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The Occasional Lyric in an Early Modern Persian Anthology

Abstract

This paper argues for a modest expansion of the concept of occasional verse in the context of classical Persian poetry. Discussion of occasionality in this field has traditionally focused on the panegyric ode (*qaṣīda*), and to a lesser degree on the epigrammatic poem (*qiṭʿa*). While these forms certainly represent key categories of occasional verse, it is unfortunate that the type of poetry that came to dominate the classical Persian tradition – *i.e.*, love lyric, especially the *ghazal* – has less of a clear position in the discourse on occasionality. The difficulty in considering *ghazal*s as occasional is, admittedly, first and foremost a result of their tendency to treat abstract themes, rather than to comment on specific events. What I suggest, however, is that we can look to biographical anthologies of poets (*taẕkiras*) – in particular from the early modern period – since they sometimes offer anecdotes to explain the context underlying the composition and sharing of *ghazals*. Leveraging these sources could allow us to extend the study of occasional verse in Persian to a much larger body of poetry, with strong representation from all historical periods.

Keywords

Classical Persian poetry, Occasional verse, *Ghazal*, Biographical anthologies, Safavid-Mughal period.

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to encourage conversation on the idea of occasional literature in the context of classical Persian poetry – a topic that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been debated to a significant extent in scholarship.[1] There is, of course, a rich body of work on one kind of occasional verse in the Persian tradition: the panegyric ode, or *qaṣīda*, which was a widely practiced genre in all periods and especially dominant in the pre-Mongol era.[2] But studying the classical *qaṣīda*, which represents occasional poetry in the most

1. I would like to thank Ingela Nilsson and Nikolaos Zagklas, for organizing this special issue, as well as the 2022 workshop in Stockholm that led to it; and Christian Høgel, for his patient editorial work. The comments of the anonymous reviewers of this article were highly astute and helped me to improve several aspects. I hope to address more of the fundamental questions that they raised in future research. Finally, at the time that most of this paper was written, I was affiliated with the ERC-funded project AnonymClassic at the Freie Universität Berlin, and I remain grateful for that support.

2. As will be discussed below, the *qiṭʿa* – a form of short, often epigrammatic poetry – has also been treated as occasional in some contexts.

straightforward sense, is not the same as a broader critical engagement with questions of 'occasionality'. What did it mean for a Persian poem to be occasional? How could that term perhaps be applied to different forms and genres? (That is, if we are comfortable extending it beyond panegyric and other 'safe cases'). And where can we look for evidence of the occasional dimension in Persian poetry, when context may be lacking in the poems themselves?

What I would like to suggest, on an experimental basis, is that it is possible to identify occasionality in a form/genre in Persian that is usually thought of as lyric: the *ghazal*.[3] This shorter form of poetry – which focuses on themes of love (broadly defined) and held unmatched popularity among Persian poets from about the seventh/thirteenth or eighth/fourteenth century onward – was practiced in such a range of contexts, to such a variety of ends, that it is not difficult to imagine its application to occasional verse. Were *ghazal*s sometimes composed for particular occasions and linked to phenomena such as patronage and competition among poets? It is likely that almost any specialist in classical Persian poetry would answer this question in the affirmative. What is lacking is, rather, a higher-level discourse in the field.

To be more specific about the line of argument in this paper, I place emphasis on the role of biographical anthologies of poetry (or *taẕkira*s) as repositories of information about the contexts in which poems were composed and performed.[4] We have a proliferation of anthologies from the early modern period – the same time in which the total dominance of the *ghazal* among the genres of Persian poetry was consolidated. And these sources allow us, in certain cases, to 'connect the dots' between a snippet of lyric poetry and the moment of, or reason for, its composition. We can thereby circumvent one of the difficulties in studying *ghazal*s from a social perspective: the tendency for their *text* not to include direct references to their *context*.

This is merely a short article, outlining a few ideas and pointing to examples. While there are many early modern Persian *taẕkira*s that contain useful discussion of poets' careers and interactions,[5] I will focus on one source, the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* (*c.* 957/1550). Written by a Safavid prince named Sām Mīrzā (d. 975/1567), the *Tuḥfa* is an invaluable record of the activities of poets (or would-be poets) of the tenth/sixteenth century, who came from a range of social classes and lived in cities across Iran. This *taẕkira* includes anecdotes involving two phenomena in the culture of Persian lyric poetry that bear on questions of occasionality. First, there are descriptions of poets' circles, in some cases noting that a given poem was composed at a certain

3. There is some prior scholarship that explores the occasional dimension in *ghazal*s. One of the best examples is Brookshaw, who analyzes, *inter alia*, the mention of places and performance contexts in *ghazal*s by Ḥāfiẓ (d. *c.* 792/1390) and other poets of his era. It should be noted, however, that Brookshaw does not explicitly use the terminology or framework of 'occasional verse.' Part of the project of enriching the discussion of occasionality in scholarship on classical Persian literature will be bringing together existing studies that are relevant but perhaps not obviously so.

