

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

June 30, 2015

Negin Yavari, *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2014, vii + 197 pp., \$55.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780199338924.

This article consists of two parts. Section I proposes an understanding of advice literature's literary genre and political function. As such, it serves as a preface to the succeeding review section.

## *Section I*

*The Shah was playing chess with Dalqak [the Jester]. Dalqak checkmated him: immediately the Shah's anger burst out.*

*Dalqak cried, "Checkmate, checkmate!" and the haughty monarch threw the chessmen, one by one, at his head, saying, "Take it! Here is 'checkmate' for you, O scoundrel." Dalqak restrained himself and only called for mercy.*

*The Prince commanded him to play a second game: Dalqak was trembling like a naked man in bitter cold.*

*He played the second game, and the Shah was defeated again. When the moment for saying "checkmate, checkmate" arrived,*

*Dalqak jumped up and ran into a corner and in his fear hastily flung six rugs over himself.*

*There he lay hidden beneath several cushions and six rugs, so that he might escape from the Shah's blows.*

*The Shah exclaimed, "Hi, hi! What have you done? What is this?" He replied, "Checkmate, checkmate, checkmate, checkmate, O excellent Shah!"*

*"O wrathful man who art wrapped in fire, O thou who art defeated by me, while I, defeated by thy Majesty's blows, am crying 'checkmate, checkmate' under thy house-furnishings! How can one tell the truth to thee except under cover?"<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Nicholson, ed. and trans., *The Mathnavi of Jalauddin Rumi*, 8 Vols. (London: Gibb Memorial Series, 1925-40), Book 5, verses 3507-3516 (the translation is Nicholson's with my slight modifications). For the original Persian text see: Jalal al-Din Mohammad Molavi, *Masnavi-ye Ma`navi*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Tehran: Amirkabir, 1987), 1002.

Molavi's anecdote signals a horizon of thought within which one may develop an understanding of advice literature as both a political practice and a literary genre in pre-modern societies in the Middle East. Perhaps his Dalqak rephrases the key concern of a thinker/statesman—say, a vizier—who may author an advice treatise, yet, in addition, must offer practical counsels to the monarch at specific political junctures. Likewise, the ordinary citizens who dare to criticize a tyrant or the majority must have preoccupied themselves with the same concern: “How can one tell the truth to thee except under cover?” What is the makeup of this *cover*, we may ask, and what bearing does it have on the literary genre of the advice discourse? A set of questions stems from the same concern: which discursive practice may effectively and justly convey a critique or a counsel to the monarch? Should an advice treatise assume the task of political criticism and consultation? Let's assume that political praxis can indeed have a manual; then, should, in its discursive modality and purpose, an advice treatise resemble a *manual of governance*—that is, incorporate blunt narratives that supposedly mirror the reality of the moment and include precise rules that presumably enable the monarch to make decisions?

There exists a difference of status between the Shah and Dalqak—the under-*cover* truth-teller. Moreover, Dalqak lacks courage and cannot afford the risk of displeasing the “wrathful man.” He, therefore, factually hides under a cover. On the whole, a monarch of the medieval Islamic era is absolute in sovereignty, and his rage can be lethal to the subject/vizier. It takes a strong will to truth and a great deal of courage—that is, the “political virtue par excellence”<sup>2</sup>—to criticize the monarch blatantly; to tell him the whole truth forthrightly without flattering and without rhetorical dissemblance. The same courage is required when a citizen like Socrates criticizes his fellow citizens' opinions and manners of life—and, Socrates is ready to pay with his life for this upfront discursive practice. Accordingly, we may expect that the specific social situation—that is, the non-democratic power relationship between the vizier-cum-author<sup>3</sup> and the monarch—must have somehow affected and contextualized an advice treatise's mode of enunciation. It must have required the author to apply a *cover*—to shield against the wrath of a king who, in his turn, lacks the courage of receptivity of the naked truth or candid critique. Here, however, the cover has to do with the treatise's very genre of enunciation. In other words, it is the rhetorical modality of the literary tradition of advice that *covers up* a truth, but at once and in part discloses it—including the truth of practical and theoretical “wisdom”<sup>4</sup>—in a figurative manner, through rhetorical strategies such as allegorical fables, “timeless aphorisms,” and “didactic tales” that may “defy the ascription of definitive meaning and interpretation.”<sup>5</sup>

