The Sorcerer Scholar: Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī between Grammar and Grimoire

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Abstract

Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī is the author of two books—one famous, and one now virtually unknown. If we read his famous work on language, the *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm*, in dialogue with his neglected work on magic, the *Kitāb al-Shāmil*, a powerful picture emerges of the author himself. We can see in both the *Miftāḥ* and in the *Shāmil* that Sakkākī constructs his authority in the turbulent world he lived in by presenting himself both as a master of the Arabic language (necessary to understand the word of God) and a master of dangerous occult sciences. He presents both subjects as the exclusive domain of a talented and privileged few. His own background as a Persian-speaking metalworker nevertheless remains apparent, as we see him wrestle with the power of language and magic, and the sources from which this power is derived.

Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī was born in Khwarazm in 1160 CE (555 H). His *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm* (The Key to the Sciences) is an influential text on the study of the Arabic language. Besides being an expert of language, Sakkākī was also known as a magician; his biographers tell us that his powers gained him a position in the court of Chaghadai Khan (r. 1227-42 CE), son of Chinggis Khan, where he is said to have captured birds out of the sky using magical inscriptions. Moreover, a contemporary account credits him with influencing a power struggle between the Abbasid caliph and the Khwarazmian Shah with a buried enchanted statue. One 19th-century biography (Khwānsārī's *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*) describes a work of Sakkākī on the subject of magic and talismans as being "of significant power and critical importance" (*kitāb jalīl al-qadr wa-ʿaẓīm al-khaṭar*).[1] Unlike his famous book of language, this book of magic has not yet been edited, translated, or studied by modern scholars, and this is the goal of the current Leverhulme-funded project, "A Sorcerer's Handbook."

Our translation of the title of this book, *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa baḥr al-kāmil,* as *The Book of the Complete* is informed by a reading of its introduction, which refers to the "perfect" scholars of the ancient world on which it bases its information, hence, "The book of the Perfect/Complete person." It is probable that the title is a play on that of the 11th-century book of magic, *al-Shāmil fī l-baḥr al-kāmil* (Complete Book of the Perfect Sea) by Ṭabasī.[2] In the case of Sakkākī's grimoire, the focus moves from the book itself to the complete men, or the "perfect friends of God" (*awliyāʾihi*

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[1] *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, p. 222. This biography is further mentioned below.
[2] See Zadeh, "Commanding Demons and Jinn," pp. 144-151 for a highly informative summary of al-Ṭabasī's work. This essay also includes an introduction to Sakkākī as mentioned below. The Leverhulme-funded "Sorcerer's Handbook project" (P.I. Emily Selove), aims to produce an edition and translation of the *Shāmil*, as well as a volume of essays by multiple authors. In this volume, Travis Zadeh will shed light on the various Persian works of magic attributed to Sakkākī and his son (see "Cutting Ariadne's Thread, p. 635-6), which appear at first glance to be similar in some ways to the *Shāmil*, but nevertheless, different in content.

al-kāmilīn) to whom he refers immediately before presenting the title of his work.[3] These perfect embodiments of the microcosm serve as conduits between heaven and earth,[4] and are uniquely qualified to practice these dangerous forms of elite knowledge. We can read Sakkākī himself as the *Shāmil* (complete) man to whom the title refers. As this essay will demonstrate, he leaves nothing out of his microcosmic grimoire, which encompasses the darkest as well as the loftiest regions of the cosmos. He includes a mixed and varied collection of texts dealing with occult matters, including instructions for creating talismans in tune with their various astrological sympathies, for controlling jinn and devils, for causing sickness, for curing such magically-caused afflictions, and for calling upon the power of each of the planets (among other topics).

According to his biographies, and as his name, al-Sakkākī (the die caster) suggests, he began life as a metal worker, beginning his career in scholarship at the relatively late age of 30.[5] And as a former metal worker, the art of melting and pouring metal continued to loom large in Sakkākī's mind; he mentions it in the first words of the introduction to his famous book of language, the *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm* ("speech poured out only in the mold of truth…" We quote the introduction more fully below). The verb *yufrigh*, to pour molten metal into a mold, is also used repeatedly in Sakkākī's *Shāmil*, which provides numerous detailed practical descriptions of the creation of talismans and statues, many of which involve melting and pouring gold and other metals.[6]

Though he went on to become an authority of the Arabic language, Sakkākī's Arabic language skills were far from "complete" by the time he wrote his grimoire. According to the colophon of our oldest manuscript witness,[7] the *Shāmil* was penned in 602 H (1205 CE), when the author would have been about 45 years old. That he was a native Persian speaker and a latecomer to scholarship is everywhere apparent in his grimoire, and it may be that fifteen years was insufficient time for him to master

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[3] Cairo manuscript 1735, ff 1b-2a. This manuscript will hereafter be referred to as C. We obtained this manuscript as a photocopy from the Juma al-Majid Cultural Centre in Dubai, but we refer to it as "Cairo" because of the label reading Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah on the final folio. By comparing the image on folio 62a to Christie's Auction house's online records, we can see that the original manuscript was purchased in 2001 by an anonymous buyer, who did not respond to our attempts to contact them through the auction house. It is unclear how the manuscript made its way from Cairo to Christie's.

[4] See Chapter Seven, "Sabian Perfected Man and the Avicennan Theory of Prophethood" in Michael Noble's *Philosophising the Occult* for the philosophical background of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's reliance on this concept in his *al-Sirr al-Maktūm*, which work profoundly influenced Sakkākī's own grimoire.

[5] Khwansarī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, p. 221. Heinrichs suggests that the details of this tale, in which Sakkākī changes professions in hopes of gaining greater favour from his royal patrons, may be "a transposition of a similar *curriculum vitae* told about the S̲h̲āfiʿī scholar al-Ḳaffāl ("the Locksmith") al-Marwazī," but the transposition may have occurred because the arc of these two scholars' lives resembled one another in this regard.

[6] In her presentation "The Name of the Key, al-Sakkākī's Literary Craftsmanship and Pragmatic Poetics in *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*," (a published version of which is to be hoped for in the collection of essays that will accompany The Sorcerer's Handbook project's edition and translation of the *Shāmil*). Chiara Fontana painted an evocative portrait of the *Miftāḥ* as a text that paradoxically employs an approach based on goal-oriented craftsmanship and the manipulation of tools in pursuit of specific aims (and thus appears to be espouse a dry, earthy, and quotidian approach to language), but which masks profound and deliberately hidden depths. This is the perfect accompaniment or counterpoint to Sakkākī's work on magic, as she illustrated.

