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Ibn Sīnā's Literary Impact: Medical Poetry and Its Influence

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ABSTRACT

Ibn Sīnā, also known as Avicenna (980-1037 AD), made substantial contributions to Unani medical literature through his poetic endeavors also. His poetic compositions not only served as educational aids but also acted as reservoirs of medical wisdom, presented in a more accessible and memorable form. Avicenna's medical poetry covered a wide array of subjects, spanning from anatomy and physiology to pharmacology and medical ethics. His intention was to simplify intricate medical principles, facilitating comprehension and retention among students and practitioners. Avicenna's impact transcended his time, as his medical verses endured through the ages, enriching the study and dissemination of medical knowledge across the Islamic Golden Age and beyond.

INTRODUCTION:

Author: Ibn Sīnā (980-1037 AD)

Full name: Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Ḥasan bin ʿAlī ibn Sīnā al-Balkhi al-Bukhari

Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, was born in 980 C.E. in the village of Afshana near Bukhara, now part of Uzbekistan. Displaying exceptional intellectual prowess from a young age, he was proficient in the Qur'an and the Arabic classics by ten. Over the next six years, he immersed himself in Muslim jurisprudence, philosophy, natural science, logic, Euclid's geometry, and the Almagest. At 17, he turned his focus to medicine, which he found "not difficult." By 18, he had gained a reputation as a skilled physician.

Ibn Sina possessed remarkable powers of absorption and retention of knowledge, devouring the contents of libraries and composing his first book by 21. According to Al-Qifti, he completed 21 major and 24 minor works on philosophy, medicine, theology, geometry, astronomy, and more. He claimed that there was no addition to his knowledge after the age of 18, having mastered multiple disciplines by then.

He documented his achievements extensively and passed away at 57, leaving behind over 450 books. His most famous work, "Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb" (The Canon of Medicine), contains about a million words. Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb has been translated into nearly every major Western and Eastern language, including French, Spanish, German, English, Russian, Japanese, Persian, Uzbek, and Urdu. For the past thousand years, scholars have continuously engaged with his texts, ensuring that his contributions to knowledge remain recognized and understood by educated people.

In the annals of medical history, Ibn Sina's name shines brightly, earning him the epithet "Father of Modern Medicine," similar to how Hippocrates is revered as the "Father of Medicine." Avicenna lived during the pinnacle of Islamic Arabic culture in the flourishing Abbasid period of the fourth century of the Islamic era, a time marked by remarkable intellectual and scholarly achievements. His enduring legacy as a prodigious intellect and prolific writer continues to inspire generations of scholars and thinkers.

Ibn Sina asserted, "Listen carefully to my words and act upon them; medicine is the sum of my teachings." He also said, "I am so invaluable that no buyer worthy of me can be found." Fully aware of his greatness, he gained significant importance in his own time, and his personality became legendary. [1, 2, 3]

The importance of poetry

The impact of poetry often surpasses that of prose because what might require ten pages of prose to express with force and power, a poet can convey in a single verse. This principle is also prevalent in science. Medicine, intertwined with science, similarly communicates profound meanings with minimal words. Analyzing a single verse often reveals that its explanation could span ten pages. Essentially, poetry encapsulates vast oceans of meaning into a mere cup. The foundation of early Greek history is laid in poetry. People memorized verses by heart, passionately reciting national history and battle poetry. Across all world literatures, poetry has historically preceded prose due to its significant power and influence. The impact of poetry is unparalleled, even by the best prose. Moreover, poetry is easier to remember than prose; a paragraph of prose cannot be recalled word for word.

A poem you revisit repeatedly resonates deeply with your inner self. Ghalib, celebrated as a great poet, is cherished because his verses resonate with our daily lives. This quality emerges when a poet has experienced life's myriad ups and downs, joys, and sorrows. When these emotions are woven into their verses, they radiate with color and brilliance.

