

See Our Radiant King and Queen

A Ghazal in the Persian and Turkish Traditions of the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Century



The Seated Scribe by Gentile Bellini, Istanbul, Ottoman Empire, 1479-1481

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“See Our Radiant King and Queen”

See our radiant king and queen: hail them!
If Atlantia be true and strong, we shall not fail them.

My beloved comes to my bed of perfumed pillows
to recline and rest; my tresses protect and veil them.

- 5 The broken-hearted rise within the darkness.
Blossom, rage of the righteous: sustain and prevail them.

When drumbeats gather the people to places of power,
Rulers hide in their halls. A reckoning trails them.

- The perfumes of my beloved flow with the pepper and pine
10 Of protection and power. Breathe, O heart, and inhale them.

Now those who toil with craft, cunning, and courage
Seek the righteous heights of service and scale them.

Gleaming oars that strive in sanguine waves
Steady ships and the well-loved warriors who sail them.

- 15 Singing of home and heartache, the ocean blankets
The bodies of the bold in a final darkness that jails them.

What is the duty of poets? To illuminate and exalt
Truths with radiant words. We write to unveil them.

Introduction

My goal for “See Our Radiant King and Queen” was to examine the different facets of power, protection, and duty through a series of observations and proclamations using a poetic form that was new to me. Because one of the time periods and locations I study is the Ottoman Empire between 1450 and 1600, I decided on the ghazal. This was a popular poetic form in both Persia and Turkey before, during, and after my chosen time.

History and Form of the Ghazal

The ghazal, pronounced “guzzle,” originated from the Arabic *qasīdah* beginning in the 7th century (Jalajel). Adopted and adapted by Persian poets, by the 16th century the ghazal had spread throughout the Islamic world, including to Spain, Turkey, and India (“Ghazal”; Jalajel; Pritchett 119). It was the primary verse form of the Persian mystic Rumi (1207-1273). It was also popular with other well-known poets of this region, including the Persian poet Hafez (1315-1390) and the Azerbaijani Turkish poet Füzuli (1494 – 1556) (“About the Odes/Ghazals”; Jalajel; Pritchett 119).

The ghazal is composed of “syntactically and grammatically complete couplets” that are united by their complex rhyme scheme and meter (“Ghazal,” qtd.; “About the Odes/Ghazals”). Ghazals are short, usually between seven and fifteen couplets in length, though Arabic forms are longer (Pritchett 119; Jalajel). These couplets, called *sher* in Persian and *bayt* in Arabic, are each a distinct miniature poem, similar to haiku (Jalajel; Pritchett 119 and 132).

The rhyme scheme of the couplets is *aa, ba, ca, da*, and so forth (Pritchett 119). Each rhyming line ends with a refrain word or phrase (called the *radif*) that is preceded by the rhyming word (called the *qafia*). The *radif* is technically optional, but it was commonly employed by the 14th century (“Ghazal”; Jalajel; Pritchett 119). The first couplet of the poem is the only couplet where both lines end in the *qafia* and the *radif*.

In adapting the ghazal, Persian poets imposed two further structural requirements. First, ghazals use traditional meters and line-length (“Ghazal”; Pritchett 119). There is not one specific meter for ghazals; rather, they “follow one of the twenty-one traditional ghazal meters” (“About

the Odes/Ghazals”). Second, the last *sher* of the ghazal includes the poet’s pen-name or *takhalluṣ* (“Ghazal”; Jalajel; Pritchett 119). This addition was in use by the 12th century (Jalajel).

Theme and/or tone are critical for ghazals. Traditionally, Arabic ghazals focused on “loss and romantic love” (“Ghazal”). In Persian ghazals and their descendants, themes of longing and romantic love continued, but the unifying concept could also be religious, devotional, erotic, or even abstract observations (“Ghazal”; Jalajel). In fact, all these themes could be mixed within the same poem.

Because each *sher* is a syntactically complete miniature poem, the ghazal is often describe as being “like pearls on a string” (Pritchett 119). Overall, the thematic or tonal unity of the couplets should create “an unuttered but clearly suggested train of thought (or silent verse, as it were) between each verse-unit and the next” (Farzād, qtd. in Pritchett 122). In Ottoman versions, a suggestion of unity was often created through word choice, repetitive imagery, and sentence structure (Pritchett 124). Because this unity is suggested instead of stated, it may be obscure or difficult to ascertain. However, this allows the poet to rearrange, add, and/or exclude interior verses during performance based on the audience’s mood, which makes the ghazal an excellent form for oral presentation (Pritchett 127).