[7] C 216a.

the scholarly registers of Arabic,[8] for *The Book of the Complete* is written in a mixed formal and colloquial register that could be described as a type of Middle Arabic. It often ignores gender agreement and other basic standards of formal Arabic grammar, lapsing sometimes into Persian, perhaps especially when addressing the jinn (whom, we assume, were local to his area and therefore spoke the local language). Thus the Arabic of his grimoire is very unlike that of his *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm*, which is a *tour de force* of formal Arabic prosody, and which, we must assume, was written much later in his life. The linguistic register of his grimoire is possibly also a sign that it was in part collected as notes by his students or by his son (himself an author of occult writings). This is suggested by the frequent attributions at the beginning of sections chapters (e.g. *qāl mawlānā jāmi' al-kitāb shaykh Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī...* ("Our master, the compiler of the book, Shaykh Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī said...")).[9] Other sections, and the colophon itself, suggests that Sakkākī wrote some of his grimoire in his own hand.[10]

Sakkākī's Reputation

Few modern scholars have mentioned Sakkākī's book of magic,[11] focusing instead on his work on grammar and language, the *Miftāḥ*. His *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entry states that "In spite of a number of lost or doubtful works that have been ascribed to him, al-Sakkākī is really a man of one book, the *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm*."[12] An abridgement of this *Miftāḥ* is still widely used to study the Arabic language today, and Sakkākī's name is now famous for that reason alone. Like his work on language, he is therefore assumed to have been a hyper-logical and probably somewhat boring man.[13]

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[8] As indeed Khwānsārī suggests, in portraying his slow struggle to acquire his new language. When he saw a trickle of water wearing away a stone, Khwānsārī writes, he resolved to show the same persistence, and thus gradually overcame the hurdles of the Arabic language to become the linguistic master that we know today.

[9] Delhi f. 216b, in introducing a chapter on how to cause sexual impotence. This manuscript will hereafter be referred to as D. Currently housed in the British Library, it appears to have been looted from the Mughal Palace in the 19th century, following an uprising against the British East India company (as I discovered in Bink Hallum's workshop "An Introduction to Arabic Scientific MSS" on 10/06/2019 in London). It appears that it was copied directly from SOAS, which may in turn have been copied directly from C.

[10] Sakkākī seems to have written entire sections of the later chapters of curses in his own voice, for example. Meanwhile, the widely circulated work on lunar mansions may have been included in the *Shāmil* after his death, as suggested by the *isnād* beginning *Qāla muṣannif al-kitāb al-shaykh al-kabīr Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī ʿalayhi al-raḥmah*, "The compiler of the book the great shaykh Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī, rest his soul..."). The colophon of C refers to him as the "*faqīr*" ("the poor wretch"), a label most likely to be self-applied (suggesting that C was copied from a branch of manuscripts that could be traced to a version that Sakkākī wrote himself. "The poor wretch Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ya'qūb wrote it in the year 602..."C 216a SOAS, in copying Cairo, leaves this word out).

[11] Notable exceptions, such as Travis Zadeh and Michael Noble, are cited throughout. See Noble, *Philosophising the Occult,* pp. 31-33 for a biography of Sakkaki as a magician. Zadeh provides another excellent introduction to the subject in "Commanding Demons and Jinn," pp. 133-134. Zadeh also notes in his *Wonders and Rarities* (p. 81) that the Mamluk physician of Cairo, Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348), hails Sakkākī's handbook of spells as "a work of significant standing [on the science of talismans] whose benefit is manifestly of great utility, but whose methods are of extreme difficulty." (Al-Akfānī offers no further comment on the work), see Ibn al-Akfānī,, p. 414 = p. 51 of the Arabic text.

[12] Heinrichs, 'al-Sakkākī.'

[13] See footnote **88,** which explains the origins and refutation of this characterisation.

For Sakkākī and his contemporaries, however, his reputation as a sorcerer was a crucial asset, and one that often outweighed his reputation as a scholar of language. So notorious was his reputation for magic that some biographers writing before 1900 CE mention his grammatical writings only in passing while focusing instead on his role as a court magician and astrologer. A contemporary account of Sakkākī's life in Nasawī's *Sīrat al-Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dīn Mankubirtī* tells how he aided the Khwarazmian shah 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 596–617/1200–1220) in his attempt to overtake the Abbasids by causing an enchanted statue to be buried in Baghdad. (He promised it would help the Shah, but its curse rebounded on Khwarazm and strengthened the armies of Baghdad instead.)[14] And Sakkākī's *Shāmil* is indeed filled with recipes for enchanted statues, some of which repel or attract military forces. Nasawī's biography also credits Sakkākī with the ability to "stop water flowing with his curses," and in fact his *Shāmil* provides instructions on the art of "halting the flow of all running water in whichever land you wish," by means of burying a brass model ship loaded with a dead fox and mustard seeds, and by reciting the names of angels at the correct astrological moment.[15] His biography and his grimoire therefore reinforce one another in the portrait they paint of Sakkākī as a sorcerer.

A much later (sixteenth-century) Persian biography, Khwandamir's *Ḥabīb al-siyar*, introduces him as the author of the *Miftāḥ*, but then devotes the rest of its account to his role as a court magician, including a story in which he brings cranes down from the sky by drawing a magic circle on the ground. The use of magic circles (*mandal*s) and instructions for attracting or repelling birds and other animals can also be found in his *Shāmil*.[16] Khwandamir adds that when the vizier of Baghdad offended Sakkākī, he caused all the fires in the city to die out, and would not let them be relit until the vizier kissed a dog's arse, and issued a proclamation acknowledging Sakkākī's magical prowess. This shocking biography concludes with a fatal battle between Sakkākī and his rival at the court of Chagatai Khan. Sakkākī caused this rival to be banished from the court, convincing the ruler that his astrological chart showed him to be on the verge of a period of bad luck. Later Sakkākī attacked him with a fiery apparition by using the power of Mars. This rival finally convinced the Khan that Sakkākī's magical powers made him dangerous, so Sakkākī was put in jail, where he died.[17]

Powerful Illusions

Though the biographies depict the very real and dangerous forces that he wielded, it is also clear that illusion, performance, and manipulation of the truth were

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[14] Nasawī, *Sīrat al-Sulṭān*, pp. 253-4. The biographer provides this as a cautionary tale against hubris, and against vain clinging to the pleasures and powers of earthly life, ending his account with this comment: "I don't know which is more astounding: the credulousness of that learned man, or the deception of these people by what he spat curses into? Is any nation safe from the passage of time, or can this earthly life remain as it is without changing? How many communities have had 'all their bonds severed?' (Q 2:166), for 'God effaces or makes firm what He wills, and the Mother of the Book is His'" (Q 13:39). Also see Miller, "Occult Sciences" and Selove, *Popeye and Curly*, episode 79.
[15] C 20a-b, D 82b.
[16] These magic circles are also described and illustrated in a Persian work attributed to Sakkākī, the *Taskhīrāt* in Oxford University's Bodleian Library MS Walter 91. See Zadeh, "Cutting Ariadne's thread," p. 635.
[17] Khwāndamīr, *Ḥabīb al-siyar*, p. 46. This is all repeated in Laknawī, *al-Fawā'id al-bahiyya*, p. 232.

important tools for Sakkākī as a court magician. Magic and trickery often go hand in hand;[18] indeed the term *nīranj* "from a Persian word for creating illusions," is also used in the *Shāmil* and similar texts to refer to a talisman-like spell characterized as the action of spirit on spirit.[19] And just as a magician might influence the spirit of an animal in order to capture it by magical means, a trickster might influence the spirit of a gullible person by means of trickery. Sakkākī's grimoire includes a *nīranj* for creating illusion, which, like the fiery visions sent against his rival at court, are born of a blend of genuine power and terrifying deception:

> As for the nīranj of deceiving appearances, for this, one takes ten human hairs and the clippings of his fingernails of two barleycorns'-weight, and writes these letters on a sheet of scroll, and wraps it in the hair, and suffumigates it with the fingernail clippings, and afterwards you burn the incense of the lunar mansion, while you read the names of the six angels, and say, "Penetrate, spirits of fear, illusion, and terror, this work and this nīranj, until its victim cannot rest nor be quiet nor smile at anything he sees!" Then bury the work in front of his eyes, and this is what is in the scroll: [symbols on a spiral square]. By these means you will reach you goal, and [by] your retention of the letters and figures, so be advised.[20]

The power behind Sakkākī's illusions lies in language, and in the mastery and manipulation of symbols and signs ("letters and figures"). By this art, he sought to survive in the turmoil of his era. Anxiety about the power of language in times of turmoil stretched far beyond the confines of the royal courts and is widespread in Arabic literature. The most famous literary manifestation of this anxiety is the genre of the *maqāmāt,* whose trickster protagonists sometimes appear as charlatan magicians, influencing the spirits of their listeners with tricky language alone. In the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008) the narrator, ʿĪsā ibn Hishām, famously fails to recognise the trickster Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī as he delivers speeches, preaches, and begs under many disguises. One of these stories is directly related to Sakkākī's text: the *maqāmah* of the amulet (*al-ḥirziyya*). In this story, the trickster extorts money from terrified passengers on a ship in a stormy sea by selling them amulets (consisting of slips of paper, presumably inscribed with magic words or symbols), which he promises will keep them safe from drowning. If the ship had sunk, he reasons at the end of the tale, nobody would have been around to blame him in any case. In Sakkākī's *Book of the Complete*, we have an example of the sort of spell the trickster may have pretended to offer to his fellow passengers: "The moon is also for protection of a ship at sea from sinking. Go to a secluded location and draw a picture of the ship on some paper, and suffumigate it with frankincense, sandarac, and thalia, with these words surrounding it…"[21] We can safely assume that Abū al-Fatḥ spared himself the expense of the incense when creating his scraps of "talismanic" paper. He

[18] Magic and trickery often go hand in hand; Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* mentions talismans in the same breath as trickery (*ḥiyal,*) (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist,* p. 333) and as Savage-Smith writes, "Magic also included the art of trickery or forgery." Savage-Smith, 'Introduction,' pp. xxviii-ix (*Ḥīlah* can also refer to a stratagem, a means, or an expedient, and is therefore not always a negative term. My thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for pointing this out).

[19] See Burnett, 'Niranj.' The *nīrānj*, unlike the talisman, can only be created at night, and often pertains to emotions like love or anger.

[20] C 34b-35a, D 112a.

[21] SOAS f. 212b, JRL f. 160b.

could rely on his eloquence alone to hoodwink his audience, if not to save a sinking ship.

The Magical *Miftāḥ*

In the light of his biography as a court magician, with all its tales of power, illusion, and eloquence, Sakkākī's seemingly dry and upstanding work on language, the *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm*, takes on an occult appearance. His references to the *siḥr* (sorcery) of rhetoric no longer sounds like a metaphor. He refers to his master in the art of "greater derivation" (on which see more below) as a kind of wizard (*nawʿ min saḥara*) of language.[22] The study of this art, and other elements of *ṣarf* (morphology), he writes, allows you to perceive the intelligent design of the "coiner" of language (*al-wāḍiʿ*), whether that coiner was God or an ancient wise man.[23]

As Sakkākī explains in his *Miftāḥ*, the letters themselves and the forms of words have *khawāṣṣ* (special properties), the same word used to refer to the hidden properties of gemstones, plants, and other magical tools found in occult texts. His *Miftāḥ's* introduction includes a categorisation of letters according to these special properties,[24] a theme he resumes much later, when introducing his chapter on metaphor. Letters have *khawāṣṣ*, he writes there, but they are not intrinsically connected to the meanings of the words themselves. Rather they could be called symbols (*ramz*), linked by their properties of hardness or softness, and by the places they are formed in the mouth, to the things they describe.[25] These special properties of letters are similar to the *khawāṣṣ* of the gemstones which he describes in his *Shāmil*, linked by their texture, their color, and the places from which they are extracted, to the magical effects that they can be manipulated to produce. Like letters and words, gemstones are strung together for powerful results, and mined from the depths of the unseen treasures of creation.[26]

The *Miftāḥ* itself, writes Sakkākī, is meant to provide the *kāmil* (perfect) person (and here we hear an echo of the *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa-baḥr al-kāmil*) to the key (*miftāḥ*) to the sciences (*al-ʿulūm*), or to "all scientific issues" as he puts it (*jamīʾ al-maṭālib al-ʿilmiyya*).[27] Given his reputation, "all scientific issues" certainly include the occult sciences, with its manipulations of gemstones, incense, planets, spirits, and human hearts. Language is the key to these powers.

Those who Know and Those who Don't

Sakkākī claims that the labor of the *Miftāḥ* was undertaken as a penance to lessen his torments in the grave, for it may help people to avoid errors in language, a dangerous tool.[28] Although after Sakkākī's death, al-Khaṭīb al-Qazwīnī (d. 739/1338)

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[22] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ*, p. 49.
[23] Ibid. p. 42.
[24] Ibid pp. 43-47.
[25] Ibid pp. 466-467. The organizational logic of the "coiner," whether God or wise man, reappears here as well.
[26] Luca Patrizi makes the link between gemstones and words explicit in his "A Gemstone Among the Stones: The Symbolisms of Precious Stones in Islam and its Relation with Language."
[27] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ*, p. 39.
[28] Ibid. p. 38.

abridged and adopted his work into the usefully didactic *Talkhīs* of the *Miftāḥ*, and thus fulfilled this stated goal, Sakkākī wrote the *Miftāḥ* itself as a master of an esoteric art, and in forbiddingly intricate language, often inaccessible to those not already initiated into the dark arts of Arabic grammar. The introduction to the *Miftāḥ* refers to the power of language to influence the listener, and names the Qur'an as containing the most powerful language of all. It then categorises people into two sorts—those with the capacity to follow the fiercely obscure and difficult text to follow, and those without, for whom it would be dangerous to try. These are implicitly linked to those who would try in vain to understand or imitate the language of the Qur'an, and, having failed, take up barbaric arms in their frustration. Sakkākī frames this argument within the standard opening format of virtually all Muslim Arabic books of the era, namely, in praise to God, the Prophet, and his family:

> The worthiest speech that tongues fervently repeat and whose pages are not folded by the passage of time is speech poured out only in the mould of truth and woven only on the pattern of veracity. It is fitting that you should accept it willingly when its flow bends the ear, and when it unveils its face, leaving no doubt hanging on the train of its gown. First, it is praise of God Almighty and the adoration due to Him forever from time immemorial, which praises are strung ever anew as on a string of pearls. Second, it is prayers of peace upon His beloved, Muhammad the warner and bringer of glad tidings, in the illuminating Arabic book that bears witness to the truth of his call with the perfection of its eloquence, and which incapacitates the pontificating masses from desiring to match it by silencing the prattle of every pompous voice, and darkening the path so that the face of the way of imitation is obscured, until they give up trying to match it with letters, and try to fight it with swords, and give up speaking with lips, to try to beat it with spear tips, with their injustice, their hatred, their stubbornness, and their wrangling. And third, it is for the family of the prophet and his illustrious, guiding companions, the leaders of Islam.[29]

He returns to this theme of contrasting eloquence with ignorance at the end of his explanation of the derivation of words from root letters. He curtails the discussion, he says, for those who are clever will find it sufficient, while those who are not are the "slow ones who, by God, would never derive any benefit even if you read the entire Torah and the Bible to them!"[30] (It is apparent in his grimoire that he considers both texts to hold enormous power, second only, perhaps, to the Qur'an itself).

