

A LITTLE-KNOWN MIRROR FOR PRINCES
BY AL-GHAZĀLĪ*

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The *Fürstenspiegel* (Mirror for Princes) genre is well attested in the medieval Islamic world from an early stage. These works, in Arabic, Persian and later on in Turkish, were written by a range of authors — government ministers, bureaucrats, philosophers, historians and lawyers — and they approached the topic from a variety of standpoints. Such works often present a synthesis between Arabic/Islamic and ancient Persian elements and are happy to draw on illustrative models from both Muslim caliphs and Sāsānian shahs, from Islamic religious writers, ancient Zoroastrian texts and Hellenistic statecraft. These *Mirrors* demonstrate widespread Muslim concern with just government and the nature of kingship¹.

This contribution looks at an example of one such work by al-Ghazālī, probably written in the early years of the twelfth century. It is addressed to a person or persons in power in Iran in the middle of the Seljuq period. This era saw the eastern Islamic world dominated militarily by Turks, rulers whose great-grandfathers had roamed the Central Asian steppes as pastoral nomads and who had come to power with credentials which to orthodox Muslims seemed dubious. Al-Ghazālī addresses this work to them, as well as to the Persian bureaucrats who administered the Seljuq government on their behalf.

Al-Ghazālī towers like an intellectual colossus over the Seljuq period and beyond. The generally accepted outlines of his career are well known and are largely based on his spiritual ‘autobiography’ (*al-Mun-*

* Gerhard Endress has been a fine colleague and friend, an example to us all. It is a real pleasure to dedicate this small piece to him.

¹ A noteworthy example is the anonymous twelfth-century *Baḥr al-fawā'id* from Syria; cf. *The Sea of Precious Virtues (Baḥr al-fawā'id). A medieval Islamic Mirror for Princes*, trans. J. S. MEISAMI, Salt Lake City, 1991. Cf. also the interesting discussion in G. J. VAN GELDER, *Mirror for Princes or Vizor for Viziers: the twelfth-century Arabic popular encyclopedia Muḥīd al-'ulūm and its relationship with the anonymous Persian Baḥr al-fawā'id*, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64.3 (2001), p. 313-338.

qidh min al-ḍalāl), and the evidence of medieval biographical dictionaries. Having enjoyed the status of the foremost intellectual of his time and the favours of caliph, sultan and vizier alike, al-Ghazālī abandoned his prestigious post at the *Niẓāmiyya madrasa* in Baghdad in 1095 and, on his own admission, wandered as a *Ṣūfī* for ‘ten years’ visiting Mecca, Medina, Damascus and Jerusalem before returning to his native land, Khurāsān². There he engaged in the corporate *Ṣūfī* life and wrote works in both Arabic and Persian³. It is important to stress that actual chronological information in medieval chronicles and biographical dictionaries about the life of al-Ghazālī is relatively sparse; much of the overall geographical pattern of his movements seems secure, but not the precise details⁴. What seems incontestable, however, is that al-Ghazālī was heavily involved in the politics of his time, both in Baghdad and even after his return to Khurāsān, despite his protestation to the contrary. If he did absent himself from the circles of rulers and viziers at all, it could only have been for a short time. Perhaps the lure of power was too strong for him.

A vast amount of work has been done on al-Ghazālī’s massive *œuvre*, but scholars have continued to concentrate on his output in Arabic, not surprisingly since this is the language of the overwhelming majority of his books. However, it is time for works that he composed in his native tongue to receive more attention⁵. This contribution focuses on a little-known work of al-Ghazālī on good government. It is buried in the *Kīmiyā-yi sa’ādat*, al-Ghazālī’s longest extant work in Persian. This is commonly held to be a Persian summary of al-Ghazālī’s *magnum opus* in Arabic, the *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. This generalisation is obviously true to a great extent, since substantial parts of the *Iḥyā’* are omitted or shortened in the *Kīmiyā*, no doubt with the aim of not overburdening the readership for whom the *Kīmiyā* is intended with the often sophisticated intellectual apparatus of the *Iḥyā’*. The result of this pruning process is to produce a work which is much clearer and more direct in its message

² AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *al-Munqid min aḍalāl (Erreur et délivrance)*. [Texte arabe,] trad. française avec introduction et notes par F. JABRE (*Coll. Unesco d’œuvres représentatives, série arabe*), Beirut, 1959, p. ۳A.