4. It should be kept in mind that there are questions surrounding the reliability of anecdotes presented in some anthologies – including, famously, the *Taẕkirat al-shuʿarāʾ* (892/1487) of Dawlatshāh Samarqandī. The problem is most pronounced when there is a large gap in time between the career of a poet and the composition of *taẕkira*s that discuss them. In this article, the focus is rather on details that early modern anthologists recorded about poets of their own era, perhaps even acquaintances. Still, as is always the case in literary history, stories must be taken with a grain of salt. *Taẕkira* authors had various motivations: promoting themselves and their friends; criticizing their rivals; setting out their perspectives on trends in the style of Persian poetry; etc.

5. Another ideal *taẕkira* in which to study this phenomenon is the *ʿArafāt al-ʿāshiqīn va ʿaraṣāt al-ʿārifīn* (1024/1615) of Taqī al-Dīn Awḥadī Balyānī. (See the edition of Ẕabīḥ Allāh Ṣāḥibkārī and Āmina Fakhr Aḥmad, published in eight volumes by Mīrāṡ-i Maktūb in 2010). One could use Taqī al-Dīn's biographical notices to reconstruct the activities of urban poets' circles around the turn of the eleventh/seventeenth century.

gathering of individuals. Second, on a more abstract level, Sām Mīrzā sometimes introduces a quote from a *ghazal* by explaining that it was composed in the practice of *imitatio* (*javāb-gūʾī*) vis-à-vis a specific earlier poem.[6] Among my suggestions is that it is worth exploring the idea that *javāb-gūʾī* – which was one of the key ways in which Persian poets engaged in conversation with one another through their work – might in itself constitute a sort of occasion.

6. The classic study of this practice in Persian poetry is Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*.

Before turning to the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, however, it will be necessary to define our terms (including 'occasionality'); to situate occasional poetry in the classical Persian tradition, paying special attention to the shift in popularity and influence from the *qaṣīda* to the *ghazal*; and to provide at least a brief introduction to the *taẕkira* genre. Again, this is intended to promote further dialogue among Persianists on a topic that has yet to be confronted in earnest in the scholarly literature. To develop a nuanced understanding of occasionality in classical Persian poetry would involve a substantial, longer-term research effort.

Terminological Questions

We need first to have a working definition of occasional poetry – at least for the purposes of this paper. For a starting point, we can look to an authority such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. There we find an entry for 'occasional verse,' which is described as "poetry written for or prompted by a special occasion, *e.g.* a wedding, funeral, anniversary, birth, military or sporting victory, or scientific achievement" (Baldick 176). The entry further specifies that the poetic forms most associated with the occasional style are the *epithalamion* (a kind of poem that celebrates a wedding), the elegy, and the ode.

A slightly longer and more critical discussion of occasional verse is given in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Green 966). While the term is defined in effectively the same way, a few noteworthy caveats are issued. First, the authors of this entry clarify that "all literary works are occasioned in some sense," and that "occasional verse differs in having not a private but a public or social occasion." Second, after listing a range of well-known examples of occasional poetry (mostly in English), the authors note that the common perception of this type of verse – that it is "ephemeral or trivial or public" – can be challenged in many cases. Occasional verse exists in various forms and at all levels of seriousness. This leads the authors to admit – or, at least, to hint at an admission – that it is diffi-

cult to set boundaries for which kinds of poetry qualify as occasional. They cite the example of Emily Dickinson's poems that imagine the occasion of her own death.

In short, the impression given by reference works is that it is straightforward to articulate a basic definition of occasional verse – and that there is a consensus around this definition, and around many of the famous examples to be mentioned – but at the same time, we see acknowledgment of the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of finding a basis on which to distinguish consistently between occasional and non-occasional poetry. And this way of thinking about occasionality is clearly applicable to the classical Persian tradition. As will be discussed in greater detail below, some of the central applications of the *qaṣīda* form – praising a ruler, marking a holiday, etc. – fit within the ordinary, simple definition of occasional verse.

The object of this paper is not to call into question the validity of the traditional approach to occasional poetry, nor to attempt to dislodge the *qaṣīda* from its position as the clearest manifestation of this phenomenon in Persian. Rather, the question at hand is whether we can broaden our sense of occasional verse to some extent. What I will suggest here – if only provisionally – is a practical and flexible understanding of the term, under which, rather than setting absolute criteria, we highlight a few 'indicators of occasionality.' Poetry that displays multiple such features might then (weighing the specific circumstances) be considered occasional.