The advice literature, therefore, represents a mode of discourse that is distinct from the modality of unembellished statement of the whole truth (*parrhesia*). As was previously implied, practical reasoning, with its two-fold concern for efficiency and justice, accounts for the discursive modality *and* the purpose of medieval advice treatises. In addition to the non-democratic power relationship between the vizier and the monarch, which makes frank engagement with the latter existentially dangerous, perhaps a second factor has historically

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to viziers, administrators, court secretaries, jurists, theologians, judges, Sufis, and philosophers, and other men of letters have contributed to the repertoire of advice literature.

<sup>4</sup> See Louise Marlow, “Advice and advice literature” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, III*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (2015) <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/advice-and-advice-literature-COM\\_0026](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/advice-and-advice-literature-COM_0026)> (accessed on 28 March 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Neguin Yavari, “Mirrors for Princes or a Hall of Mirrors? Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyar al-muluk* Reconsidered,” *Al-Masaq* 20, 1 (2008), 47 and 52. Also see the book under review, 89-90.

necessitated the rhetorical genre of advice literature. From a medieval philosophical perspective on the composition of the human soul, the king's is a high-spirited soul ( النفس الغضبية ) in which, both *nous* and *eros* are subject to the might of *thumos*—that is, a complex of passions including anger, ambition, arrogance and affection. In other words, the internal structure of the soul distinguishes a king from, say, a philosopher. Through philosophic life the latter's soul converts from a tripartite structure (*nous*, *thumos*, and *eros*) to a bipartite one in which “the fusion of mind (*nous*) and desire (*eros*) holds out the prospect of a unified soul.”<sup>6</sup> In a king's soul, however, *thumos* (spirit) and *eros* (desire) are not detached. Rather than controlling *thumos/eros*, the *nous* is indeed an instrument for fulfilling *thumos*'s will to conquer. Under *thumos*, the king's desire is always possessive, domination-seeking, violent and, accordingly, imperfect in justice. Whereas the converted soul of the philosopher has an almost erotic lust for universal truth, the spirited king has a lust for power and supremacy. In other words, in their universal, demonstrative, and non-metaphorical formulations, the truths about justice and *the good things* are neither appealing nor comprehensible to the monarch's spirited soul which, “wrapped in fire,” subjugates the *nous* (intellect).

The vizier-philosopher-cum-author of the advice treatise knows only too well—experimentally and philosophically—that the monarch's ignorance of justice shall destroy the city and the state; that good governance requires the king's care for, and awareness of, the noble life and its cardinal virtues (justice, wisdom/prudence, courage/fortitude, and moderation/self-control). After all, for Plato, and for his numerous followers in the medieval Islamic period, “until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils...nor will the human race.”<sup>7</sup> The vizier-philosopher recognizes that his time and Plato's are not that different: being a king—that is, the mode of exercising power—still does not coincide with philosophizing—that is, the mode of rational living. An available option, however, presents itself in the form of the vizier-philosopher taking up a role similar to that of a detached intellect ( عقل منفصل ), outside the monarch's soul (in modern terminology, the vizier must represent *raison d'état*)<sup>8</sup> and, accordingly, help the *politeia* and its *nomos* accord with *logos*.