³ For the generally accepted chronology of the works of al-Ghazālī, cf. M. BOUYGES, *Essai de chronologie des œuvres de al-Ghazali (Algazeli)*, édité [...] par M. ALLARD (*Recherches publiées sous la direction de l’Institut de lettres orientales de Beyrouth*, 14), Beirut, 1959.

⁴ The numerous medieval biographies of al-Ghazālī follow a similar pattern.

⁵ This point was made a long time ago by J. van Ess but few scholars have followed this up; cf. J. VAN ESS, *Neuere Literatur zu Ġazzālī*, in: *Oriens* 20 (1967), p. 299-308.

than the *Ihyā'*, even though the spirit of the *Ihyā'* is largely retained. In some parts of the text one might go further and call the *Kīmiyā* an interpretative essay in the themes of the *Ihyā'*. This is especially true of the introductory section of the *Kīmiyā*⁶.

There is a whole chapter (Book 2, Section 10) in the *Kīmiyā* which is not in the *Ihyā'* at all; it is entitled 'On Governing and Exercising Authority' (*Dar ra'iyat dāshtan va-vilāyat rāndan*)⁷. The tone of the chapter is strongly *Šūfi*. In it the ruler is exhorted to keep constantly in his heart the remembrance that this life is but transient. If he does so, he will govern justly and not be preoccupied with the passions of this world. The importance of the '*ulamā*' is stressed, as is the crucial significance of justice, since the ruler's actions have exemplary value and his punishment or reward will be correspondingly greater on the Day of Judgement. The key elements of this text are as follows. After an introductory meditative section, al-Ghazālī states that justice will be achieved if ten rules, which he presents here in numbered form, are observed:

1. The ruler should rule in such a way that he is the subject and the other person is the ruler.
2. The ruler should care for those in his trust.
3. The ruler should not indulge his appetites or be extravagant in clothes or food.
4. The ruler should govern kindly.
5. The ruler should strive to please all his subjects.
6. The ruler should please his subjects only within the Law.
7. The danger and responsibility of governing should be known.
8. The ruler should thirst for the spirit of devout '*ulamā*'.
9. The ruler should make sure that those in his service refrain from injustice.
10. The ruler should avoid pride and anger.

So much for the skeletal outline of the text. What of the image of monarchy in this section of the *Kīmiyā*? This is not a mirror in the usual practical mould with its emphasis on the precepts of good government; rather, this little piece in the *Kīmiyā* presents a series of pious injunctions to the ruler about the principles of the faith which should be the

⁶ Abū Hāmid Muḥammad AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *Kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat*, ed. H. KHEDIVJAM, Tehran, 1361/1976, p. 13-115.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25-42. The following analysis of this section of the *Kīmiyā* arises from a project of mine, begun in 1985 and still ongoing, to translate the whole of this work of al-Ghazālī into English. Some of the subject matter of this article has been discussed in the relevant section about the *Kīmiyā* found in Fouchécour's monumental work on medieval Persian didactic literature; cf. C. FOUCHÉCOUR, *Moralia: les notions morales dans la littérature persane du 3^e/9^e au 7^e/13^e siècle*, Paris, 1984, p. 393-5.

mainspring of true Islamic government. The *Kīmiyā* mirror leaves out — and this is an important omission — all sayings or stories from pre-Islamic or non-Islamic sources. Thus neither Anūshīrvān nor Alexander appear and there is no mention of Sāsānian or pre-Sāsānian Persian concepts of government.

