

THE POETICAL WORKS

OF

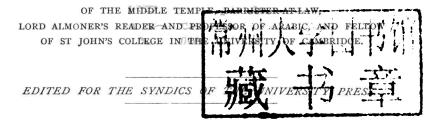
BEHÁ-ED-DÍN ZOHEIR,

OF EGYPT.

WITH A METRICAL ENGLISH TRANSLATION, NOTES, AND INTRODUCTION,

BY

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PREFACE.

The poems of El Behá Zoheir, although enjoying a considerable reputation in the East, are absolutely unknown in Europe; with the exception of a few verses quoted by Ibn Khallikán, the Arabic biographer, and one or two short poems cited anonymously in the *Arabian Nights*, I am not aware that a single verse of his poetry has ever been printed or translated. Having while in Egypt become possessed of a copy of his poems, I was so struck with the beauty of the language and the freshness and originality of the thoughts, that I have since made them the companion of my leisure hours, and have long cherished the idea, which I have at length realised, of presenting them to English readers in an English dress.

In the present translation I have rendered the Arabic original as closely as the difference between the two idioms would permit, never allowing myself to make a loose paraphrase for the sake of my own metre. At the same time I have carefully avoided a too literal version, which must have resulted in a quaint and stilted style; believing that the easy and graceful language of the original would be best rendered by endeavouring to turn it into idiomatic English of a similar character. How far I have succeeded in attaining this end I must leave the reader to judge.

Oriental poets are inordinately fond of puns and plays upon words; not, however, necessarily to produce a humorous effect, but as a recognised rhetorical artifice,—a mere conceit or prettiness of language. The sense of a verse in which such a *jeu de mots* occurs is thus often perfectly obvious in the Arabic, while, if translated into any other language, it becomes utterly unintelligible. In

such cases I have either found English words with a similar double meaning, or I have slightly paraphrased the line so as to introduce a similar pun. In a word, I have aimed at producing a translation, which, while it will enable a scholar or student to interpret the text, will convey to the English reader's mind exactly the same impression as the Arabic would to the mind of an Arab.

The principles thus laid down for the translation apply equally to the rhythm of the metrical form in which it is cast. The fact is, that metres, in any language, are not mere arbitrary forms; they grow naturally out of the accentuation of individual words in the language, certain groups of which, of definite length, become more pleasing to the ear than others. Now as the accent of various languages often differs even more than the pronunciation, it is obvious that there is an initial difficulty in representing the metres of one language by a similar arrangement of feet or syllables in another. In Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hindustani, this difficulty is enhanced by the fact that in compositions like the present the same rhyme must be repeated in every alternate line; if, then, it were even desirable, it would be impossible to find sufficient rhymes for such a purpose in any European language. Any attempt at servile imitation, therefore, would result in a form of verse unfamiliar to English ears; and this could never represent a form of verse familiar to Arab ears.

Once, and once only, I have attempted this (p. 79); and though I have allowed it to stand as a specimen of one of the forms of Arabic verse, I am fully aware that the experiment is unsuccessful. Such being my views, I have adopted the plan of selecting for each poem an English metre of which the movement corresponds, more or less closely, with the movement of the Arabic.

Another difficulty which I had to encounter was the gender of the subjects of many of the poems. El Behá Zoheir, it is true, has many pieces addressed to, or in praise of, women, yet in this he is departing more or less from Oriental usage. The Eastern poets, whether from the habit of keeping women and all

connected with them rigorously in the background, or from the fact that a mystical meaning is often implied in their rhapsodies, do, as a rule, address all their erotic verses in the masculine gender. To such an extent is this carried, that two grave and reverend Doctors of Divinity will often address to each other complimentary stanzas, couched in language which would come more appropriately from the pen of a romantic school-girl. For such cases I have adopted no strict rule. Where the subject of the poem was left vague and undefined, I have generally used the feminine throughout; but where (as in the poem commencing on p. 257) the person addressed was obviously some king or prince, I have used the same gender as the original.

Thanks to the kind assistance I have received from many eminent native scholars, especially from Rizk Allah Hassoun Effendi, a well-known Arabic Poet and savant, and Mons. Abdallah Marrásh, of Paris, I venture to believe that the translation will be found at least accurate, and, as such, I trust that it will prove useful to students of the language.

The present volume is, as far as I know, the first complete version of the collected works of any Arabic poet ever published in English. Although, therefore, I feel that it comes far short of the grace and elegance of the original, I hope that it may not be unacceptable, as an attempt to introduce my fellow-countrymen to the productions of the Arab muse.