Therefore, the vizier must (A) educate the king, and convey universal truths about good things and moral virtues to the monarch. And, (B) he must give diplomatic counsel on specific junctures.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, since the monarch's soul lacks moderation—that is, in it the subjected *nous* cannot dominate *eros* and *thumos*—the intellectual weakness of the king

<sup>6</sup> See Paul W. Ludwig, “Eros in the Republic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G.R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 202-231, esp. 227-228.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic* in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1100.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Peripatetics the detached Ten Intellects emanate the intelligibles to the philosophers in demonstrative formats—and to the less intellectual men through the sensibilia and figurative images. Accordingly, a vizier-philosopher-cum-author of advice treatises such as Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201-1274), who counseled an absolute tyrant like Hulagu Khan in his siege of Baghdad, is called the “Eleventh Intellect.” It is noteworthy that my application of the concept of *raison d'état* within the frame of pre-modern Islamic political thought does not presuppose a modern separation of fact and value and its corollary, Realpolitik.

<sup>9</sup> Also, secondary matters of education, such as tutoring the prince about the court's etiquettes, bureaucratic principles, and other practical aspects of kingship might be included in task (A) [see Marlow, “Advice and advice literature”). What is of essence to our discussion is that tasks (A) and (B) are *analytically* distinct affairs that are *politically* interconnected; and, that the vizier-philosopher-cum-author's primary service in task (A) is translation of theoretical wisdom's intelligibles into the advice treatise's metaphorical language.

requires the vizier-philosopher to also assume the role of the rhetorician and apply diverse genres such as rhetoric, poetry, dialectic, and, even, sophistry (anything but demonstrative abstract arguments) in order to perform his task (A). In this capacity, that is as the detached intellect whose prudence suggests the use of rhetorical genres in performing task (A), the vizier-philosopher may author an advice treatise. Task (B)—diplomatic counseling—however, requires the counselor to apply an unembellished, sincere, and realistic language.

The art of rhetoric's primary purpose is persuasion and thus not communication of universal intelligibles in their philosophical formats. Rhetorical speech does not necessarily presuppose a care for the freedom of the addressee, nor does it require the rhetorician's personal commitment to mirroring reality through the narrative. Rather, rhetoric usually involves power imposition on the addressee; i.e., it seeks to establish "a constraining bond, a bond of power between what is said and the person to whom it is said."<sup>10</sup> As a detached intellect, the author aspires, or, better, feels a responsibility, to persuade—that is, to foist ideas upon—the king's soul and, in so doing, to improve the king's moral status. After all, in medieval Islamic philosophers' view, the well-being of the city, as well as the happiness of the king, requires the *nous*'s control over the king's *eros* and *thumos*. And, if the king's own intellect is weak and subjected, it becomes the ethical responsibility of the vizier qua detached intellect to seek control over the king's spirit and its whims. Where to, we may ask, does the advice treatise conduct the king? The question can be posed from another angle: What is the expected outcome of the "bond of power" that advice literature aspires to establish between what is said and the addressed king? Michel Foucault's concept of the "parrhesiastic pact"<sup>11</sup> helps us answer this question.

It is my contention that the rhetorical discourse of advice is to persuade the king to enter a parrhesiastic contract with the vizier, and, thus, empower the latter to fulfill his task (B). Accordingly, as I have already pointed out, an advice treatise is not political counseling properly speaking—inasmuch as sincere political counseling presupposes outspokenness, giving precise and conjunctural recommendations or unreserved criticisms, telling all that is truthful without flattery or embellishment, and, of course, taking the risk of death. In other words, political counseling proper—that is, task (B)—is a parrhesiastic discourse while the advice treatise is a strategy of persuasion or a technique for facilitating the parrhesiastic pact. In its turn, the parrhesiastic pact is to increase the safety of the future "parrhesiastic games"—that is, discourses of frank and realistic counseling and criticism—between the counselor and the king. The parrhesiastic pact is to reduce the risk of death and, in so doing, open a guaranteed site for truth-telling in the forthcoming rounds of counseling. In the absence of a democratic institutionalization of power relationships in pre-modern societies, and under autocratic rulers, the *guarantee*, however, is at best a moral obligation that each side of the pact may carry on his shoulder.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the political role and the intellectual value of an advice treatise come to the fore: since the setting is not democratic—and, because the monarch is high-spirited and, oftentimes, his intellect is subjected and weak—the nobility of advice rhetoric resides in its encouraging the king, its primary recipient, to care for truth and for the justness of his