As well as providing Qurʾānic foundations for his injunctions, al-Ghazālī follows in the *Kīmiyā* his traditional habit of giving Islamic corroboration to his themes. In accordance with the pattern of other early Islamic religious literature in Persian (such as the *Tanbīh al-ghāfilīn* of al-Samarqandī, who flourished at the end of the tenth century⁸), al-Ghazālī cites several *ḥadīth*, followed by anecdotes or pious snippets about famous personalities in early Islam. Almost half of the illustrative material in the *Kīmiyā* mirror concerns the Prophet. However, although many of the statements are introduced by the phrase ‘and the Prophet said’ (*va-rasūl goft*), they are not easily traceable to any canonical collection of *ḥadīth*. More probably, they come from a corpus of accumulated *Ṣūfī* wisdom and formed part of what was taught to *Ṣūfī* disciples in their daily lives. Whatever the source of these pious sayings may have been, it is noteworthy that al-Ghazālī’s intention in choosing to include them is to use the Prophet, above all, as the exemplar of model government. Other important figures in early Islam mentioned here are the caliphs ʿUmar, ʿUmar II and Hārūn al-Rashīd. Occasionally, too, Judaeo-Christian figures who are, of course, well incorporated into the Islamic prophetic tradition, such as Moses, David and Jesus, are invoked. The wide range of figures of spiritual authority cited in this text highlights the corresponding absence of celebrities whose prestige was secular.

What kind of ruler is being addressed here? The term used most frequently in this Mirror to denote ‘ruler’ is *vālī*, ‘the one who governs or exercises authority’. Such a usage as this is very convenient as it embraces a variety of specific offices — sultan, prince, *amīr*, *wazīr* and others — and it stresses the importance of Islamic government at different levels of state administration, both supra-provincial and provincial. Here again, then, the difference from the standard *Mirror*, which targets the principal ruler, is marked. Al-Ghazālī’s ethical emphasis, which makes fewer distinctions of rank than works in this genre normally do, places moral responsibility on all those who exercise power through their public office.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 139-42.

The *Sunnī* 'Abbāsīd caliphate, whose pivotal role al-Ghazālī had stressed whilst in Baghdad in his *Kitāb faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyya wa-faḍā'il al-Mustazhiriyya*⁹, is not mentioned here at all. This omission does not necessarily spring from inconsistency or shifting allegiance on al-Ghazālī's part; it is more likely that he is concentrating here on the local context of Khurāsān to which he has returned, probably some time between 1097 and 1100. Nor does the *Kīmiyā* mirror speak specifically of the sultanate, the preoccupation of a number of Persian *Mirrors*. There is, however, no mention of a specific ruler to whom this *Mirror* is addressed and its inclusion within the massive *Kīmiyā* gives it generalized validity. The pervasive use of the term 'vālī' has the same deliberately general flavour.

Further light can be shed on this little *Mirror* in the *Kīmiyā* by an analysis of its links with other works of al-Ghazālī. A comparison with al-Ghazālī's Persian letters gives insights into the background in which he lived in Khurāsān during the last decade of his life¹⁰. These letters were often written to named rulers, such as the son of Nizām al-Mulk, Fakhr al-Mulk. Both the tone and the content of these letters are reminiscent of the *Mirror* in the *Kīmiyā*; they exhort the rulers of the time to mend their ways and to govern according to Islamic principles. Another didactic work, the *Naṣīhat al-mulūk*, has been classified as being amongst the works of al-Ghazālī, although only the first of its two parts can confidently be attributed to him¹¹. It is in this first part of the *Naṣīhat*, probably written shortly after the *Kīmiyā*, that the *Mirror* in the *Kīmiyā* reappears in somewhat expanded form. The content of both pieces is the same, but it is arranged in a different order. The piece in the *Kīmiyā* would seem to have been a preliminary draft of the longer, more sophisticated piece which followed.

The relationship between the 'little *Mirror*' in the *Kīmiyā* and its corresponding chapter in the *Ihyā'* is more complicated. The 'little *Mirror*' (Pillar 2, Chapter 10) in the *Kīmiyā* completely replaces its equivalent section in the *Ihyā'* (Pillar 2, Chapter 10) which is not about government

⁹ Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *Kitāb Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyya wa-faḍā'il al-Mustazhiriyya, ḥaḥqaqahū wa-qaddama lahū* 'Abdurrahmān BADAWĪ, Cairo, 1382/1964.

¹⁰ D. KRAWULSKY, *Briefe und Reden des Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Gazzālī*. Übersetzt und erläutert von D. K. (*Islamkundliche Untersuchungen*, 14), Freiburg im Breisgau, 1971.