His approach can be contrasted with that of Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī's (d. 395/1005) *al-Ṣināʿatayn* (The "Two Arts" (i.e. of poetry and prose)), whose introduction blesses and welcomes the reader, making its didactic aim clear.[31] Meanwhile Sakkākī's *Miftāḥ* intimidates the reader, going on to warn that most people will be unable to understand him, and for such people, the small knowledge

[29] Ibid. p. 35-6.
[30] Ibid. p. 74.
[31] (See Sanad, "A Multidisciplinary Investigation"). It seems that Sakkākī's introduction is influenced directly by Abū Hilāl's, as both begin with the word "aḥaqq" (the most deserving/best).

that they will gain might be a danger to them.[32] He returns to these dangers again in his conclusion, as we explain farther below.

As Hisashi Obuchi's contribution to this present volume shows, al-Kashshī, a contemporary of Sakkākī, praised writing for its ability to spread true knowledge, but equally blamed it for spreading false and misleading information. We may ask ourselves why Sakkākī allowed his *Miftāḥ*, let alone his grimoire, to be recorded on paper, if he considered his knowledge so dangerous. For though the information he provides contains profound truth, it may easily fall into the wrong hands. It seems that he did, however, believe a select few not only could but should benefit from even his most esoteric teachings, and indeed states in his grimoire that its rituals (even, it is implied, those aimed at contacting Satan) are "permitted to the wise… Therefore, if someone were to forbid you to learn this, do not listen to them."[33] Again in the chapter on rituals of India, he says "we have mentioned one [ritual] that is hidden from creation, but not hidden from the deserving, and whoever forbids it to one of merit is unjust."[34] Even in a cautionary tale directly pertaining to the dangers of written material, in which a student of magic misleads himself by reading grimoires without proper instruction, he includes an admonition that one should not deny occult knowledge to a student who has proven himself worthy.[35] Perhaps the obscurity of the language of the *Miftāḥ* was itself a guard against the uninitiated. As for the *Shāmil*, it seems a written trace of an oral tradition, and is missing sections that we must assume were to be completed in private dialogue with a master—for example, a ritual to summon seven jinn requires the inscription of seven verses of the Qur'an on seven pieces of paper, but only six verses are provided.[36] The ritual to invoke Venus requires that five gowns of five different colours be worn, but only four colours are divulged.[37]

It is easy to understand why such occult rituals could be dangerous, but why guard mastery of language so closely? In effect, the powers and dangers of both are one and the same. In his *Miftāḥ,* Sakkākī promises that the art of metaphor and simile (*majāz*) "if mastered, will allow you to grasp the reins of rhetorical sorcery."[38] This is because they pertain to the connections (*mulāzamāt*) between *maʿāni* ("meanings"). As Key explains in his *Language Between God and the Poets,* although we may have "false cognitions" of *maʿnā*,[39] accurate accounts provide a way to understand God and his creation.[40] Ibn Manẓūr defines *siḥr* (sorcery) as "transforming something from its

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[32] It is especially a danger in that the overconfidence derived from a little bit of grammatical knowledge may lead them to falsely interpret the word of God, as he warns on pp. 38-39. This is further addressed at the end of this essay.

[33] C 106b. This introduces a chapter containing rituals which he divides into two categories, the ḥalāl and the ḥarām, and which are designed not only to contact pious jinn, but also Satan himself as well as his children. **Obuchi essay—determine final title in this volume.**

[34] C 142a.

[35] C 137b ff—see footnote **51** where the anecdote is quoted in full.

[36] C 126a-126b, though it should be noted that the first "verse" is in fact half each of verses 23:80 and 2:117 joined together, which is possibly a source of confusion in numbering the list. In most such cases, full lists are in fact provided.

[37] C 18a.

[38] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ*, p. 439.

[39] Key, *Language Between God and the Poets,* p. 147.

[40] "…and this is "theology," or *ʿilm al-kalām* ("the science/discipline/knowledge of speech," p. 11.) Alexander Key's translates the word *maʿnā* (more commonly translated as "meaning) as "mental contents;" he also describes *maʿnā* as "a set of ontological and cognitive pigeonholes," p. 130. These

ḥaqīqa (true meaning) to something else."[41] This is similar to the definition of *majāz* (metaphor), which implies a mental insight into the *ḥaqīqa* (the meaning set for a word by the "coiner,") followed by an effort to apply that word to something else. As in magic, where deceptive powers may alter the true appearance of a thing to terrifying effect, while true understanding of magic reveals and magnifies the hidden connections in God's creation, metaphor and the poetic power of language can either mislead or illuminate with the connections they create.[42]

The Sun is a Pot of Gold

Sakkākī begins his discussion of metaphor with the simplest of examples-- obvious comparisons based on the senses. For example, roses are red, like cheeks.[43] A cheek is like a rose. From there, his comparisons grow increasingly mental, manneristic, and complex—these are the more advanced levels of the metaphor. One of the most extended compares the sun at length to a pot of melting gold:

> When you compared [the sun] to a crucible of molten gold… in its total form, including its roundness, the purity of its colour, its unity of movement, and the appearance of an alteration between expansion and contraction, because when gold is heated and melts in a crucible, and begins moving all around without boiling, it takes on the round shape of the crucible, and that movement is wondrous, as if it is trying to spread and overflow the sides of the crucible with its fine liquid nature, but then it realises that it must return to its confines, because of the perfect coherence of its constituents and the strength of its internal bonds, and the crucible, moving in answer to its movement, creates together with the melted gold the form that I mentioned. For the sun, if a person examines it carefully in order to understand its essence, is found to be constituted of two forms…[44]

Thus the sun is like the crucible on one hand, and the melted gold on the other—or to put it in more modern terms, a constant balance between explosive fusion and gravity. This description of the movement of molten gold within a crucible, dramatically expanded from the versions found in works by his predecessors al-Jurjānī (fl. 441/1050) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), is clearly written by a man with personal experience of molten metal.[45] He shows an enthusiasm for this metaphor absent in Jurjānī's and Rāzī's analyses. For example, Sakkākī describes the movement

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"pigeonholes" and their study are inextricably linked to a reverence for the language of the Qur'ān and of poetry.

[41] In his *Lisān al-ʿArab*, he writes that according to al-Azharī (d. 370/980), "*Aṣl al-siḥr ṣarfu al-shay'i ʿan ḥaqīqatihi ilā ghayrihi*." This was brought to my attention by Matthew Melvin-Khoushki in his presentation "Talismans as Technology."

[42] As Liana Saif explains, Pharaoh's sorcerers were thought to have used a power called *sīmiyā'*, which "according to Ibn ʿArabī . . .is the knowledge of letters and names that have power over the senses of the observer, causing illusions without any essential transformations." This is to be contrasted with the power of the "true lettrist . . . to [generate] essences" or "[produce] beings." Saif, "From *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Shams al-maʿārif*," p. 335.