---

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France 1982-1983*, ed. F. Gros and trans. G. Burchell (London: Palgrave-Macmillan Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 203. Also see Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984*, ed. F. Gros and trans. G. Burchell (London: Palgrave-Macmillan Press, 2011), 12, 142-143.

<sup>12</sup> "The long history of doomed glorious viziers preserved in virtually all medieval Islamic writings," Yavari states, shows that, "the procurer of advice is inexplicably eradicated by its intended recipient" (127).

decisions; to develop a more moral and thereby moderate self that honors the parrhesiastic pact. Such a care, enticed by the edificatory and charming spell of the treatise's exhortations, fables, flatteries, poetic and religious utterances, historical fictions, etc., will ultimately serve the well-being of the city because it demands from the king that he exercise power judiciously. The parrhesiastic contract between the monarch and the vizier-counselor requires the latter to be courageous and sincerely reveal the whole truth when counseling the king. In return, the king is required, in order to uphold his end of the pact, to exhibit courage; to be receptive to truth, criticism, and counsel. As a cardinal virtue, therefore, courage is demanded from all parties of the pact.

In modern democratic societies, the parrhesiastic pact is embodied in the constitutional arrangement of power positions. Hence, the existence of institutional sites for the democratic parrhesiastic game between citizens and rulers has in part lessened the need for advice treatises and their persuasive role. In other words, in democratic societies, the Platonic correlation between philosophy and governance as two modes of being takes place within the public arena. In pre-modern settings and under autocratic rulers, however, the populace is largely absent from the game of "monarchic parrhesia" between the king and the counselor.<sup>13</sup> Finally, it is noteworthy that from a methodological point of view, the idea of parrhesiastic pact resembles concepts such as social contract and the state of nature, in being a *heuristic device*. The social contract thinkers apply the idea of a contract between individuals in a hypothetical situation. As a heuristic device, this idea, however, helps those thinkers to articulate the nature of political sovereignty and to explain the bond between citizens. Similarly, the idea of parrhesiastic contract refers to a putative situation that accounts for the bond between the pre-modern monarch and the vizier-counselor. Furthermore, it explains the nature and political function of advice literature.

To conclude, the persuasive and impressive effect of an advice treatise's rhetorical genre mediates its noble political function—that is, opening a site for *raison d'état's* engagement in the ruler's decision-making. Medieval Persian, Arabic, and Turkish works of advice generally represent rhetorical renditions of theoretical wisdom's themes on justice and noble life. In their prudent political function, Middle Eastern mirrors for princes partially reflect practical wisdom's attempt to facilitate rational governance.

## Section II

Yavari's *Advice for the Sultan* resourcefully discloses a set of key universal intelligibles that the medieval treatises wish to convey to the monarch in the vessel of rhetorical speech. The aptly chosen subtitle—*Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam*—encapsulates the volume's central point: beneath the calm surface of religious images, historical fictions, anecdotes, allegories, flatteries, etc., that represent the recurring narrative pattern of many an advice treatise, there exists a sub-current of judgments by reason alone (henceforth, Reason) about the nature of just ruling, noble living, and dignified self-making. The voice of a major advice treatise such as Nezam al-Molk's *Siyasat Nameh* is prophetic—that is, revealing rhetorical images in abundance—while, it is reason *alone*—the *detached* intellect or, in an expression with present-day currency, "secular" rationality (83)—that founds the rhetoric of the surface and gives ultimate meaning to the treatise's voice. In the vizier-philosopher's view, the high-spirited king cannot—or, shall not—get this point; he must take the advice treatise's discourse quite literally, as a mirror image of reality, and not as "patchworks" of