There are three factors that seem especially pertinent to the question of occasionality in the case of Persian poetry. First, and most obviously – almost tautologically – there should be a connection between the authorship of a poem and a certain 'occasion,' *e.g.*, a festival, the inauguration of a new ruler, or a meeting of a literary circle. (Later we will see how the practice of *imitatio* in Persian poetry, or *javāb-gū̓ī*, might also be thought of as generating a kind of occasion, albeit more abstractly). Second, an occasional poem will often have a definable 'performance context.' Was the piece in question initially meant to be recited, for example, at court before the king, or at a gathering of other poets or friends? Third, the composition of a given poem, or the work of the poet more generally, may be linked to 'patronage.' That is, occasional poetry can be relevant to the way that the poet makes a living or achieves his or her social status. Patronage could involve a direct payment – say, a poet performs an ode at court as part of a celebration of the harvest and is awarded his weight in silver coins. Or it could be that the poet holds a regular position, the maintenance of which in-

volves periodically composing and reciting new work. Each of the aforementioned indicators – occasion, performance, patronage – can be approached on flexible terms. This makes for an understanding of occasional verse that is relatively broad, but not, I would argue, to a degree that renders the concept meaningless.

If one looks for discussion of occasional poetry in scholarship on classical Persian literature, one will find relevant material in works by researchers such as Sunil Sharma (*Persian poetry, Mughal Arcadia*; in the latter book, see, *e.g.*, 49–50), Jocelyn Sharlet,[7] Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, and Samuel Hodgkin. In most cases, however, there is the traditional application of terminology and concepts, in which occasional verse is nearly equated to panegyric verse (*i.e.*, the *qaṣīda*) composed in search of patronage from someone in a position of authority. The one other type of poetry in Persian that is often referred to as 'occasional' is the *qiṭʿa* (lit. 'snippet'), a short form that was used for epigrams, extemporaneous commentary on events, etc. (see de Bruijn and Baha'-al-Din Khorramshahi).[8] But this is not a large avenue of research, given that the *qiṭʿa* is generally one of the less-studied forms in the Persian tradition.

7. This is perhaps the overall best study of classical Persian (and Arabic) panegyric poetry, at least in recent years. See, *e.g.*, the overviews of the careers of individual panegyrists in ch. 3.

8. See, for example, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* entries on "Ḵvāju Kermāni," by J. T. P. de Bruijn; and "Hafez ii. Hafez's Life and Times," by Baha'-al-Din Khorramshahi.

Locating Occasionality in Classical Persian Poetry

One could categorize classical Persian poetry in any number of ways, along both formal and generic lines (not to mention other criteria). With regard to form, for example, we could highlight four that became especially prestigious and dominant, in different periods and in different ways: the verse narrative, composed in rhyming couplets (*maṡnavī*), up to thousands of lines in length; the ode (*qaṣīda*), of variable length but often on the order of several dozen lines; the love lyric (*ghazal*), traditionally five to fourteen lines (*i.e.*, roughly comparable in length to the sonnet); and the so-called quatrain (*rubāʿī* or *du-baytī*), which in fact consists of two lines of two hemistichs each. Any of these forms could then be associated with multiple genres. Persian narrative verse, for example, could be used for epic (the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī, d. *c.* 410/1020); romance (*Khusraw va Shīrīn* by Niẓāmī, d. *c.* 605/1209); or religious or philosophical discourse (the *Maṡnavī-i maʿnavī* of Rūmī, d. 672/1273). The *qaṣīda* could be panegyric (its most common manifestation), or it could be composed without a dedicatee and address more abstract themes.[9] The *ghazal* could express love anywhere on a spectrum from the mystical (the *Dīvān-i Shams* of Rūmī) to the

9. One relatively early Persian poet noted for his imaginative use of the *qaṣīda* form is Khāqānī Shirvānī (d. *c.* 1190s CE). See Beelaert "Ḵāqāni Šervāni," *A Cure for the Grieving*.

strongly profane (as in some of the poems of Saʿdī, d. *c.* 690/1291).[10] And so forth. One could go into limitless detail in such a discussion, but the basic point is that, for the most part, when we open the collected works (*dīvān* or *kulliyyāt*) of a classical Persian poet, we will find predominantly *ghazal*s, *qaṣīda*s, *rubāʿiyyāt*, and sometimes longer-form narrative poems.[11]

