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extra

Melancholia in *Chahâr Maqâle*, a 12th-century Persian text

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Little is known about the life of Ahmed ibn 'Umar ibn 'Alî, better known as Nizâmî 'Arûzî. The only information resides in his own text outlining travels throughout Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to collect biographies of famous poets. He reached Iran and became the court poet of the sultan Sanjar in 1116/1117 AD. His monumental *Chahâr Maqâle* (*Four Discourses*) addresses the four professions indispensable for a sound ruler: poet, civil secretary, astrologer and physician. The work entered the literary canon within the 13th century.

Four Discourses is rich in cultural history. For example, 'Arûzî lists essential works for the mastery of medicine. Moreover, his narratives resemble case presentations. Contemporary readers can therefore compare symptoms across time and space.

In one anecdote on melancholia, a person dear to the Buyid ruler 'Alâ al-Dawla becomes so delusional that he considers himself a cow. He asks people to kill and eat him even as he fasts. Since no physician could treat him, the ruler entertains his trusted vizier Ibn Sîna (Avicenna), who dispatches two men with word of a butcher's arrival. The young man rejoices. As they bind his limbs, Ibn Sîna inspects him like a butcher, but protests that he is too thin for slaughter. Ibn Sîna orders specific foods and medicines to fatten him up. The young man cheerfully obliges. Ibn Sîna continues to consult and within a month the man's health returns.

Notable lessons can be drawn from this anecdote. Like today, one millennium ago physicians struggled to manage psychotic depression. Ibn Sîna's status as minister also reveals the historical esteem of physicians. Finally, physicians working within the patient's psychological world tend to succeed, even through unorthodox means. This helps explain Ibn Sîna's lasting reputation.

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