[43] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ,* p. 437. Lara Harb explains the function of the increasing levels of complexity in similes and metaphor in *Arabic Poetics*, pp. 157-159, relating it to al-Jurjānī's previous discussions, and describing the increasing levels of strangeness and effort required in comprehending each new level of comparison. Also see William Smyth's "Some Quick Rules Ut Pictura Poesis."

[44] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ,* p. 443

[45] Jurjānī, 180-181, Rāzī 128-9.

of the molten gold in the crucible as "wondrous" (ʿajība), and goes on to speak of it in grammatical terms that depict the gold as a conscious being, using verbs that suggest awareness, such as "trying to" (yahummu) and "then it realizes that" (thumma yabdū lahu). In contrast, Jurjānī's and Rāzī's analyses of this same metaphor are systematic and impersonal, using the metaphor to illustrate their point without evincing any special predilection for or interaction with the image. In general, we could describe Sakkākī's version of this synonym as more literary than that of his predecessors—an honour he pays to this image presumably because of his own experience with metalwork. As he himself points out in his book of language, a person's personal and professional experiences provides the basis from which they choose metaphorical images that speak most powerfully to them.[46]

Moreover, we find in his grimoire that he specifically associates the sun with the minting of money and coins (al-ḍarb wa-l-sikka), the same root (s-k-k) from which his own name, al-Sakkākī, is derived.[47] That is to say, these crafts are governed by that heavenly body, whose aid can be sought in their practice. He ends his prescribed address to the sun with this prayer, appropriate for a craftsman who had sought (as his biography relates) royal patronage for his crafts:[48]

> You are… the Sun… endowed with awesome strength…Fulfill my needs for might, elevation, security, comfort, acceptance, beautiful gifts, and generous grants, especially from kings and sultans, looking upon me with a favouring eye, and with tenderness and spontaneous love, and with requests for works of craftmanship, so that you make them and all great and noble men and kings and sultans avid for all of my weavings, and carefully preserving all of my crafts, thus making my deeds beautiful, comely, and prized in the eyes of all creation…

If we are correct that his grimoire was written long before his book of language, he was perhaps praying to the sun to show his metalwork in the best light long before he took up the sun-as-molten-metal metaphor and reworked it in his famous book of language. In his Miftāḥ, Sakkākī follows this extended metaphor with several more heavenly body-based examples of complex correspondence, where the likeness is not one to one, but implies a broad range of sensual and intellectual resemblances (e.g. a battle is like a night of falling stars, or Mars and Jupiter are like a person going home from a party holding a candle).[49] These heavenly-body based images go on for several pages and dominate his discussion of complex metaphor, again reminding us of his grimoire, full of heavenly bodies and their many corresponding forces on earth.

His description of the molten gold in the crucible as "wondrous" (ʿajīb) further links us to his grimoire, where he describes the actions of his talismans with the same adjective. There he seems to employ the adjective as a category—a wonder of God's creation, a clue or a sign that reveals, in its miraculous workings, a hidden connection between disparate entities.

The experience of wonder (ʿajab) provides a strong link between rhetoric and magic more generally. Lara Harb has shown that the ability to create the feeling of

[46] Sakkākī, Miftāḥ, 357 ff., on which see Fontana, "The Name of the Key."
[47] C 208a.
[48] Recounted in al-Khwānsārī's biography "on the authority of the Zīnat al-madjālis of Madjd al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Madjdī (a contemporary of Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī, who died in 1030/1621)" (Heinrichs, al-Sakkākī).
[49] Pp. 443-445.

wonder by use of complex metaphors and similes is fundamental to the power of language. The wonder that strange metaphors excites drives the listener to exert himself in making the necessary connections, and thereby to learn more about God's creation.[50] But even this function is not without danger; Harb writes of Sakkākī's predecessor in the arts of language, al-Jurjānī's: "He goes on to compare the seductiveness of poetry to that of idols for their worshipers, and compares the magical ability of the poet to alter substances and change qualities to that of alchemy and elixir."[51]

As we saw implied in his introduction to the *Miftāḥ*, translated above, such rhetorical sorcery is reserved for the advanced practitioner. We are reminded of an anecdote in his *Shāmil* (to which we previously referred) about a man who tried to contact spirits without a teacher at the age of fifteen, and gave up when his efforts met with little success. Later, when in his 50's, he met a shaykh who could show him the right way. This shaykh threw his students' old books into the sea, and made him promise never again to meddle ignorantly with these practices, for by doing so, he was merely serving Satan and his demonic forces. Such arts, he explains, cannot be obtained properly except after a rigorous period of prayer, abstention, and study of the Holy Text.[52]

Similarly one must not rush too precipitously into the advanced practice of language and metaphor. The macrocosmic associations that Sakkākī's complex, planetary metaphors evoke are built upon the microcosmic workings of the words and letters themselves, the special properties of every letter, the echo of significances of words of related roots (*al-ishtiqāq al-akbar*), and the subtle alchemy of morphology and syntax, all of which the *Miftāḥ* has just spent four hundred pages exhaustively and often tediously laying bare.

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[50] Zadeh's *Wonders and Rarities,* forthcoming in 2021, explores many associations with the term "wonder" (*'ajab*), also linking it to the feeling of curiosity that inspires us to learn more about God.

[51] .. "except that it is psychological in nature, employing the imagination and intellect instead of earthly and heavenly bodies," *Aesthetic Experience* p. 74.

[52] The Shaykh Abū 'Abd Allah ibn Muḥammad al-Andalusi, "I undertook to study the science of the rūḥāniyyah from the age of 15 until I turned 16, and I was struggling with the seals of the kings of the jinn and their illusions … and memorising the names of their helpers. And I did not manage thereby to discover a spirit or a means to subjugate it or [to cause it to] perform a task, and I remained like a blind man without a stick, straying, and reached neither the beginning nor the end.

When I turned fifty-nine, I met a man from the land of al-Andalus named Aḥmad, and I talked to him about the science of the rūḥāniyyah that I had tried in the past, and I told him that I had gained nothing by it but epilepsy, or causing a seal or an object to move very slightly, and I was not content with that, having never discovered or seized on a spirit.

"Poor thing," said Aḥmad to me, "By God, you have forfeited both this world and the next, and troubled yourself ignorantly and to no avail!"

"My shaykh," I replied, "Guide me to what will benefit me, and I will speak well of you for as long as I live, and whatever I gain will be unto the God the Exalted."

"On one condition," he said.

"And what is that?" I asked.

"My son," he replied, "Bring me all of the books of wisdom that you mentioned that you read in the past."

I brought them and placed them before him, and he brought out a Qur'an and made me swear upon it that I would never again do anything like what I did before in regards to the science of the rūḥāniyyah, and he threw all the books in the sea and destroyed them." C 137b ff.

Poetry on Purpose

It is in first mentioning the *ishtiqāq al-akbar* (greater derivation) that he brings up his (otherwise unknown) teacher in the arts of language. The science of relating words that share root letters (say, for example, the words "king" and "speech" (*mālik* and *kalām*) has occult resonances,[53] and Sakkākī fawns over his master in the linguistic art of greater derivation, the "shaykh al-Ḥātimī (may God have mercy on him)" calling him "a kind of sorcerer in this art the likes of which has never been seen before."[54] He then lapses into fervent and poetic praise of the man, who clearly held the same status in his eyes as his masters in magic and their ancient forebears, whom he similarly praises in his grimoire.[55] He praises Ḥātimī again and with equal ebullience in his discussion on poetry,[56] where he states that his teacher defined poetry as speech which is intentionally metrical—speech which is metered *on purpose*—a crucial theme to which we will return again shortly. But we will first briefly clarify the links between magic and poetry (or *siḥr ḥalāl* (halal sorcery), as it is often known).