E. H. PALMER,

ST John's Coll., Cambridge, Nov. 11th, 1876.

TRANSLATION OF THE EDITOR'S ARABIC INTRODUCTION.

IN THE NAME OF GOD THE MERCIFUL, THE COMPASSIONATE.

PRAISE be to God who created man, and endowed him with clear speech; and adorned him with "those two least members, the heart and tongue."

The tendency of people in the present day to travel abroad, and to communicate freely with each other, notwithstanding the differences of nationality and religion, and the long distances that separate them, has made the acquisition of foreign languages indispensable to those who desire to journey in distant countries. As a poet has well said,

'Tis by the languages he speaks
A person's usefulness is gauged.
These will afford the aid he seeks,
When on important works engaged.

Then persevere, both old and young, In learning all the tongues you can. For you will find each separate tongue Will count for you a separate man!

No educated person can have failed to observe that the Poets in every language are, in El Khalil's¹ words, "the lords of language, turning it as they please, and taking licences which are not allowed to others, in the way of giving general or particular meanings to an expression, of putting a diffuse expression concisely, or a concise one diffusely, and in the combination of words and phrases generally."

¹ The inventor of the Arabic system of prosody.

Whoever, then, becomes properly acquainted with the poetry of a language, and has mastered all its niceties and refinements, will never find any difficulty afterwards in the prose writings, or in the vulgar colloquial dialect.

Now when I saw that the illustrious Premier, the learned Doctor, the keen and sagacious Scholar, the tongue of speakers and conqueror of writers, the prodigy of the age, and phenomenon of the period in which he lived,—Abu'l Fadhl Zoheir ibn Mohammed el Mohallebi (may God have mercy on him!), the Court secretary, who could soar to any height of eloquence that he pleased,—was an authority in every school of verse, and was remarkable for the versatile character of his poetry, I conceived the idea of printing his Collected Poetical works, and have accordingly set myself to print them, and have added an English Metrical Translation for the benefit of those of both nations—Arabs or Franks—who love poetry. I have moreover supplemented them with a Concise Commentary explaining all obscure allusions or difficult expressions, and giving an account of all the persons and things mentioned in the poems, as well as of the various popular proverbs occurring therein.

The works of El Behá Zoheir were composed at a time when the intercourse between Eastern and Western nations had become greater than at any previous period of modern history, and are especially interesting, as exhibiting the language and thought of the desert, applied to altered circumstances, and modified by more civilizing influences.

In poetry Alexandria seems to have been, what it certainly was in philosophy and theology, the meeting-place of East and West. The inhabitants of the East and West differ so widely in tastes and habits, that we should hardly expect to find a community of ideas existing between an Arabic and an European writer; and yet the works of Eastern authors are filled with proverbs, sentiments, and metaphors, which we are accustomed to regard as peculiarly Western in origin and character. To cite a few examples:—The introduction to the Sháhnáma, the great national Epic of Persia, enunciates, in so many words, the axiom that "Knowledge is

power;" the proverb "L'homme propose et Dieu dispose," exists in Arabic, with even the same alliterative jingle, el 'abdu yudabbir wa 'lláhu yukaddir. The poems of El Behá Zoheir contain numerous instances of these curious parallels; in one case, addressing his mistress, he says:—

But oh! beware lest we betray

The secret of our hopes and fears,
For I have heard some people say

That "walls have ears"—

which is absolutely identical with the English proverb.

But it is not only in such details that the works of El Behá Zoheir remind us of the productions of the Western poets; the whole tone of thought, and style of expression, much more closely resemble those of an English courtier of the seventeenth century than of a Mohammedan of the Middle Ages. There is an entire absence of that artificial construction, exaggerated metaphor, and profuse ornateness of style, which render Eastern poetry so distasteful to a Western critic; and in place of these defects we have natural simplicity and epigrammatic terseness, combined with a genial wit, that remind us forcibly of the Vers de Société of the English poet Herrick.

In that peculiar trifling of words and sentiments, of which the English poets of the Restoration were so fond, El Behá Zoheir is excessively happy. Take, for instance, the following:

My heart will flutter when she's near— Pray does it very strange appear To dance when we rejoice?

Even to the hackneyed hyperbole of dying for love he contrives to give a new and original turn:

Oh! torture not my life in vain,
But take it once for all away,
Nor cause me thus with constant pain
To die and come to life again
A thousand times a day!