---

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 59.

tales “ambiguous in provenance and chronology” (75). In a sense, the advice treatise must be a *mirror to the prince*: the vizier-philosopher’s political prudence demands that the treatise appear to the prince as a mirror that depicts truth and reality factually and precisely. Otherwise the treatise fails its political function: since the spirited monarch’s subjected intellect ceases to handle the universals in their philosophical format, and, while he fancies that the anecdotes and metaphors of the treatise are but old wives’ tales without any universal grounding beneath them, the king tears the last controlling cord over his violent *thumos* and releases its unreserved will to power. The outcome, the vizier-philosopher observes, is ignoble governance and political decline. Accordingly, Yavari asks the reader to appreciate the rhetorical nature of advice literature without ignoring its underlying rationality; i.e., without dismissing the rhetorical voice as superfluous because its narratives are not factually accurate, or because it does not offer scientific or philosophical analyses of politics. The works of advice from the pre-modern Islamic era are neither grandiose philosophical essays on governance nor diplomatic manuals of policy minutia and recommendations. After all, philosophical and diplomatic modalities of discourse are distinct from the rhetorical genre.

As previously mentioned, the volume inspects copious examples to uncover a number of grounding rational intelligibles that mediate the rhetorical exterior of advice literature. The fundamental truth that is voiced rhetorically in many a treatise of advice is that justice and truth are greater than the king, and if the monarch is not in control of his own self—that is, if *nous* (intellect) does not dominate his soul—his governance fails the criterion of justice (22-23). Accordingly, the foundational rationality that mediates the figurative dialect of advice literature amounts to the point that well-being, “proper conduct, proper faith [please take heed: proper faith/*religion*] and proper rule” are realizable under the rule of Reason (75). In other words, Reason should govern the king’s soul, the city and its religion. In pre-Islamic Persian treatises such as *Denkard* and *Abd-e Ardashir*, the philosophical theme of Reason’s absolute sovereignty finds its figurative account in terms of brotherhood between religion and kingship. And, this formulation continues its presence in “almost every specimen of medieval Islamic advice literature” (37).<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of brotherhood instructs the king that preservation of religion and promotion of justice are concurrent responsibilities of the king (32), and, that the king should not allow religion to be hijacked by corrupted people since “religion is the foundation of sovereignty and kingship its pillar, and who controls the foundation is in a better position to wrest control of the entire edifice” (33). So, the king must “oversee the affairs of religion” and, since the masses’ hearts are “most vulnerable to religious propaganda,” the king should not allow anyone—including the religious experts—to “carve for themselves an independent sphere” of control over the community’s religious beliefs, affection, and fear (33, 77).

These lines may remind us of Machiavelli’s maxim according to which founding religions is the prerequisite of founding states.<sup>15</sup> He blatantly recommends that the prince must care for his image in his subjects’ eyes and control or shape mass mentality—that realization of hegemonic sovereignty requires either a prophet who acquires the king’s sword or a king who takes the affairs of religion in his own hands, so that power is over the subjects’ minds

---

<sup>14</sup> Also see Shaul Shaked, “From Iran to Islam: Notes on Some Themes in Transmission,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 75-91.

<sup>15</sup> See: Ronald Beiner, “Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion,” *The Review of Politics* 55, 4 (1993), 622.