Apparent metaphors used in poetry, e.g. the comparison of a beautiful beloved to a gazelle, reappear in books of magic, where gazelle skins are used as the material support for love spells. Many commonly-used metaphors of poetry are similarly found in magic.[57] Musk and camphor, for example, two types of incense linked to Venus, at least in one version of such lists that Sakkākī provides,[58] are frequent adornments of love poetry, as are myrtle- used in love *nīranj* of the tenth lunar mansion, and sweet basil, an image of which is used in a love *nīranj* of the 13th lunar mansion. These ingredients of love magic represent the beloved's enchanting appearance and manners in love poetry ("Down above her lip like sweet basil....Her breath is ambergris and musk/ Her teeth are pearls and camphor . . .)[59] Jupiter, the Pleiades, and obviously the moon, are likewise used as metaphors for human beauty, but not Mars, despite its bright and attractive red colour. Its martial qualities would render the comparison ridiculous, in love poetry and gentle love magic alike.

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[53] The *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* notes that ṭ-l-s-m backwards gives us m-s-l-ṭ, and *musallaṭ* means "that to which power over something is conferred," a meaning clearly related to *ṭillasm* (talisman) which is granted power by the "celestial secrets" in its body (See Saif, "From *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Shams al-maʿārif*," p. 300, where she is discussing and translating Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix: Das Ziel des Weisen,* ed. Hellmut Ritter, Leipzig, B.G. Teubner, 1933, pp. 7-8. My thanks to Hisashi Obuchi for drawing my attention to this passage). Since *mīm* is not a root letter of *musallaṭ*, this does not technically qualify as *al-isthiqāq al-akbar*, but is nonetheless evocative.

[54] P. 49. Maṭlūb speculates on the identity of al-Hātimi in *al-Balāgha,* p. 53. The notion of the greater derivation was first introduced in Ibn Jinnī's (d. 1002/392) *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ fī ʿilm uṣūl al-ʿarabiyya.*

[55] In occult matters, he relies especially on a certain Awḥad al-Dīn, whom he mentions numerous times in the *Shāmil*, but also in Persian occult works attributed to him, as found, for example, in BL Or. 11041, fol. 86a–b / Bodleian, Walker 91, 183a, which, unlike the *Shāmil*, provides his master's full name. In a private communication to me, Travis Zadeh alerted me to this passage and translated it as "Our teacher, our master, our lord, the just prince, the great noble servant, unique of the age, singular in the time, master of meanings, sun of meanings, Awḥad al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar ibn Muḥammad ibn Ilyās ibn ʿAbd Allāh [ibn] Hilāl al-Andalusī."

[56] P. 619.

[57] D 100a.

[58] "As for Venus, its incense are dried storax, labdanum, camphor, and musk" (citing Jābir ibn Ḥayyān in this section) (C91a).

[59] Al-Azdī, *The Portrait of Abū l-Qāsim,* §185.

Meanwhile we find in satire that an ugly man scowls like he just bit an onion or ate a radish! He has a face like he squirted mustard up his nose.[60] Mustard and radishes are used for spells of hatred, spells of violent love conducted with the aid of Mars.

There is nothing particularly startling in all this: indeed, some of these associations seem too obvious to point out—they are linked so clearly to the spices' pleasant or unpleasant taste or odour. But that simply proves the primacy of affect, the deep, intuitive, emotional connections we experience that are prior to and at the root and heart of language, the music and metaphor that gave birth even to scientific discourse. Which is to say, the obviousness of these links exactly reveals the hidden connections between ourselves and the rest of creation, those hidden links and currents needed to produce effective poetry and magic.

The *shāʿir* (poet) is "the knower," the "feeler," who has a special talent for sniffing out these connections, these metaphors that Sakkākī says are the key to rhetorical sorcery.[61] But the basic definition of poetry is less mysterious—it is speech with meter and rhyme.

Poetry must have rhyme and meter on purpose, he writes.[62] If you are buying aubergines in the market, and accidentally enquire after their price in metrical speech, this is not poetry (I loosely translate this transaction as "How much for your aubergines. One coin, but will you try our beans?")[63] Only if you do this *intentionally* is it poetry, Sakkākī emphasises.

A Powerful Muse

But what if poetry is inspired by the jinn? How much control do poets have over their jinn? If the jinn inspires you to recite a poem, do you recite it intentionally? A.S. Tritton writes in "Spirits and Demons in Arabia," "During a discussion between two poets one said: 'I say a poem every hour but you compose one a month; How is this?' The other said: 'I do not accept from my *shaiṭān* what you accept from yours.'"[64]

Likewise the soothsayers may deliver oracles when they are inspired by a jinn, but are they *majnūn*? Of course the prophet himself was accused of being *majnūn* (insane). Michael Dols writes that when he received his revelations, his critics first accused him of being possessed, but then, when told that "here is no choking, spasmodic movements and whispering [*waswasa*]," they suggested instead that he

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[60] Ibid., §229.

[61] In his *Beholding Beauty*, Domenico Ingenito, focusing on the Persian poet Saʿdi of Shiraz (d.1292), shows how the poet may perceive through the image of the beloved, the *ghayb*, or unseen and divine world, and thus may intuit an indication of God in his love poetry. He describes this poetic capacity in terms of the philosophy of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīna (see especially pp. 333-348). Also see Selove, "Magic as Poetry, Poetry as Magic."

[62] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ,* p. 619.

[63] *Bi-kam tabiʿa alfa bādhinjāna? Abīʿuhā bi-ʿasharatin ʿadliyāt.* Ibid, p. 619. See Selove, *Popeye and Curly*, episode 97.

[64] Tritton, "Spirits and Demons," p. 723 (He cites al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-bayān*, 1. 116 referring to the Cairo 1905–1907 edition). Similarly Bürgel's "The Poet and his Demon" quotes Imru' al-Qays's boasting, "The demons let me choose their poems/ and I select from them whatever I like," p. 13.

was a poet. This accusation was in turn rejected due to the lack of metre in his speech, nor did his actions quite match those of a sorcerer, as he did not spit on knots, nor those of a soothsayer, because he did not produce unintelligible murmuring rhymed speech.[65]

As for Sakkākī, he is at pains to prove that the prophet was not himself the author of the Qur'an, and he ends his *Miftāḥ* with a passionate defence of this argument.[66] Anyone, he writes, who would claim otherwise knows nothing of language (or of "secrets" (*asrār*), he vaguely adds), "and their leaders are animals who only lick the trash of philosophy… and spout nonsense with their tongues stuck out like panting dogs…")

In both the introduction and conclusion of his *Miftāḥ*, Sakkākī argues that it is of prime importance to gain, by painstaking effort, mastery over the Arabic language in order, first and foremost, to understand the Qur'an as well as possible, and to avoid hateful errors such as these. By studying the arts of grammar, one can refute those who criticize the Qur'an as self-contradictory, repetitive, and, in short, written by a human. In his introduction, Sakkākī warned us that a partial study of grammar leads to overconfidence and can be dangerous in the wrong hands, and in his conclusion, he provides examples of those who think they understand language, but whose incomplete knowledge leads them further into error. In refuting these arguments, he demonstrates another point from his introduction, that an in-depth study of language reveals the profound logic at the root of its smallest details, and the wisdom of the one who first designed it.[67] An incomplete knowledge of grammar, it is implied, could lead one to misinterpret God's word, and thus lead to grave error or even damnation.

