



Hyperbole Serving an Ideal: A New Perspective on the Function of Hyperbole in Anvari's Panegyric Qasidas

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1. Introduction

Hyperbole in Anvari's panegyric qasidas has long been one of the most controversial subjects in Persian literary scholarship. What distinguishes Anvari's poetry is the striking disparity between the idealized image of his patrons and the historical realities of the Seljuk court. This discrepancy has led generations of scholars to interpret his panegyrics primarily as products of excessive flattery. Scholars such as Hamidi (1959: 167–168), Modarres Razavi (1961: 133), Shafi'i Kadkani (1993: 123), and Rypka (1985: 57), while acknowledging Anvari's exceptional poetic imagination and stylistic innovation, likewise regard his use of hyperbole as exceeding conventional poetic norms.

This article offers a different interpretation of the function of hyperbole in Anvari's panegyric poetry. Drawing on al-Fārābī's theory of the imaginative power of poetry and the position of poets in medieval Iranian court culture, it argues that Anvari's hyperboles should not be understood merely as instruments of praise or material gain. Rather, they functioned as an imaginative and ethical strategy through which ideal courtly virtues were projected before rulers and courtiers alike. The central question is whether Anvari's exaggerated representations of his patrons can be interpreted as an indirect means of ethical cultivation rather than simple flattery. It argues that, as a poet familiar with philosophy and the rational sciences, Anvari

deliberately employed hyperbole to construct an ideal ethical vision encouraging ethical self-reflection among his patrons. While this strategy undoubtedly served his material interests, it also fulfilled an ethical and reformative function.

2. Literature Review

The critique of hyperbole in Persian panegyric poetry has a long history. As early as the eleventh century, Onsor al-Ma'āli, in the *Qābus-nameh*, emphasized the importance of maintaining a proper balance between praise and reality and cautioned against attributing impossible qualities to patrons (Onsor al-Ma'āli, 1992: 191). Later, Shams Qeys Razi, in *Al-Mo'jam*, explicitly criticized Anvari, arguing that some of his panegyrics elevated their subjects beyond the rank of kings (Shams Qeys, 2009: 367–368). Modern scholars, including Zarrinkub (1995: 180), Vazinpur (1995: 189), Shahidi (1971: 289), and Mo'tamen (n.d.: 28), have likewise criticized Anvari for the excessive hyperbole in his panegyric poetry.

These studies offer three main explanations. The first is material, attributing Anvari's hyperbole to dependence on patrons' gifts (Shahidi, 1971: 28; Vazinpur, 1995: 189; Mo'tamen, n.d.: 28). The second is political, emphasizing the despotic and unstable atmosphere of the Seljuk court (Shafi'i Kadkani, 1993: 158). The third is literary, explaining hyperbole as the result of competition among court poets seeking patronage (Shahidi, 1971: 289). Although valuable, these interpretations tend to present one-sided readings of Anvari's poetry.

Relatively little attention has been paid to the educational role of poetry in al-Fārābī's thought and the distinguished position of poets within medieval Persian court culture. These neglected aspects provide the basis for the alternative interpretation proposed in this study.

3. Result and discussion

According to al-Fārābī, the cultivation of virtue is achieved through two forms of influence: rational persuasion (logical argument) and imaginative influence (the creation of an ideal world). In this imagined world, virtues appear in their highest form, and the audience is guided toward their realization through these ideal images (al-Fārābī, 1961: 49). Al-Fārābī regards the poet as a guide who leads the audience into this ideal world (ibid.: 50).

This theory is also reflected in Persian literary texts. In the *Chāhār Maqāleh* (Four Essays), Nezāmi Arūzi illustrates the transformative power of poetry through the account of its influence on Abdollāh Khājestāni and Rūdaki's famous qasida for Nasr ibn Ahmad Sāmāni (Nezāmi Arūzi, 2009: 42, 50–57). Moreover, court poets occupied the distinguished position of companions and confidants of kings, enabling them to influence their patrons' thoughts and conduct (Awfi, 1906: 36).