The earliest forms of literature in Greece, as well as in other languages of the world, manifested in poetry. While prose began to take shape in Greece before the 6th century BCE, examples of poetry had already emerged by the 10th century BCE. Greek civilization, being more advanced than its contemporaries in science, philosophy, and medicine, was also far ahead in literature and poetry. The epic poems of the great Greek poet Homer mark the beginning of Greek history. Homer's poetry even contains terminology from medicine and other sciences, illustrating the interrelation of knowledge. Additionally, ancient history can be gleaned from the works of other Greek poets.

Before the advent of Islam in Arabia, no written books existed on any subject; the entire literary tradition was confined to poetry, which people listened to attentively. This underscores poetry's significance in preserving and conveying cultural and historical knowledge across civilizations. [4, 5]

Literary legacy of Ibn Sīnā

Avicenna's prolific output encompassed a vast array of subjects, ranging from physics, mathematics, and economics to chemistry, natural history, religion, philosophy, music, and notably, medicine.

His literary legacy comprises nearly 450 treatises, with approximately 240 having endured the test of time. Among these, around 150 delve into philosophy, while 40 focus specifically on medicine. Of particular significance is his contribution to Medical Poetry, where Arabic didactic verse served as a vehicle to impart knowledge in an accessible and memorable manner, encapsulating complex medical principles into concise poetic forms.

Medical poetry became a popular device for learning simple concepts of therapeutics and regimen, because the rhyming verses enabled the student or practitioner to quickly retain the basic ideas. Numerous medical treatises were rendered into verse to help students memorize basic concepts.

Among Ibn Sīnā's notable compositions in Medical Poetry are: [3]

1. Al-Urjuzah fi al-Tibb (Poem on Medicine)

2. Al-Urjuzah fi Wasaya al-Tibbiya (A Poem on Medical Guidance)

3. Urjuzah fi Amraḍ Jafn al-Aiyn (A Poem on Diseases of the Eyelid)

4. Urjuzah fi Tarif al-Nabḍ wal-Baul (A Poem on the Knowledge of the Pulse and Urine)

5. Urjuzah fi tadbir al-Siḥḥah fi al-Fusul al-Arbaʻah (Poem on the Regimen of Health in the Four Seasons)

6. Urjuzah fi al-Tashreeh (A Poem on Anatomy)

7. Urjuzah al-Mujarrabat fil-Tibb (A Poem on Tested Drugs)

Discussion

This study endeavors to shed light on the noteworthy contributions of Ibn Sīnā, an Arab thinker renowned by both ancient and contemporary scholars as the preeminent figure among Muslim philosophers. Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya (Egyptian National Library) has published a

comprehensive list of his works and their commentaries, totaling over 150 printed works and manuscripts. These encompass a wide array of disciplines, including poetry, acquired and disseminated by Avicenna. Avicenna's renown primarily rests on his philosophical and medical writings. His philosophical treatises have captivated Western thinkers for centuries, with his works becoming seminal texts in the field. In medicine, his magnum opus, al-Qanun (The Canon), was translated into Latin in the late twelfth century AD, subsequently serving as a cornerstone in medical education across European universities until the seventeenth century.

Avicenna's influence has garnered extensive scholarly attention throughout history, leading to the publication of numerous books, treatises, and articles examining various facets of his life and work. However, one aspect that remains relatively understudied is his contribution to medical poetry. By delving into Avicenna's medical poetry, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of his multifaceted legacy, offering fresh insights into his approach to medicine and the dissemination of knowledge in poetic form. [6, 7]

Medical Poetry

Arabic didactic verse served as a potent tool for imparting knowledge in a concise and memorable format. Medical poetry, in particular, gained popularity as a means of conveying simple concepts of therapeutics and regimen, thanks to the rhyming quatrains that facilitated swift retention of basic ideas. Numerous treatises on various subjects, ranging from grammar to astronomy, were translated into verse to aid students in memorizing fundamental concepts.

These poetic compositions typically employed the Rajaz verse form, characterized by an iambic meter with a pattern of syllabic repetitions that produced a distinctive, jingling sound conducive to memorization. While this poetic pedagogy enjoyed immense popularity in medieval literature, many examples remain in manuscript form and are yet to be published. Unfortunately, the use of didactic poetry for teaching serious subjects like medicine has waned over time, resulting in a lack of scholarly attention from historians.