Meanwhile, in his *Shāmil*, verses of the Qur'an are woven together into powerful invocations by which to subdue devils and jinn; he spells out the obvious dangers of this practice as well: that these jinn will destroy you if you show fear, or fail to produce the ritual correctly. In both cases, knowledge of language is the key to true knowledge of the Holy Text, and thus the surest route to confidence, power, and safety.

In refuting the claim that the prophet was the author of the Qur'an (as opposed to God Himself), Sakkākī first admits that the prophet was the most eloquent of Arabs. Even so, he writes, he could never have fooled the other Arabs, those masters of language, into thinking that God was the author of a text that he wrote himself. After all, the early satirists Jarīr and Farazdaq were so advanced in their mastery of language, and so consequently tuned into the "unknown", that they could anticipate one another's verses, predicting word for word a poem the other would recite (indeed it was said that they shared an inspiring jinn). Moreover, they could pick, at first hearing, one plagiarised line out of a lengthy poem, identifying its original author merely by the style. How then could the prophet have tricked his fellow eloquent Arabs into believing that God and not he was the author of the holy text? Their mastery of language preserved them from this dangerous error.

One particularly amusing anecdote from this section, provided as another example of the Arabs' sensitivity for the subtleties of language, depicts an Arab woman named Sukayna criticising the poetry of both Jarīr and Farazdaq in turn.

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[65] Dols pg. 221 citing the Encylopaedia of Islam 1 article on al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīra, the prophet's defender in the anecdote. Also see p. 216, as well as Bürgel's "The Poet and his Demon."
[66] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ,* pp. 700-703.
[67] Ibid. p. 42.

Turning her attention to a line of love poetry, which praises the poet's relationship with his beloved by rejoicing that they "both like the same things," Sukayna asks if the poet is implying that he likes being penetrated, or relishes playing the passive role in sex (as his female beloved presumably does).[68] Thus does Sukayna show how an ill-chosen turn of phrase can render a poet not an object of envy but a laughing stock. We find obvious parallels with the care that must be taken in uttering magical incantations: one may seek control over the jinn, but find oneself through carelessness—a misspoken word or phrase— dominated by them instead, or as you might say, "screwed"—the passive rather than the active partner in the relationship.

Sakkākī the Man

Sakkākī emphasises control in his *Miftāḥ*. In his promise to unveil the secrets of metaphor, he writes, "We shall drive them to you in an orderly file, the leader of their pack of benefits in chains, arranging them in an order that tightens the bridle back on the faces of their precious pearls."[69] All in all, he seems like a man who strives to keep a firm grasp on his jinn. In his *Shāmil*, the jinn are only to be addressed in a state of absolute ritual purity and under carefully determined astrological circumstances. They are to be faced without fear and ordered firmly in the name of whichever Holy Text they would best respond to (the Qur'an for Muslim jinn, but the texts of the Christians, Jews, or Zoroastrians if attempting to control Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian jinn. When attempting to expel jinn of undetermined faith from an epileptic, he recommends "any incantation that is formidable and awe-inspiring").[70] Even in, for example, invoking the power of Venus, Sakkākī's ritual is relatively restrained compared to a similar ceremony in Rāzī's *Al-Sirr al-Maktūm*.[71] Sakkākī largely avoids methods which might put mental control at risk, namely, the use of sex and wine as ritual tools (indeed he implies in his *Miftāḥ* that he has never tasted wine, when he writes that it is as sweet as a lover's kiss "or so people claim.")[72]

Again, this seems to be a symptom of his desire for self-control, more than an unwillingness to overstep the bounds of decorum. In fact, his willingness to go beyond the limits of proper conduct in his magical practice earned him the opprobrium of some commentators. Zadeh writes "Al-Sakkākī was also held out, even in occult literature, as an object lesson for transgressing the bounds of probity."[73] But like other famous transgressors in the history of Arabic literature (Abū Nuwās springs naturally to mind), he was nevertheless a pious Muslim of passionate faith; he was a man of microcosmic contradictions.

Nor was he devoid of a sense of humour—a trait especially apparent in his chapter on *faṣl wa-waṣl* (detachment and conjunction), in which he explains the importance of joining words and phrases with appropriate links:

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[68] Ibid. p. 707.
[69] Ibid. p. 471.
[70] C114: *Ayya ʿazīma in kāna bi-haybah ʿaẓīmah.*
[71] Both versions of the ritual were discussed by Liana Saif in her presentation "Under the Light of Venus."
[72] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ* p. 441.
[73] Zadeh, "Cutting Ariadne's Thread," p. 634 footnote 78, where he cites the opening of the astrological treatise, *Hayʾāt al-aflāk*, British Library, MS Or. 5416, fol. 4b. As mentioned above, the contemporary account of Sakkākī's failed magical statue is also described in disapproving terms, as an act of dangerously impious hubris (al-Nasawī, *Sīrat al-Sulṭān*, p. 254).

If someone said, "Zayd has gone away, there are 30 degrees in the constellation Aries, the Caliph's sleeve is extremely long, I really need to vomit, the people of Byzantium are Christian, there is a bulginess about the eye of the fly, Galen was a skilled physician, it is sunna to read the Qur'an in *tarāwīḥ*, and monkeys look like people," and he used "and" to connect [these sentences together], he would be kicked out of the category of the smart people club, recorded among the ranks of the perfectly silly, or counted as a laughingstock. If taken to the extreme, such an ordering might be considered the work of a joker, a vessel of rare nonsense, as opposed to if he had thrown the sentence out like so many nuts and stones without seeking to link them together.

Although we have painted Sakkākī as a man with an interest in the darkest of the dark arts, and with a somewhat terrifying desire for control, it is clear in this passage that he also had a playful side. But his interests in the images and tools of occult ritual loom even beneath this light-hearted discussion, which he first introduces with a similarly silly list of unrelated items: "There should be a shared feature between the items joined together, such as the sun and the moon, heaven and earth, jinn and man… as opposed to, for example, the sun and the gallbladder of a hare, *Sūrat al-Ikhlās* and the left leg of a frog, Zoroastrianism and a thousand eggplants"…[74] We cannot help but remark how even his humour revolves around animal and plant parts, holy texts and traditions, and heavenly bodies, all in a way that inevitably reminds us of his grimoire.

Conclusion

The closing pages of the *Miftāḥ* are redolent with magic.[75] Sakkākī's final three refutations of criticisms of the Qur'an revolve around the images of Solomon's tempest, Moses's staff, and the heavenly tablets on which the highest version of the Qur'an is preserved. As for the wind which King Solomon commanded, Sakkākī claims that critics characterize its description as both "gentle" and "storm-like"[76] as contradictory; Sakkākī explains that it was a strong but not a destructive wind. They further complain, he claims, that Moses's staff was described as three different types of snake of three different sizes.[77] (It was a large snake but not a heavy one, he explains). And he refutes the criticism that the Qur'an should not have been called both *tanzīl* and *inzāl*,[78] two words meaning subtly different versions of "sent down," by explaining that each refers to different stages in its progress from Heaven to Earth.