Period Exemplar

The exemplar I present here is Ghazal 977 by Rumi, selected because a version was available in transliteration and translation. When discussing forms of poetry that originate in other languages, I believe it is critical to show a poem in that language along with a translation for meaning. As most English speakers do not read non-Roman scripts, a transliteration of Ghazal 977 is necessary to make the rhyme scheme visible.

<p>`îd bar `âshiq-ân mubârak bâd `âshiq-ân! `id-etân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>May the `Eid Festival be blessed for the lovers (of God)! O lovers! May your Festival be blessed!</p>
<p>`îd ar bôy-e jân-e mâ dâr-ad dar jahân ham-chô jân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>If the Festival has the scent of our soul, may it be blessed in the world like [our] soul!</p>
<p>5 bar tô ay mâh-e âsmân-o zamîn tâ ba-hasht âsmân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>O (beautiful full) moon (suitable) for the heavens and the earth, may the sky be blessed up to the seventh heaven for your sake!</p>
<p>`îd âmad ba-kaf neshân-e wiSâl `âshiq-ân! ân neshân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>The Festival has arrived! The sign of union (is openly) shown. O lovers! May this sign be blessed!</p>
<p>rôza ma-g'shâ-î joz ba qand-e lab-ash 10 qand-e ô dar dahân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>Do not open (the completion of) the Fast (of Ramadan) except next to his sugary lips. May his sugar be a blessing for the mouth!</p>
<p>`îd be-n'wesht bar kanâr-e lab-ash k-în mayê bê-karân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>The Festival wrote (these words) on the edge of his lips: "May this 'wine' be blessed without limit!"</p>
<p>`îd âmad ke ay sabok-rûHân riTl-hây-e gerân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>The Festival has arrived! O light-footed soul (resembling an angel), may your (wine-) heavy goblets be blessed!</p>
<p>15 chand penhân khwor-î SalâHuddîn! bôsa-hây-e nehân mubârak bâd</p>	<p>How much (longer) will you drink privately, O Salahuddin? May your hidden kisses be blessed!</p>
<p>gar naSîbê ba-man deh-î gôy-am "bar man-o bar fulân mubârak bâd"</p>	<p>If you give a portion to me, I will say: "May it be blessed for me and so-and-so!" ("Ghazal 977," translated by Ibrahim Gamard)</p>

The structure of this poem is intangible in translation but obvious in the transliteration. The *radif* (refrain word or phrase) is “mubârak bâd”; “mubârak” means “blessing,” with “bâd” being a preposition or adverb. The translation demonstrates how difficult it is to render ghazals in English, as “mubârak” is translated as both “be blessed” and “blessing” and, due to differences

in syntax, cannot end most of the *shers*. The *qafia* (rhyme) is *-ân*, but because of necessary syntax changes, the *qafia* is entirely lost in translation. Regarding meter, the transcriber notes that the poem uses “Meter 12: XoXX oXoX ooX” called “*khafif sâlim makhbû*.” This is presumably one of the twenty-one ghazal meters.

Regarding the question of unity, each *sher* in Ghazal 977 is united through the continuing theme of Eid, the final Festival of Ramadan, which celebrates the end of a month-long series of daytime fasts. The repetition of “*îd*” (Eid, translated as “Festival”), emphasizes the theme: this word is repeated in lines 1, 2, 3, 7, 11, and 13. While two *shers* do not mention Eid (lines 5-6 and 15-16), they contain indirect references to the festival. In lines 5-6, the speaker marvels at the moon; an audience familiar with Eid knows that it begins at sundown. In lines 15-16, the speaker gently scolds a person named Salahuddin for drinking in private; fluids are not allowed during Ramadan’s daytime fasts, and the celebration after each fast was communal. Furthermore, the repetition of a thematic word is not the only item creating unity in the poem: another is “*âshiq-ân*” (lovers), repeated in lines 1, 2, and 8. Other words and concepts whose repetitions are visible in the translation include “soul,” “wine” or “drink/ing,” and “lips” or “kisses.” Overall, the repetition of these words creates an effect of one wandering through a nighttime street festival, observing different scenes.