Despite this trend, Ibn Sīnā, stands out as a prolific writer who composed hundreds of works, including the monumental 'al-Qanun'. In addition to his scholarly treatises, Ibn Sīnā also delved into the realm of medical poetry, producing several notable works in this genre. While the specifics of his medical poetry are briefly mentioned here, it is evident that Ibn Sīnā's

contributions extend beyond conventional prose, encompassing the creative and mnemonic realm of poetic expression. [6, 7]

1. Urjuzah fi al-Tibb (أرجوزة في الطب) (Poem on Medicine)

The most renowned Arabic didactic medical poem, simply titled "A poem on medicine" (Urjūzah fī al-ṭibb), was authored by Ibn Sīnā. This poem, written in the Rajaz verse form, emerged as the most popular among medieval Arabic medical poems. Divided into two parts (Juz), it covers general medical principles as well as regimen and therapeutics.

It begins with this poem:

اسمع جميع وصيتى واعمل بها

فالطب مجموع بنص كلامى

Despite its ancient origins, "A poem on medicine" retained its popularity through the centuries, as evidenced by the numerous manuscripts preserved today. Its influence extended beyond the Arab world, as it was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the mid-12th century and later by Armengaud de Blaise of Montpellier. These translations facilitated its dissemination and popularity in Europe during the Middle Ages. The poem was often accompanied by commentaries, with one of the most notable being by the Spanish Arab physician Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes (d. 1198 AD). Ibn Rushd's commentary provided valuable insights and interpretations of Avicenna's work. Other commentaries include those by Musá ibn Ibrāhīm al-Baghdadī and Ali ibn Abdullāh ibn Hayder (d. 1463 AD). Manuscript copies of "A poem on medicine" are preserved in libraries worldwide, including the National Library of Medicine in the USA. Additionally, a beautifully handwritten manuscript dating back to 10th Shawwal, 1215 AH, is housed in the Ibn Sīnā Academy of Medieval Medicine and Sciences in Aligarh, India, serving as a testament to the enduring legacy of Avicenna's contribution to medical literature. [8, 9]

Publication:

Ibn Sīnā's book, "A Poem on Medicine," has been subject to numerous publications and translations, attesting to its enduring significance in the realm of medical literature. Here is a compilation of some notable editions and translations:

1. M. al-Baba edited the Arabic text of Ibn Sīnā's poem in his book "Min Mu'allafat Ibn Sīnā al-Tibbiyah" (Aleppo: Ma‘had al-turath al-ilmi al-arabi, 1984), spanning pages 90-194.

2. Henri Jahier and Abdelkader Noureddine published an Arabic-Latin-French edition and translation under the title "Avicenne, Poème de la médecine, Urguza fi al-tibb, Cantica Avicennae" (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1956). This edition utilized three copies, two in Paris and one in Algiers.

3. An Arabic text with German translation was produced by Allal Sīnāceur, Sonja Brentjes, and Sāmī Shalhūb in collaboration with Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Burchard Brentjes, and was published in 1980 from Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Leipzig.

4. Siyavash Samandar translated the poem into Persian with the title "Ash‘ar-i Pizishki-i Bu Ali," which was published in 1993 by Navid-i Shiraz, Shiraz.

5. Haven C Krueger provided an English translation titled "Avicenna's Poem on Medicine," based on the French translation by Jahier and Noureddine. This translation was published in 1963 by Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Illinois.

6. Translations into Spanish, Uzbek, and Dutch languages were also made available.

7. A German translation titled "Avicenna: Das Lehrgedicht über die Heilkunde" was published by K. Optiz.

8. The Urjuzah was published alongside Ibn Rushd's commentary from Calcutta in 1829 AD and republished from Lucknow in 1845 AD. Additionally, it was translated into Urdu by Abdul Aziz Batalvi under the title "Jawahar al-Nafees fi Sharh Urjuzah al-Shaikh al-Rais."