Although he gives the appearance in this section of refuting the criticisms of a non-Muslim, non-native Arabic speaker, as he concludes his argument, the criticisms he pretends to refute grow increasingly arcane—advanced knowledge of Arabic grammar is required even to understand them. It is implausible that anyone "ignorant without limit" of the Arabic language (as he then calls them) would ever have raised these objections in the first place—they are at once too subtle and too absurd. It seems

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[74] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ* pp. 359-360.
[75] Ibid. p. 721.
[76] Gentle (*rukhā'an*) in Q: 38:36, and storm-like (*'āṣifa*) in Q: 21:81.
[77] *Thuʿbānun* in 7:107 and 26:32, *al-jānn* in 27:10 and 28:31, and *ḥayya* in 20:20.
[78] Verb forms two and four of the root n-z-l are used to refer to the Qur'an in multiple verses (though the verbal noun *inzāl* is never used in the Qur'an).

more likely that Sakkākī chose these three images as locations of enormous power—Solomon's wind, Moses's staff, and the language of the Qur'an as bridge between Heaven and Earth. These images all feature in his grimoire, and they are here at the end of his book of language as examples of the power of language itself.

He follows these arguments with a brief refutation of a purported criticism of a verse in which the angels bow down to Adam; again, it seems less likely that he is answering a real criticism here (regarding a technicality of when precisely humans were created)[79] and more likely that he is seeking to conclude his book with another image of great importance to him—the image of man's power over angels. This closing image of his grammar leads naturally into the opening image of his angel-filled grimoire: "Praise God who made the angels messengers with two, three, or four wings, adding to His creation as He wills, for God has power over all things."[80]

But the final argument of the entire *Miftāḥ*, with which he abruptly concludes his 726-page tome, is that the Qur'an is not poetry, because, although certain fragments of verse fit into metrical patterns, they do not do so because they *intend* to be poetry.[81] They are not poetry on purpose.

This is the goal of both books: to harness and dominate the dangerous forces of language and magic—to create rhetorical sorcery by the force and training of the purpose and the will. Despite the fact that Sakkākī is not now remembered as a Sufi, his text, like many works of occult significance of the era, cites Sufis as authorities on these matters. If we were to link his practises to a Sufi path broadly defined, we would have to call him a sober rather than an intoxicated practitioner, despite the fact that he deals with the darkest of the dark arts.

A substantial proportion of his *Shāmil* is aimed at communication with the devil and his offspring, and often for purposes of harming or sexually ensnaring a victim. His grimoire was as dark as the time and place he lived in; his desire for control made poignant by the chaotic environment in which he attempted to survive. In explaining the apparent pessimism of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār's *Book of Suffering*, Navid Kermani describes the environment of 13th-century Iran and Central Asia—the world Sakkākī also inhabited—as "an agitated, bloody time in which robbery, whoring and drunkenness spread as widely as mysticism, asceticism and inwardness."[82] Warring local rulers burned, pillaged, and abused the populations that they sought to rule, while simultaneously provided protection and patronage to the poets and scholars who adorned their courts.[83] As Miller writes, Khwarazmian Shah 'Alā al-Dīn's resort to magic and divination, including his employ of Sakkākī's malfunctioning statue, was another result of the "confusion, desperation, and sheer

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[79] This pertains to Q 7:11, translated by Yusuf Ali as, "And We created you, then fashioned you, then told the angels: Fall ye prostrate before Adam!"
[80] C 1b, a paraphrase of Q 35:1.
[81] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ* pp. 722-726.
[82] Kirmani, *The Terror of God*, pp. 65-66. Noble also discusses the impact of the terror of the Mongol invasions and uncertainty of the time in promoting the "aggressive use of the talismanic science," *Philosophising the Occult,* p. 265. Melvin-Koushki's "Mobilizing Magic" comments on the uncertain environment of post-Mongol conquest and the manner in which it empowered magicians. Zadeh discusses this extensively in his forthcoming *Wonders and Rarities*.
[83] Maṭlūb, *Al-Balāghah,* pp. 30-40.

terror" inspired by the conflicts in the region.[84] She refers especially to the Mongol conquests, but Noble reminds us that the Shah simultaneously had reason to fear Nizārī Ismāʿīlī assassination.[85] Amongst these warring factions, Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and other religious traditions coexisted, survived side by side, and seeped into one another by "osmotic processes."[86]

Let us remember Sakkākī's own linguistic distance from the Arab masters of language whom he idolises—he was himself likely a native speaker of Persian, Khwārazmian, and/or Khwārazm Turkic.[87] The mixed linguistic background he inhabited is everywhere apparent in his garbled grimoire. In his thorough study of the *Miftāḥ*, *Al-Balāgha ʿind al-Sakkākī*, Aḥmad Maṭlūb identifies a poetic exemplar that Sakkākī himself penned, and criticising it as derivative and ugly, concludes that this famed scholar of language lacked poetic genius. To Maṭlūb, the competent but uninspired verses are proof of his thesis, that driven by his Muʿtazili leanings, Sakkākī approached language from a dryly logical and systematic, rather than a literary standpoint.[88] This is in keeping with my argument that Sakkākī was a man who sought to dominate rather than submit to inspiration, although I would point out that the moments I have focused on in this essay—those rare moments of high emotion in the *Miftāḥ*, work their magic on the mind with a fierce and delicate exactitude. Without doubt, Sakkākī wielded a powerful pen. As for the verses Maṭlūb criticises, these rail against a hard and treacherous fate, ending every line with the poetic apostrophe, "O thou Time!" (*ayyuhā l-zaman*),[89] employing the *radīf* rhyme scheme more common to Persian than Arabic.[90] We can read this refrain in light of his work on magic, where such apostrophes addressed to planetary spirits, jinn, and angels are pervasive.[91] The theme of the poem itself further highlights the hardships that the author faced during his lifetime.

Read against this historical background, we can perceive a man struggling to stay in control of his situation (and ultimately failing—as he died in prison, having lost in a magical battle of wits). As a translator and interpreter of his work, one may follow him in perceiving the links between poetry and magic, but find we must take a passive role to his dominating prose style, and embrace the illegibility and ambiguity of his writing with something like an ecstatically resigned shrug.

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[84] Miller, "Occult Science," p. 249.

[85] Ibid. p. 266.

[86] Kermani, *The Terror of God,*192.

[87] As Heinrichs suggests in his "al-Sakkākī."

[88] This has become the standard interpretation of the *Miftāḥ*, so frequently characterised as a dry and boring reduction of language to a set of logical rules (inspired by the Muʾatazila love of rationalism, and read in contrast to al-Jurjānī's depiction of language as a vehicle of wonder) that this has become almost a trope in speaking about Sakkākī's work. In her "The Name of the Key" Fontana provides a full analysis of this scholarly trope, as well as a defence of this book, which in fact holds enormous mystery and magic.

[89] Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ,* p. 694 and Maṭlūb, *Al-Balāghah,* p. 59.

[90] When it is found in Arabic, it is typically used by Persians writing in Arabic, as explained in Van Gelder's *Sound and Sense*, 180 ff.

[91] Selove, "Magic as Poetry, Poetry as Magic."

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