and bodies altogether.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, pre-modern Persian, Arabic, and Turkish advice literature is far from *direct* expression of this “realist” or pragmatic outlook on religion. Though—especially in the case of works with Iranian socio-cultural background—the treatises signal “parity between the kings and prophets” and “frequently imply that kings and prophets are equivalent in their cosmic station,”<sup>17</sup> the literature simultaneously shows a different tendency according to which kingship and prophethood are different in “stature.” Consequently, the fear of God and the appeals of worldly fame and otherworldly prize are frequently invoked by the pre-modern treatise:<sup>18</sup> the king, *Siyasat Nameh* states, must outdo everyone in “devotion to religion”; he must be “acquainted with the divine precepts and prohibitions and put them into practice.” He must “obey the commands of God...and...respect the doctors of religion” so that “in this world he shall have fame, and in the next world he shall find salvation” and “reward” (34). Yet another trend is traceable: the treatises may also express a belief in the “close proximity” or the “complementary and equally indispensable roles” of the kings and prophets.<sup>19</sup>

On the one hand, therefore, advice literature reveals a propensity to political “realism”—most clearly stated in Ibn Muqaffa’s call for “subordination of religion to kingship” (42)<sup>20</sup>—and, on the other hand, there exists the most orthodox recommendation to the ruler of religiosity: of quest for worldly fame or reward in Paradise, and of fear of fire in Hell (76). On the one hand, religion’s thriving is said to be dependent on wisdom/Reason (36, 85); religion is conceptualized largely based on its political function—that is, integration of the believer/citizen into the societal whole (70-71), and, accordingly, religious heresy and disorder are declared punishable due to their harm to societal bond (137). Time and again, the king is advised to “oversee the religion” (35), and, *raison d’état* is designated to “guide” governance and decide on religious understanding (45). Reason alone—not the god of religion, not the king’s “ideological commitment” (52)—is said to be leading the good ruler while “religion proclaims obedience to him [the good ruler] as law” (50). In other words, obedience to the king is frequently presented as the essence of the divine law. The king is recognized as being chosen directly by God and his rule is said to depend on justice and good counsel, not on the clerics’ approval (77). On the other hand, Reason is repeatedly introduced as religion’s brother—and, not its guardian, arbitrator, or governor. How should we understand these divergent motifs of advice literature?

The quick, though cursory, answer is that the incoherence signals that the works of advice are intellectually superfluous. Chapters one through four of Yavari’s *Advice for the Sultan*, however, reveal the impropriety of this response (also see 91-92). Whereas logical accuracy and coherence are required from scientific or philosophical discourses, a rhetorical text’s meaningfulness and noble political function do not presuppose its coherence. This

<sup>16</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. H. C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Marlow, “Kings, Prophets and the ‘Ulama’ in Medieval Islamic Advice Literature,” *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995), 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, 108.

<sup>20</sup> In early second century of Islam, while the *Shari’a* had not yet emerged as a systematic legal code, the Persian Ruzbeh-e Daduyeh (d. 756), also known as Ibn Muqaffa’, proposed that the caliph should assume responsibility over religious affairs, take the administration of the religious laws in his own hands, and, legislate based on: A) precedent and usage; B) tradition and analogy; and, C) his own decision. See: S. D. Goitein, “A Turning Point in the History of the Muslim State,” in *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 163-164; and Said Amir Arjomand, “Abd Allah Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ and the ‘Abbasid Revolution,” *Iranian Studies* 27, 1-4 (1994), 15, 32.

notion bears with it, I would claim, the point that it is the prudence of the vizier qua rhetorician that decides how an intelligible universal such as the absolute sovereignty of Reason should mediate the texture of metaphors, come closer to clarity at a moment, and get *covered up* by, say, the rigorous language of religious orthodoxy, in another. As formerly observed, the vizier-philosopher who embodies Reason knows that Reason is “antithetical to the king’s nature” (75). Such a king’s ideological commitment to a particular set of religious credos and laws, and its opposite—that is, his unbelief in otherworldly punishment and reward—can be equally harmful to the city. The king cannot comprehend the abstract idea of Reason’s absolute sovereignty—as his own *nous* lacks sovereignty over his *thumos* and *eros*. Nevertheless, the metaphor of brotherhood communicates to his faculty of imagination an *image* or a similitude of the abstract/philosophical truth. Accordingly, we may conclude, the vizier qua rhetorician’s acumen suggests incorporation of divergent motifs in the treatise so that, at specific political junctures, the counselor would possibly benefit from a certain motif that is previously settled in the king’s imagination by the treatise. At a certain moment, the motif of religious orthodoxy may assist the vizier to tame the spirited king’s passionate will to power and, in another instance, the motif of the king’s overseeing religion may assist the monarch to preserve his hegemonic power, transcend the appearance of religious/ideological credos and laws, and solidify the state’s position vis-à-vis its rival in the power struggle—that is, the clerical establishment.