Anvari lived during a period in which the Seljuk court, owing to its nomadic origins, lacked a codified system of courtly etiquette and was characterized by harshness and political instability (Zarrinkub, 2005: 494). According to Safā (1990, vol. 2: 118) and Rāvandi (2007: 171), the period was marked by internal conflicts, uprisings among military commanders, oppression, and the weakening of central authority.

Within this context, many scholars have interpreted Anvari's hyperboles as mere flattery. This study, however, argues that amid the moral crisis of the Seljuk court, a poet aware of the imaginative power of poetry could employ hyperbole to reconstruct neglected ethical values.

An analysis of Anvari's qasidas, based on Modarres Razavi's edition, shows that he attributes the same virtues to all his patrons, regardless of rank: power, generosity, wisdom, justice, magnanimity, security, forbearance, and perfection (Anvari, 1958: 427, 211, 7, 156, 87, 16, 56, 428, 257, 105, 426, 465, 227, 50). He attributes these qualities not only to Sultān Sanjar but also to lesser-known viziers, minor military commanders, courtly women, and even architectural structures (Anvari, 1958: 69, 332; Karami & Jamali, 2017: 127). This broad generalization suggests that he sought to construct a unified image of virtue.

The contrast between this idealized image and historical reality raises a fundamental question. The answer lies in the relationship between al-Fārābi's theory, the poet's social position, and Anvari's material motivations. In one of his shorter poems, Anvari himself accuses his patrons of miserliness (Anvari, 1961: 568). By attributing virtues they lacked, he invited them to reflect on these ideals and gradually encouraged their realization through the creation of an ideal world. This form of ethical cultivation enabled Anvari to pursue his poetic career while securing material rewards.

Thus, his poetry served a dual function: promoting the ethical cultivation of patrons while strengthening his own position.

This interpretation is further supported by Clinton's view that Persian court panegyrics functioned as ritual texts expressing the ideals of kingship (Meisami, 1987: 44). Anvari's approach may also be compared with Ghazālī's *Nasihat al-Muluk*, in which Ghazālī sought to educate Seljuk rulers through rational argument (Homai, 1938: introduction, z).

Two additional stylistic features support this interpretation. The first is the remarkable diversity of Anvari's patrons, nearly seventy individuals, including sultāns, viziers, courtly women, and even buildings, reflecting his intention to reach every level of the courtly hierarchy (Anvari, 1958: 116, 205, 77, 69, 332). The second is his preference for brevity (*muqtaḍab*): 146 of the 207 qasidas in Modarres Razavi's edition omit the conventional introductory sections (*tashbib* and *nasib*), thereby intensifying the ethical message conveyed through praise (Anvari, 1958: 29, 159, 205).

Why, then, did Anvari not express these ethical ideals explicitly? Three factors may explain this: the conventions of courtly panegyric, which required preserving the patron's dignity; the despotic political structure, which made direct criticism dangerous, as illustrated by the case of Mas'udi Marvazi; and the effectiveness of indirect expression in influencing both the patron and the courtiers present at court (Hodgson, 1977: 300).

4. Conclusion

Based on these findings, Anvari cannot be regarded merely as a flattering poet. Drawing on al-Fārābī's theory of the imaginative power of poetry and recognizing his distinguished position at court, he employed hyperbole as an artistic and ethical instrument for cultivating virtue among courtiers. His combination of ethical idealism and pragmatism places him among the thoughtful poets who elevated the qasida from a purely panegyric form to a medium for conveying ethical ideals. The hyperbole in his poetry was not the product of ignorance but reflected his profound understanding of philosophy and the persuasive power of poetry. Through the interplay of hyperbole, imagination, and ethical cultivation, Anvari's panegyric qasidas represent one of the most significant examples of the use of poetry for ethical and social reform in Persian literary history.

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