The preface and chapters one and twenty-three of Minhāj al-dukkān differ from the other chapters, which all deal with aspects of pharmacology, either compound drugs (chapters 2–19) or simples (chapters 20–22, 24–25). These sections deal, in one way or another, with al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār’s understanding of the role of the pharmacist. Beginning with an explication of why he bothered to write Minhāj al-dukkān in the preface, chapters one and twenty-three continue to elucidate the ethics of managing a pharmacy. In all three sections, al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār presents himself as a father writing to his son.

The preface; or, Why I wrote this book

The prefaces of books do not form a literary genre in themselves, but are programmatic notes setting out the author’s reason and purpose in writing. According to Freimark,

In the central part, almost always introduced by the rhetorical formula ammā baʿdu (“now, then, now to the point”), the author states the real reason for writing his book. For this he mostly uses topoi, which consist largely of schematic patterns of thought and expression belonging to literary tradition, and which have parallels in European literatures of the late classical, medieval and early modern periods. On the other hand, several authors also show personal approaches based on reality…¹

Even the most cursory reading of the ḥuṭḥa of Minhāj al-dukkān reveals its formal structure and use of topoi common to prefaces throughout Arabic literature. The characteristic tripartite division into opening praises, middle (‘objective’) part and closing praises² is present: an exordium (p. 9) praising God for giving humanity the intelligence

¹ P. Freimark, “Muḫaddima,” EI2, vol. 7, p. 496. I thank Prof. Sarah Stroumsa for referring me to the work of Freimark and Riad (see below).
to know and use the various animals, vegetables and minerals on earth is followed by a rehearsal of al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār’s motives and objectives in composing Minhāj al-dukkān (pp. 9–11). These are followed by a detailed table of contents of the work (pp. 12–13). Finally, a single sentence (p. 13) asks for God’s help in achieving the author’s purposes.

What are al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār’s motives and objectives? He aims to fill a perceived need for a book that would cover all of pharmacy, pointing out the lack of such a book, among both ancient and modern writers, aimed specifically at pharmacists. This is his major criticism of one of his most notable predecessors, Ibn Abī ʾl-Bayān. Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār has to criticize his predecessors, in order to differentiate himself from them and to explain why his book is better. He can not afford to ignore al-Dustūr al-bīmāristānī thus he has to state explicitly what it lacks in comparison with his own book. He continues by stating the requirements of his readers and clarifying his method.

Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār begins the main part of his preface with the following words:

And now to the point, I have longed for a collection that would comprise all my objectives, sufficient for all the needs of one desiring to achieve comprehension of everything relating to it. That would enable such a one to do without a guide (yakūn mustaghniyan ʿan murshid) to show him the details that he requires in order to occupy himself in the craft of pharmacy. [The student] could not do without a guide absolutely but in relation to his fellow. This craft is the most honourable craft after the craft of medicine, because it is a tool of the craft of medicine, whose subject is the observation (nazār) of the human body in order to preserve health if it is present or to restore it if it is absent. This is only done through drugs, simple and compound, and customary foods. I have not found a book comprising all I wanted, neither an ancient nor a modern pharmacopoeia sufficient for what I intended.

Two points are raised here: (1) The need for a comprehensive book of pharmacy; (2) The status of pharmacy as the handmaid of medicine. (1) is the result of (2): Pharmacy’s importance requires a special book devoted to it alone.

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3 Freimark, Vorwort, pp. 26–27
4 Freimark, Vorwort, p. 62.
5 This definition of medicine is that of Ibn Sinā. See al-Qānūn fiʾl-ṭibb, vol. 1, p. 13.
6 Minhāj al-dukkān, pp. 9–10.