

Biography of Nizami

Abû Muhammad Ilyâs ibn Yûsuf ibn Zakî Mu'ayyad, known by his pen-name of Nizâmî, was born around 1141 in Ganja, the capital of Arran in Transcaucasian Azerbaijan, where he remained until his death in about 1209. His father, who had migrated to Ganja from Qom in north central Iran, may have been a civil servant; his mother was a daughter of a Kurdish chieftain; having lost both parents early in his life, Nizâmî was brought up by an uncle. He was married three times, and in his poems laments the death of each of his wives, as well as proffering advice to his son Muhammad. He lived in an age of both political instability and intense intellectual activity, which his poems reflect; but little is known about his life, his relations with his patrons, or the precise dates of his works, as the accounts of later biographers are colored by the many legends built up around the poet. Although he left a small corpus of lyric poetry, Nizâmî is best known for his five long narrative poems, of which the *Haft Paykar*, completed in 1197, is his acknowledged masterpiece.

Often referred to by the honorific *Hakîm*, 'the sage', Nizâmî is both a learned poet and master of a lyrical and sensuous style.

Nizâmî the Poet

The region of Azerbaijan, where Nizâmî lived and wrote, had in his time only recently become the scene of significant literary activity in Persian. Poetry in Persian first appeared in the east, where in the tenth and eleventh centuries it flourished at the courts of the Samanids in Bukhara and their successors the Ghazvanids, centred in eastern Iran and Afghanistan. When the Ghazvanids were defeated in 1040 by the Seljuk Turks and the latter extended their power westwards into Iraq, which was predominantly Arabophone, Persian literary activity similarly spread westwards to the Seljuk courts. In Azerbaijan, where numerous languages and dialects were spoken, the original language was local dialect, *Âzarî*; but with increasing westward migrations of Turks in the eleventh century Turkish became widespread. When in the twelfth century the Seljuks extended their control into the region, their provincial governors, virtually autonomous local princes, encouraged Persian letters. By the mid-twelfth century many important poets enjoyed their patronage, and there developed a distinctive "Azerbaijani" style of poetry in Persian which contrasted with "Khurasani" or "Eastern" style in its rhetorical sophistication, its innovative use of metaphor, and its use of technical terminology and Christian imagery.

Ganja, the capital of Arran (region of Transcaucasian Azerbaijan), described by the geographers as one of the most beautiful cities in Western Asia, was an

important and well-fortified border town and flourishing centre of silk manufacture and trade; from the 1150s onwards it was ruled by Eldigüzids, under whom it became a major centre of literary and scholarly activity. Among the many poets Ganja produced, Nizâmî stands out as a towering figure.

Although the chief source of support for poets was court patronage, which would both provide a poet's livelihood and ensure his work's copying and diffusion, and although Nizâmî's poems are dedicated to various local princes and contain appeals to his patrons' generosity, the poet seems to have avoided court life. It's often held that he did so in order to preserve his artistic independence and integrity; yet his frequent complaints of "imprisonment" in Ganja and of the envy of rivals and detractors suggest that his isolation may not have been by choice. Despite attempts to reconstruct Nizâmî's biography from statements in his poems, the details of his life seem destined to remain obscure. As with all medieval poets, complaints of poverty and old age, pleas for generosity and favour, and inveighing against envious rivals are well-established poetic topoi. Nor can the poet's precise relations with his patrons, or the exact dates of composition of his poems, be accurately determined; the extant manuscripts are all considerably later than his own time, and undoubtedly contain many errors, alterations, and interpolations.

About Nizâmî's prodigious learning there is no doubt. Poets were expected to be well versed in many subjects; but Nizâmî seems to have been exceptionally so. His poems show that not only was he fully acquainted with Arabic and Persian literature and with oral and written popular and local traditions, but was also familiar with such diverse fields as mathematics, geometry, astronomy and astrology, alchemy, medicine, Koranic exegesis, Islamic theology and law, history, ethnics, philosophy and esoteric thought, music and the visual arts.

The *Haft Paykar* blends historical and legendary materials concerning the pre-Islamic Iranian past with Islamic beliefs and esoteric symbolism. Over a century earlier, Firdawsî had in his *Shdhnama* ('Book of Kings'; c.1010) chronicled the history of Iranian monarchy from its mythical beginnings to the defeat of the Sassanians by the Muslim Arabs in 637, incorporating materials drawn from popular legend and saga as well as panegyrics in which he presented the poem's dedicatee, Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 997-1030), as embodying both Iranian and Islamic kingship. But Mahmud received the work coolly; and both historians and panegyrists of this and the early Seljuk period speak slightly of the 'false' and fabulous history represented by the *Shahnma*. Nizami both recuperates and reworks Firdaws's treatment of the Iranian past to create a different sort of poem, one that reflects the concerns of his own age.

Despite its position as one of the great masterpieces of Persian poetry, and perhaps because of the complexity that makes it so, the Haft Paykar has received less attention in the West than it deserves. Nizami received a brief mention in D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* in the early nineteenth century scholars in Hungary (Wilhelm Bacher) and Russia (Franz von Erdmann) addressed themselves to the poet and his works, and interest increased (primarily in Russia and Germany) throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some scholars have sought to reconstruct both Nizami's biography and his beliefs from statements in his poems, but with little success; others have been concerned with the sources of the Haft Paykar its relation-ship to 'Oriental tales' and to the spread of such tales to the West. Nizami's imagery was the subject of a study by Hellmut Ritter, who compared the Persian poet's style to that of Goethe, contrasting the vividness and immediacy of the latter to Nizami's supposed 'metaphorical transformation' of physical phenomena which permits the invention-of new relationships which have no basis in 'reality'.