The second major theme pertaining to rationality as such that is conveyed in pre-modern Middle Eastern advice literature concerns the relationship between political practice and the principle of historical uncertainty. Machiavelli is usually credited as the first truly modern thinker who, rejecting the religious notion of reality-as-fate, crystallized “the ideas of the age [of modernity] in the symbol of the Prince” whose political expertise engages *virtu* with *fortuna* and, in so doing, restores and secures the modern nation-state.<sup>21</sup> *Virtu* indicates active and prudent intervention in the natural or historical circumstances that may present themselves as matters of chance (*fortuna*). At the dawn of modernity, religious submission to a metaphysically given condition/fate was to be replaced by modern man’s rational counter-measures to his historical condition. Accordingly, political change was to be seen as the outcome of, not the historical circumstance’s sheer fortuitousness, but the agents’ engagement with the reality and its opportunities. In the fifth chapter Yavari defines “secular” political thought in terms of this non-submissive belief in the dialectic of *virtu-fortuna*. The chapter persuasively shows that “the mirrors in fact provide an opening for the taming of Fortune and neutralizing the effects of accident, chance and luck” (93). Medieval treatises such as *Kalila va Dimna* and *Siyasat Nameh* suggest taking precautionary and rational counter-measures against the uncertainty of the heavenly sphere’s wheel or whirl (چرخ فلک) (82-83). In terms of *virtu*, these treatises recommend that the monarch equip himself with prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Emblematic of practical wisdom, these virtues are clearly distinct from religious virtues such as piety, hope, charity, and faith. In other words, while the latter religious virtues accord with submissive acceptance of reality as metaphysical/divine fate, virtues of the former sort assist rational political engagement with reality and facilitate its alteration. This point is reflected in advice literature’s discourse on chess and backgammon, which metaphorically expresses the contrast and dialectic between rational political practice and the principle of historical uncertainty. On the one hand, the study of chess is repeatedly recommended to the ruler since it is “governed by codes and calculations” and is “impervious to fortune.” The pre-Islamic Persian king, Khosrow Parviz,

<sup>21</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Machiavelli’s Prince: Background and Formation,” *The Review of Politics* 13, 2 (1951), 142.



is praised for playing chess, “for all the world looks to me for solutions, how can I seek solutions from two pieces of dead bone?”—that is, the backgammon’s dice which symbolize the element of chance in historical conditions. On the other hand, Khosrow’s wise vizier, Bozorgmehr, is credited for bringing “elements of backgammon” to chess in order to reflect the reality of political practice in its dialectic with *fortuna* (74-75).

To sum up, *Advice for the Sultan* is a perceptive study of pre-modern Middle Eastern mirrors for princes. It is wary of reifying the contrast between secular/rational politics and religious politics. It highlights the themes of theoretical and practical—“secular”—rationality that, through the rhetorical and religious language of the mirrors, mediated politics in the region during the medieval period. These points signal the volume’s contribution to the developing field of history of Middle Eastern political thought. Students and scholars of the history of ideas will find *Advice for the Sultan* of great analytic value.

Alireza Shomali  
Department of Political Science  
Wheaton College (Massachusetts)

© 2015: Alireza Shomali

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Shomali, Alireza, Review of *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam*, *SCTIW Review*, June 30, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/637>.

ISSN: 2374-9288