These various editions and translations have played a crucial role in making Ibn Sīnā's medical poem accessible to a wider audience across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ensuring its continued relevance and impact in the field of medicine.

2. Al-Urjuzah fi Wasaya al-Tibbiya (A Poem on the medical guidance):

الارجوزة فی الوصایا الطبیہ

The proper schedule and timing of drug administration are essential aspects addressed in this book, underscoring the significance of strategic medication management. Copies of this valuable manuscript are safeguarded in libraries such as those in Berlin, Nur Uthmania, and Ahmad Thalith, ensuring access to this vital knowledge for generations to come.

The book commences with the following evocative poem, setting the tone for the meticulous guidance and wisdom contained within its pages:

اول یوم تنزل الشمس الحمل
تشرب ماء فاترا علی عجل

3. Al-Urjuzah fi Tadbeer al-Sihhah fi al-Fusul al-Arba’ah

(Poem on the Regimen of Health in the Four Seasons):

الارجوزة فی تدبیر الصحة فی الفصول الاربعة

The poem authored by Ibn Sīnā on regimen and health management throughout the changing seasons has circulated under several titles, each reflecting its focus on the cyclical nature of the year and its impact on human health. Among these titles, the most common designation, as per the National Library of Medicine copy, is the one mentioned above. Additionally, alternative titles include "Al-Urjuzah fi al-Fusul al-Arba’a" (poem on the four seasons) and "Urjūzah fī al-fuṣul al-arba‘ah al-da'ir fī al-sanah" (poem on the four seasons progressing through the year).

M. al-Baba edited this treatise in his work "Min Mu'alafat Ibn Sīnā al-Tibbiyat" (Aleppo: Ma‘had al-turath al-‘ilmi al-‘arabi, 1984), pages 195-206, under the title "Urjūzah Mansub ilá Ibn Sīnā fī Tadbīr al-Ṣiḥḥah." Furthermore, a commentary titled "al-Qaul al-Anis" القول الانیس و در النفیس علی منظومة الشیخ الرئیس by Madyan ibn Abdur Rahman al-Tabeeb accompanies the poem, preserved in the Library Raghib Pasha, Istanbul. [10]

Copies of this valuable manuscript are safeguarded in prestigious libraries such as those in Berlin, Vatican, and Istanbul, ensuring its preservation and accessibility for scholarly study and research.

4. Urjuzah al-Mujarrabat fi al-Tibb:

أرجوزة المجربات فى الطب

The manuscript titled "A Poem on Tested Drugs" is a valuable resource preserved in esteemed libraries across the globe. Copies of this manuscript are safeguarded in libraries including the British Museum, Ayasofia, Nur Uthmania, and Viana (Spain), ensuring its accessibility for scholarly study and research. This manuscript serves as a compendium of tested drugs, offering invaluable insights into the pharmacological properties and therapeutic uses of various substances. Its preservation in renowned institutions underscores its significance as a key resource in the field of medicine and pharmacology.

5. Al-Urjuzah fi al-Tashreeh:

الارجوزة فى التشريح

The book on Anatomy, comprised of 98 poetries elucidating the anatomy of various body parts, stands as a testament to the intersection of literature and medical science. Copies of this invaluable manuscript are safeguarded in esteemed libraries including those of the Vatican and the British Museum, ensuring its preservation for future generations of scholars and researchers. Each poetry within this book serves as a unique exploration of anatomical structures, offering detailed descriptions and insights into the complexities of the human body. Through poetic expression, the author provides a creative and mnemonic approach to understanding anatomy, facilitating comprehension and retention of essential anatomical knowledge. The preservation of this manuscript in prestigious institutions highlights its significance as a scholarly resource, contributing to the ongoing study and appreciation of human anatomy throughout history. [11]

6. Al-Urjuzah fi al-Bāh:

الارجوزة فى الباه

The book on aphrodisiacs serves as a fascinating exploration of human desire and sexual health, offering insights into the historical understanding and usage of substances believed to enhance libido and sexual performance. Copies of this intriguing manuscript are housed in renowned institutions such as the British Museum, the Wahabi Library in Istanbul, and the Raza Library in Rampur, India. Preservation of this manuscript in prestigious libraries

underscores its historical and cultural significance, providing valuable insights into the attitudes towards sexuality and wellness in different periods and regions. As a resource for scholars and researchers, it offers a unique window into the practices and beliefs surrounding aphrodisiacs throughout history, enriching our understanding of human sexuality and its intersection with medicine and culture.