Or this:

Thou art my soul, and all my soul is thine,
Thou art my life, though stealing life away!
I die of love, then let thy breath divine
Call me to life again, that so I may

Reveal to men the secrets of the tomb.

Full well thou knowest that no joys endure;

Come, therefore, ere there come on us our doom,

That union may our present joy secure—

where he has worked out the last idea more seriously, changing what was a mere prettiness into a really poetic sentiment.

Approaching old age, and the first appearance of grey hairs, furnish him with many pleasing and novel conceits—

Now the night of youth is over, and grey headed dawn is near, Fare ye well ye tender meetings with the friends I held so dear: O'er my life these silvery locks are shedding an unwonted light, And disclosing many follies youth had hidden out of sight.

It is seldom that we see a metaphor so well carried out, or so pregnant with meaning as this;—the contrast between the dark tresses of youth and the white hairs of old age, the sudden awakening from the night of folly and inexperience at the dawn of maturer judgment, and the comparison of the streaks of grey amidst the massy black locks to rays of wisdom lighting up the dark sky of ignorance.

For a delicate turn of expression I may quote his apostrophe to a messenger who had brought him news of his beloved:

Oh! let me look upon thine eyes again,

For they have looked upon the maid I love!

When polygamy prevails, and women are kept in degrading ignorance, we cannot expect to find much sentiment and affection. The Eastern poets, it is true, are often eloquent on the theme of love, but love with them is either mere sensual admiration or affected passion. The poet either expends his ingenuity in depicting his mistress's charms, and in heightening the colouring by the employment of striking imagery, or he raves about the burning

passion that consumes his bosom. Power and imagination there nearly always is in an Eastern love-song, but feeling and true sentiment are for the most part entirely absent from such compositions. It is precisely in this respect that El Behá Zoheir differs so widely from his co-religionists; his utterances of love come direct from the heart, and are altogether free from conventional affectation. What can be more full of genuine feeling than the tender apology for a blind girl with whom he was in love, beginning

They called my love a poor blind maid—I love her more for that, I said.
I love her, for she cannot see
These grey hairs that disfigure me?

But, if an ardent lover, El Behá Zoheir seems to have been an inconstant one, even by his own showing:

I'm fickle, so at least they say,
And blame me for it most severely;
Because I court one maid to-day,
To-morrow love another dearly.

And for this fickleness he accounts by a quaint conceit:

'Tis true that though I vow and swear,
They find my love is false and hollow,
Deceiving when it seems most fair,
Like lightning when no rain-drops follow.
You'd like to know, I much suspect,
The secret which my conduct covers:
Well, then, I'm founder of a sect,
Grand Master of Peculiar Lovers.

Perhaps nothing in the book is so characteristic of the period in which Zoheir lived, or reflects so vividly the tone of religious thought then prevalent, as these playful allusions to mystic rites and secret fraternities. In order that the reader may appreciate them fully, I must briefly review the religious history of Mohammedanism during the immediately preceding centuries.

On the ruins of the ancient mysteries of the Magian priesthood there arose in Persia, towards the end of the third century of our era, a number of secret associations, which, with the doctrines of the Zoroastrian religion, combined those fanciful metaphysical speculations which are chiefly known to the European world under the name of Gnosticism. These sects were seven in number:—

- I. The Kaiyumersíyeh, or followers of the doctrines of Kaiyumers, the first king of Persia, and, according to the Magian legend, the first created human being.
- 2. The Zerváníyeh, believers in Zerván Acárana, which in the old Zend language signifies "Unbounded Time." Their doctrine was that Light gave birth to various Persons, all of them spiritual, luminous and divine: but that the greatest of these Persons, named Zerván, doubted something, and Ahrimán, or Satan, came into existence from this doubt.
- 3. The Zerdushtíyeh, or followers of Zoroaster, the son of Púrasp, who appeared, according to the author of the Shahnámeh, during the reign of Gushtasp (Darius Hystaspes) son of Lorasp, King of Persia.
- 4. The Thenevíyeh, or Dualists, who believed in two Eternal Principles, and, contrary to the creed of the Magians, held that Light and Darkness were co-eternal.
- 5. The Maneviyeh, or Manichæans, followers of Manes, son of Fatek, The Wise, who appeared in the time of Shapúr, son of Ardeshír, and was killed by Bahrám, son of Hormuzd, and grandson of Shapúr. His creed was a mixture of Christianity and Fire-worship.
- 6. The Markúniyeh, who taught that there existed two primal antagonistic principles, Light and Darkness, Father and Son, and that these two, originally hostile, were reconciled by the intervention of a third celestial power, who caused the two to blend, since antagonistic elements will not blend without a Medium. This Medium they held to be lower in rank than the Light, but higher than Darkness, and believed that the visible Universe was the result of this blending and admixture.
- 7. The Mastekiyeh, or followers of Mastek, who appeared in the reign of Kai Kobád, father of Anushírwan (the contem-