¹¹ Transl. F. R. C. BAGLEY as *Ghazali's Book of Counsel for Kings (Naṣīhat al-mulūk)*. Transl. [...] from the Persian text edited by J. Humā'ī and the Bodleian Arabic text edited by H. D. Isaacs, with introd., notes and biographical index, London — New York, 1964.

at all but deals with the life and character of the Prophet. And so the question poses itself in the most pressing way — why replace the section of the *Ihyā'* on the life and morals of the Prophet with the Mirror section in the *Kīmiyā*? This change in the content of the *Kīmiyā* is at first glance quite radical. Various possible reasons or inter-related combinations of reasons present themselves. Above all, one may cite the following factors: the audience of the two works, the *Ihyā'* and the *Kīmiyā*, is different; the purpose of the two works is different; and the historical context in which the two works are written is different. But one could argue that he has kept much of the spirit of the section on the Prophet's life in the *Ihyā'* by making the Prophet's words and actions the principal exemplar in this 'little *Mirror*'. It should be added in any case that the presence of the Prophet as an ethical role model is all-pervasive in the *Kīmiyā*.

In some ways this chapter of the *Kīmiyā* can be viewed as a self-standing piece inserted into the larger work. As already mentioned, the *Kīmiyā* covers much of the same ground as the *Ihyā'*, albeit often in a different arrangement of chapters. But the ordering of the chapters in both works is deliberate and careful, and this is particularly so in the case of the *Mirror* in the *Kīmiyā*, the position of which within the overall framework of the *Kīmiyā* is significant. Despite its strongly *Šūfī* ethos, the *Kīmiyā* is arranged like a standard work of *fiqh*; the *Mirror* is placed at the very end of the second pillar which deals with the social behaviour of Muslims (*mu'āmalāt*). This pillar covers a wide range of topics of a 'practical' nature — food, marriage, trade and travel — but it deals too with more far-reaching themes which concern both the upholding of the *sharī'a* and the following of the *Šūfī* path (*ṭarīqa*). It is noteworthy that the whole pillar builds up to a climax with the last two sections — the penultimate one which deals with the exercising of *ḥisba*¹² and the final one, which is the *Mirror*, and which reminds the ruler of the basic principles according to which he should govern. Thus the position of the *Mirror* in the *Kīmiyā* may be regarded as significant, both in its replacing of the equivalent section of the *Ihyā'* which concerns the Prophet himself, and in its being sited as the culmination of the whole pillar which deals with Muslim society. In this obvious way the ruler's role and the paramount importance of his Islamic credentials are highlighted.

¹² Cf. M. COOK, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 428-45.

Why did al-Ghazālī write this *Mirror* in the first place, and why did he write it in Persian? Al-Ghazālī was no stranger to political turbulence. He had witnessed at first-hand the break-up of the empire of the Great Seljuqs and the lethal jostlings for power after the deaths in quick succession of the Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk, the sultan Malikshāh (both in 1092) and the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Muqtadī in 1094. In the ensuing bloodbath al-Ghazālī left Baghdad, alleged by some scholars to have been motivated by fear of the Ismā'īlis or because he had backed the wrong Seljuq pretender to the throne¹³. If the latter supposition is correct, discretion was assuredly the better part of valour for a man with his high profile in the capital.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when al-Ghazālī returned home to Khurāsān, but whenever that was — perhaps around 1100 — the province was in turmoil. He himself alludes to the injustice and tyranny perpetrated by the Turks who:

are unswerving only in pursuit of their passions.... They do not care about obedience and can only revert to the bonds of their innate bestial nature.¹⁴

Quite apart from the general malaise caused by the widespread local anarchy, corruption and injustice, the political climate in Khurāsān in which al-Ghazālī found himself was still in the grip of a paranoia generated by the activities of the Assassins. His vituperative attacks on this 'heretical' group were well known and he may have continued to fear for his life, even in his native land. The peak of the murders attributed to the Assassins came during the decade 1100-1110 — just when al-Ghazālī returned to his homeland — and in particular the violent death of Fakhr al-Mulk, sultan Sanjar's vizier, in 1106, allegedly at the hand of an Assassin, must have had a profound effect on al-Ghazālī¹⁵.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his towering fame, al-Ghazālī also experienced — predictably enough — personal attacks on his Islamic orthodoxy. In one of his Persian letters he refers to one such enemy in Nishāpūr who, jealous of his appointment there as teacher in the *Nizāmiyya madrasa*, intrigued against him. Summoned to the court of sultan

¹³ Cf. the discussion of this in R. J. MCCARTHY, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, Boston, 1980, p. xxxvii-xl.