It is notable that there is not an obvious mention to Rumi’s *takhalluṣ* (pen-name) in the translation of the last *sher*. However, there are two allusions that are tangible within the translation. First, the penultimate *sher* mentions Salahuddin, who was “Rumi’s closest disciple and companion” (“Ghazal 977”). Second, the final *sher* is the only one that uses first person. Overall, this allows the poet to remain a distant observer who marvels at and rejoices in the celebrations surrounding him.

Analysis of “See Our Radiant King and Queen”

Based on historical precedent and the analysis of Ghazal 977 by Rumi, my ghazal must include:

- A *qafia* and *radif*,
- Between 7 and 15 couplets,
- A selected meter,
- Thematically or tonally connected *shers* that contain distinct images, and
- An obscure or obvious reference to myself in the last *sher*.

Writing ghazals in English is not an easy task. Traditional ghazal meters are numerous and do not necessarily suit English, while thematically-connected imagery without development of a subject is unusual in our poetic tradition. Furthermore, depending on the *qafia* and *radif* selected, the poet may be locked into ending each *sher* with the same sentence structure. For this reason, I chose “them” as my *radif* and a verb ending in an “-ail/-eil” sound as my *qafia*. This choice required me to include a subject for “them” in each *sher*, as well as an action happening to the changing “them”.

Concerning meter, I chose to use pentameter (five stresses). Ghazals are often likened to sonnets, and iambic pentameter is the meter of Shakespeare’s sonnets (“About the Odes/Ghazals”). The line-length allowed by pentameter meant that I could create interesting and cohesive *shers* by employing different sentence structure and enjambment without the lines getting overly long, which would be detrimental to the short form of the ghazal. However, I did not limit myself to iambic pentameter; because ghazals are only compared to sonnets, not related, I did not want to over-emphasize the comparison.

To provide internal structure, I wanted each *sher* to focus on a different facet of power, protection, and duty through either a proclamation or an observation. Because the challenge for this event was a proclamation, I knew my opening *sher* would announce our King and Queen, instructing Atlantians to consider our duties in service: “See our radiant king and queen: hail them! / If Atlantia be true and strong, we shall not fail them.” To resist the inclination of English poets to return to and develop a specific subject, the initial draft of each *sher* alternated between one of three lenses: narrow/intimate, kingdom, and global/general. I aimed for three *shers* per

lens, with a final *sher* to conclude. While these focuses were blended within the final poem (especially between kingdom and global), they helped in creating the serial imagery of a ghazal within an appropriate number of *shers*. Moreover, I created an additional sense of unity by repeating many words, including “darkness” (ll. 5 and 16), “perfume/d” (ll. 3 and 9), “power” (ll. 7 and 10), “protect/ion” (ll. 4 and 10), “righteous” (ll. 6 and 12), and “be-/well-loved” (ll. 3, 9, and 14). Indeed, the poem begins and ends with a repetition of “radiant” (ll. 1 and 18). These repetitions follow the tradition of both Rumi and Ottoman poets.

The final hurdle was mentioning myself in the last *sher*. There is not an obvious reference in this *sher*: “What is the duty of poets? To illuminate and exalt / Truths with radiant words. We write to unveil them.” Like Rumi, I used first person, but I used “we,” not “I,” so I could pose this question and responsibility to all the poets of Atlantia (myself included). In addition, I included two highly oblique references to my name, “Elenor de La Rochelle alias Ela”. Through multiple classes with the Atlantian Madrasa Guild, notably with Sheikha Tala al-Zahra, I have selected the Arabic name علاء “Alaa” as a substitute for “Ela.” “Alaa” is derived from the Arabic for “greatness” or “exalted.” Similarly, “Elenor” does not sound too different from Arabic النور “al-Nour,” meaning “the light.” Thus, with a wink at the Arabic language, my last *sher* notes that poets must “illuminate” (light) and “exalt” truths.

Conclusion

I am highly satisfied with “See Our Radiant King and Queen.” The ghazal was an entirely new poetic form for me, challenging me in meter, structure, and content. I greatly enjoyed being able to play with, arrange, and rearrange the different *shers* to create different emotional results. In particular, I am pleased with the two allusions to my name in the final *sher*, as I love multilingual word-play.

In the future, I would like to attempt a more demanding *radif* that would challenge my sentence structure. I would also like to write *shers* that play more with both the romantic and devotional love and longing that are common in period ghazals.

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