porary of Mohammed). He succeeded in converting Kobád, but Anushírwán, having discovered his infamous imposture, sought him out and put him to death. He used to decry alike love, hatred, and war, and, since these for the most part arose about women and wealth, he declared both to be common property to all, like fire, water, or pasturage. Their tenets, religious and political, were almost identical with those of the Communists of the present day, their avowed object being the abolition of all existing religions, universal equality, and community of property and women.

When the Arabs became masters of Persia, their various sects exercised, as might have been expected, an important influence on El Islám, and the severe monotheism of Mohammed soon became tainted with the theories of Sabæan philosophy. The contest for the succession among the immediate survivors of Mohammed afforded an opportunity for the two parties to join issue; the cause of Ali and his family was espoused by the Persian party, while the Arab party favoured Moʻáwiyeh and his adherents. In this way arose the first great schism in Mohammedanism, that of Sunni and Shiah; a schism which perpetuated the old hatred between the Semitic and Japhetic races—between the Jew and Gentile. For several centuries these doctrines went on acquiring more and more currency amongst Mohammedans, and frequent insurrections and fresh schisms were the result.

In A. D. 910, 'Obeid-allah, surnamed El Mehdi, a heresiarch of this school, made himself master of Egypt, and claiming to be descended from Fatima, daughter of Mohammed and wife of 'Ali, succeeded in establishing himself as a rival to the Abbasside Caliph of Baghdad—a kind of Anti-Pope in Islam. From this moment the Persian Gnostic heresy prevailed in Egypt; it was propagated by official agents, of whom the chief was called Dá'l ud du'át, or "Supreme missionary," and associations, almost identical in their constitution with modern Freemasonry, were founded in Cairo under the name of Mejális el Hikmeh, or "Scientific meetings;" the building in which they were held being

called Dár al Hikmeh, or "The Scientific Lodge." The doctrines thus taught were known by the name of Ishmaelite, and were extensively propagated in Syria, where they gave birth subsequently to the Druze, Assassins, and other notorious sects, amongst which I should be strongly inclined to number the nominally Christian order of Knights Templars.

The Sultan, Saladin, who compassed the final destruction of the Fatemite Caliphate, and re-established, in name at least, the authority of the house of Abbas, was a rigid adherent of the Sunni sect; and his first act, on assuming the independent sovereignty, was to obliterate every vestige of the Fatemite heresy. The "Scientific lodges" were finally closed, and the formation of secret societies for religious or political purposes was strictly prohibited. The same policy was pursued by the succeeding princes of his house, and thus it is that we find El Behá Zoheir in the reign of El Melek es Salih, the third Sultan of the dynasty, turning into ridicule rites and observances which half a century before were part and parcel of the religion of the state.

The levity with which Zoheir treats themes, usually regarded with extreme reverence by Mohammedans, must be attributed to his antipathy to the Ishmaelite heresy rather than to a want of respect for El Islam itself. The texts and passages of the Corán which he turns into jest are not those which involve any of the broader principles of Monotheism, but rather those which were supposed to shadow forth prophetically the advent of Mehdi, the Mohammedan Messiah, and upon which so many impostors and enthusiasts have, down to the present day, founded their claims to a divine mission.

Thus we find him saying, in words which must sound sheer blasphemy to a Moslem ear:

I am the Prophet of the Latter-day,
Mine are the Votaries of Love and Youth;
These are my preachers—in my name they pray,
And own my mission to be Love's own truth.

The poem from which these verses are taken contains a number of similar quotations from the Corán, distorted from their original meaning, and applied to such secular subjects as love and wine; and that too without the excuse of mystic allegory, behind which the Persian poets always take shelter from the charge of irreverence. However, the use of such technical terms as $D\acute{a}'l$, "Preacher or missionary;" shiah, "votary;" $S\acute{a}hib$ ez $Zem\acute{a}n$, "Lord of the Latter-Day," &c., leaves no doubt but that the covert satire is aimed exclusively against the opponents of the Sunni creed.