¹⁴ *Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Bāṭiniyya wa-faḍā'il al-Mustazhiriyya*, ed. BADAŪĪ (v. supra, n. 9), p. 182.

¹⁵ For a discussion of these murders, cf. C. HILLENBRAND, *The Power Struggle between the Saljuqs and the Isma'ilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094-1124: the Saljuq Perspective*, in: *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. F. DAFTARY, Cambridge, 1996, p. 205-220.

Sanjar in c. 503/1109-10 to explain his position, al-Ghazālī vindicated himself and made short work of his enemies¹⁶. It is probably against such a background that al-Ghazālī wrote this ‘little *Mirror*’ on how to govern according to Islamic principles.

There remains one final question. Why write in Persian when he was an outstanding master of Arabic? It is well known that al-Ghazālī wrote in Arabic right up to the very end of his life. As for his Persian works, it would appear likely, and by no means surprising, that almost all of these date to his last years in Khurāsān. Once persuaded to resume his teaching and high public profile (as suggested earlier, it is improbable that al-Ghazālī could ever have totally abandoned these aspects of his life), it is natural that al-Ghazālī would wish to reach a Persian-speaking audience. Moreover, he was surrounded by those who saw him as the great teacher, the *mujaddid* of the new sixth Islamic century, who would revitalize the flagging fortunes of *Sunnī* Islam in turbulent times. His target was now specifically his native province of Khurāsān and its governance, and so his native tongue was the appropriate instrument for his message.

In sum, therefore, al-Ghazālī’s ‘little *Mirror*’ in the *Kīmiyā* is a first draft for a longer, more elaborate but very similar treatment of the same subject in the first (and confidently attributable to al-Ghazālī) part of the *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*. Perhaps he was angling his new chapter on governing towards one particular prince in Khurāsān — possibly Sanjar, although other names could be canvassed. But of course the material in the *Mirror* also has a more general exemplary value from which any ruler may profit.

His audience seems to have been important political and religious figures in the Persian-speaking world, but the timing of this work is also significant. He would appear not to have written a *Mirror* before. In his role as *mujaddid*, as his contemporaries came to view him, al-Ghazālī in the last years of his life seem to have felt the need to underline the vital importance of true religion in a corrupt age in which known truths and spiritual certainties have become effaced, an era overflowing with strife and trouble.

The ‘little *Mirror*’ in the *Kīmiyā* is, as already noted, remarkably free from any pre-Islamic material, in sharp contrast to the ethos of the *Siyāsat-nāma* of Niẓām al-Mulūk, al-Ghazālī’s mentor. The *Mirror* is resolutely homiletic in tone and firmly rooted in Islamic soil. Its coun-

¹⁶ Cf. KRAWULSKY, *Briefe* (v. supra, n. 10).

sels are not muddled by secular precepts and pre-Islamic Persian cultural models. His advice is unequivocal: the ruler should govern according to sound Islamic beliefs and Islam's God-given law. Al-Ghazālī's words have a formidable directness. They warn the ruler that he should be ever mindful of the transience of this world and the imminence of the Last Day. The ruler must know that:

This world is his staging-post (*manzilgāh*), not his permanent residence (*qarārgāh*). He is like a traveller whose mother's womb is his first abode, whose last staging-post is the grave and whose true homeland (*vaṭan*) is beyond that.... Even if a man should live for around a hundred years and be entrusted with dominion on earth from east to west ... what value is that to him in the face of the endless afterlife?¹⁷

Given its plain speaking and its ability to get to the heart of the matters it discusses, it is not surprising that in subsequent centuries the *Kīmiyā* became a source of inspiration for works of quite varied purpose. These include not only other Islamic *Mirrors*, such as the anonymous *Baḥr al-favā'id*¹⁸ in the twelfth century, but also *Šūfī* works such as those of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. Thus this little *Mirror* can claim an illustrious progeny.

¹⁷ *Kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat*, ed. KHEDIVJAM (v. supra, n. 6), p. 525-6.

¹⁸ MEISAMI, *The Sea of Precious Virtues*, p. xiv-xv (v. supra, n. 1), points out the debt owed to the *Kīmiyā* by the author of the *Baḥr al-favā'id*.