7. Urjuzah fi Amrad Jafn al-Aiyn (A Poem on Diseases of the Eyelid):

ارجوزة فى امراض جفن العين

The poem on ocular complaints, although not explicitly attributed to Ibn Sīnā in the manuscripts, shares thematic and structural similarities with other works traditionally associated with the renowned polymath. Found in collections alongside Ibn Sīnā's acknowledged compositions and following the sequence of his other medical poems, it is plausible that this poem was also considered to be authored by Ibn Sīnā. This short didactic poem, focusing on various diseases of the eye, is preserved in manuscripts housed in esteemed institutions such as the National Library of Medicine, the Welcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine in London, and the Vatican. While the authorship is not explicitly stated in these manuscripts, the contextual placement alongside other works attributed to Ibn Sīnā suggests a connection. Despite not being included in bibliographical studies of Ibn Sīnā's compositions and lacking explicit attribution, the poem's thematic coherence and alignment with Ibn Sīnā's medical composition warrant consideration of its potential authorship by the polymath. As the sole surviving copies, these manuscripts offer valuable insights into the historical understanding and treatment of ocular ailments, contributing to our broader understanding of Ibn Sīnā's medical legacy. [13]

8. Urjūzah fī Tarīf al-Nabḍ wa al-Baul (A Poem on the Knowledge of the Pulse and Urine):

ارجزة فى تعريف النبض والبول

The short didactic poem on detecting features of the pulse and urine for medical prognostics is attributed to Ibn Sīnā in some manuscripts, including the copy housed in the National Library of Medicine (MS A 34, item 2). Although the attribution does not occur within the poem itself, it is noted in a table of contents for the volume written on the first leaf. This attribution lends credibility to the association of the poem with Ibn Sīnā's authorship.

Furthermore, the poem shares thematic and sequential similarities with Ibn Sīnā's acknowledged compositions, as it immediately follows a copy of the (first half of) Urjūzah fīl-Ṭibb (Poem on Medicine) in both the NLM and Wellcome Library manuscripts. This contextual placement suggests a deliberate association between the poem and Ibn Sīnā's medical works. Given these factors, including the attribution in the table of contents and its alignment with Ibn Sīnā's other medical compositions, it is reasonable that this poem was indeed authored by the renowned polymath. Its inclusion in manuscripts housed in esteemed institutions such as the National Library of Medicine and the Wellcome Library underscores its significance as a valuable resource for understanding medical prognostics in historical contexts. [12]

CONCLUSION:

Poetry has long served as a powerful tool for preserving and disseminating knowledge across cultures and time periods. In ancient Greece, where writing was not yet established, events and stories were often memorized and passed down through the oral tradition in the form of poetry. Homer's epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, stand as prime examples of this tradition, exerting a profound influence on Western literature.

Similarly, in the realm of medicine, figures like Ibn Sīnā and other Unani physicians recognized the efficacy of poetic expression in conveying complex scientific concepts. While the task of transforming scientific knowledge into poetry may be challenging, the composition of medical issues in poetic forms dates back to the early Arabic period, illustrating the enduring appeal and utility of this literary device.

To advance our understanding of Unani medicine and harness the potential of ancient texts, we should prioritize exploration and research into the medicinal properties of Unani drugs mentioned in these foundational works. By adopting a mindset characterized by productivity, focus, intuition, analysis, and creativity, we can uncover valuable insights and contribute to the continued evolution of medical knowledge and practice.

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