sensory experience” (p. 33). *Beholding Beauty* is an exciting model of scholarship that dares to open itself to ambiguities, multiple possibilities, and nonlinear explorations of “the anthropological complexity of the human theater” (p. 136). Ingenito’s reconstruction of Sa‘dī’s sacred homoeroticism, his exploration of vital affinities between literature and philosophy and theorization of lyric performativity—these interventions break ample new ground within Sa‘dī scholarship and Persian studies, and will be generative for Islamic studies scholars, medievalists, and literary scholars and comparatists far and wide.

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## **A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-Option under the Islamic Republic. Fatemeh Shams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). ISBN 978-0-19-885882-9 (hbk), xvi + 371 pp.**

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A curious turn of phrase adorns the subtitle of Fatemeh Shams’s exciting new book, *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-Option under the Islamic Republic*. At first glance, the term “poetic co-option” may appear oxymoronic. We generally think of poetry as far removed from something as sinister as co-option. Yet that contradiction rests at the heart of Shams’s book, which advances a theory of poetic co-option to examine a cohort of contemporary poets who, rather than resist the Islamic Republic’s power, operate within and benefit from its formal institutions. Across an introduction and seven body chapters, *A Revolution in Rhyme* accounts for a tradition of Persian poetry that has been highly visible within Iran—in government-run literary journals, anthologies, school textbooks, and at official poetry events—but almost entirely absent from scholarly and critical discourse. The book is a tremendous achievement in its scholarship, creativity, and prose.

Although Shams does not consolidate her theory of poetic co-option, she is acutely aware of the multiple meanings of co-option and delights in playing with its different connotations.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).