That Zoheir was perfectly capable of regarding religion with becoming reverence, and even of standing up manfully in its defence, and of employing the formidable weapons of his own wit and eloquence against scoffers and atheists, is amply proved by the following epigram:

A foolish atheist, whom I lately found,
Alleged Philosophy in his defence.
Said he, "The Arguments I use are sound."
"Just so," said I; "all sound and little sense."

"You talk of matters far beyond your reach; You're knocking at a closed-up door," said I. Said he, "You cannot understand my speech." "I'm not King Solomon," was my reply.

The sting of the satire lies in the allusion to the Moslem legend, that King Solomon understood the language of beasts.

Solomon and his miraculous power over the spirits of earth and air are favourite subjects with El Behá Zoheir, as with most Arabic poets. Thus, apostrophizing the Zephyr, and beseeching it to carry a message to his beloved, he says:

And now I bid the very wind

To speed my loving message on,
As though I might its fury bind,
Like Solomon.

These constant allusions to the history and traditions of the Arabs, make the Diván of El Behá Zoheir particularly valuable as a repository of Oriental learning.

When we remember the servile adulation which Eastern despots are accustomed to exact from those about them, and the unworthy behaviour to which their favourites are too often compelled to descend, it speaks volumes for El Behá Zoheir's high character and principles, that he was able to retain his position at court for so many years without the least sacrifice of his self-respect. But that such was the case his own poems show: a free and independent spirit breathes through them all; and the rebukes which he occasionally administers to persons high in office, from whom he has received a real or fancied slight, are as frank and outspoken as they are free from ill temper and querulousness. Take, for example, the following remonstrance addressed to the Vizier Fakhr ed din, from whose door he had been rudely repulsed by the domestics:

My wrath is kindled for the sake
Of Courtesy, whose lord thou art;
For thee I take it so to heart,
No umbrage for myself I take.
But be thy treatment what it will,
I cannot this affront forget:
I am not used to insult yet,
And blush at its remembrance still.

Although Eastern poetry abounds in glowing imagery, and in metaphors drawn from natural objects, such as trees and flowers, rocks and streams, yet it must be confessed that a real appreciation of natural beauty is rarely exhibited either by Arabic or Persian authors. Behá ed dín Zoheir, on the contrary, seems to have been a passionate lover of Nature, and to have derived the keenest enjoyment from the contemplation of her beauties. Witness his description of a garden upon the banks of his own majestic Nile:

I took my pleasure in a garden bright—
Ah that our happiest hours so quickly pass!
That time should be so rapid in its flight.
Therein my soul accomplished its delight,
And life was fresher than the green young grass.
There rain-drops trickle through the warm still air,
The cloud-born firstlings of the summer-skies;
Full oft I stroll in early morning there
When, like a pearl upon a bosom fair,
The glistening dewdrop on the sapling lies.

There the young flowerets with sweet perfume blow,
There feathery palms their pendent clusters hold,
Like foxes' brushes waving to and fro;
There every evening comes the after-glow,
Tipping the leaflets with its liquid gold.

Can anything be more graceful than the comparison of the dewdrops on the branches to pearl beads on a maiden's neck? The vivid picture of the after-glow will be appreciated by any one who is familiar with Mr Elijah Walton's exquisite sketches of Egyptian scenery, or who has been fortunate enough to witness a sunset on the Nile.

Behá ed dín Zoheir is eminently the poet of sentiment, and shows but little sympathy with the metaphysical school of philosophy. As if, however, to display his wonderful versatility of genius, he occasionally breaks out into strains as mystic as those of Háfiz himself, the arch-priest of metaphysical poets. Elsewhere his Anacreontic utterances are innocent of any allegorical interpretation.

The author of these poems was a master of satirical verse, but in panegyric he is less happy. Nor is this to be wondered at, for the official congratulatory verses of a poet-laureate are seldom to be compared with the spontaneous efforts of his own unfettered genius. But even here, if not always strictly poetical, Zoheir is always original.

These compositions have, nevertheless, a special interest of their own, inasmuch as they contain many allusions and details which are of the greatest use in enabling us to understand the history of the period, and in making us acquainted with the personal character of the principal actors therein.

In this edition I have followed the small copy lithographed at Cairo in A.H. 1278 = A.D. 1861; but as the text of the copy in question was so full of errors, and so misquoted and misprinted as to be quite untrustworthy, and often unintelligible, I have carefully collated it with two Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. One of these (marked Hunt 337) is without date, but appears to