If one wished to locate occasional poetry in this system, the initial answer would be clear: one should turn to the panegyric *qaṣīda*. This was a prominent form and genre – especially (though by no means exclusively) in the early centuries of the Persian tradition, *i.e.*, from the fourth/tenth century to the seventh/thirteenth. The prototypical context was that a poet would compose a new *qaṣīda*, dedicated explicitly to a ruler or other powerful individual who was in a position to offer monetary rewards for poems that honored him. Many such panegyrics were also tied to specific events, such as the Iranian New Year (*Nawrūz*) or the autumn festival (*Mihragān*). If there was, for example, a ceremony at a ruler's court to mark Nawrūz, then a poet might prepare a *qaṣīda* celebrating both the holiday (linked to the arrival of spring) and the ruler.[12] It is thought to have been common for poets to recite their own original work at court.[13] If a poem made a particularly good impression, it might lead to an especially generous reward. Another part of this dynamic was that a poet could affiliate with a court for a period of time, or even for their whole career. We can point to several of the most famous Persian poets from the early classical period and identify them clearly as panegyrists of their respective courts. For example, Farrukhī (d. *c.* 429/1037–38), ʿUnṣurī (d. 431/1039–40), and Manūchihrī (*fl.* 1030s CE) all have secure positions in the canon, and all three served the Ghaznavid sultans in the first half of the fifth/eleventh century. Their affiliation with the Ghaznavid court was what allowed for them to make a living composing poetry, and for their works to attain popularity and to be recorded for posterity.[14]

The panegyric *qaṣīda* has all the features that one might expect to find in occasional poetry: mention of specific events, an oral performance context, a direct relationship to patronage. But the prevailing trends in Persian poetry would change over time. In the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, there was growth in the number and diversity of longer works of verse – for instance, romances and mystical allegories – and this became a major vehicle for literary creativity. At the same time, the *qaṣīda* form evolved to where it was used to address, for example, philosophical themes, in ways that were less tied to praising kings in exchange for material rewards.[15]

10. On the latter count, see Ingenito, especially pt. 1 (chs. 1–3).

11. *Qiṭʿa*s, which have been discussed above, represent another common category.

12. For an example, more or less picked out of a hat, see the Nawrūz *qaṣīda* composed by Farrukhī Sīstānī (d. *c.* 429/1037–38) and dedicated to the Ghaznavid prince ʿAżud al-Dawla Yūsuf, one of the sons of Sabuktagīn (d. 387/997), founder of the dynasty. *Dīvān-i Ḥakīm Farrukhī Sīstānī*, ed. Muḥammad Dabīr-Siyāqī, 217–19 (*qaṣīda* no. 109). The text of the poem can also be found in the Ganjoor corpus (last access on 4 October 2024).

13. The early poet Rūdakī (d. *c.* 329/940–41), for example, had a reputation as a highly skilled musician. See the introductory section in Tabatabai.

14. For an in-depth study of one of these figures, see Clinton.

15. See the earlier footnote on Khāqānī.

Perhaps most consequentially, another form rose to prominence in this period: the *ghazal*. Over the long run, and continuing into the modern era, the *ghazal* would become by far the most popular form in Persian poetry.[16] As Persian literary history progresses into the later medieval and early modern periods, with the *qaṣīda* giving way to the *ghazal*, the idea of occasionality becomes more complicated. Poets never stopped composing *qaṣīda*s or reciting them at court for patronage. But most of the activity in Persian poetry, and a great proportion of the creative energy, would come to be devoted to the *ghazal* form. We see, accordingly, a shift in what might be called the 'dominant occasion' for the performance and exchange of Persian poetry: it moves from the court to the literary salon.

16. This is not to mention the adoption and adaptations of the Persianate *ghazal* in other languages – Ottoman Turkish first among them.

This is, it should go without saying, a very high-level description of part of how the culture of Persian poetry evolved from the early days in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries to the lyric efflorescence of the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries. And a great deal has been glossed over here. The main ideas that need to be conveyed, for the purposes of this paper, are as follows: that there could be numerous approaches to the organization of classical Persian poetry into different categories; that occasional verse could, in turn, be studied from various perspectives; that the most immediately obvious angle would be to focus on the panegyric *qaṣīda*; and that, in light of the gradual shift in popularity and influence from the *qaṣīda* to the *ghazal*, it would be helpful to have a way of analyzing occasionality within the context of Persian lyric poetry. (Implicit in this is the idea that occasional literature, like other broad types of literature, was at all times being produced, and that it is our task as students of the classical Persian tradition to follow what 'occasional' meant in different eras and regions).

In fact, the culture around the composition and sharing of *ghazal*s, especially during the early modern period, does display some characteristics that can be associated with occasional verse. It was common for poets to gather socially in urban areas, to recite for one another their latest *ghazal*s, and even to extemporize lyric poetry in response to whatever the theme of the day may have been. One of the key practices in this poetic culture was *javāb-gūʾī* (*i.e.*, *imitatio*). This entailed composing a new poem as a response to an older one, using the same meter and rhyme and playing with some of the same themes and vocabulary – so as to make clear the connection between the original poem and the *javāb* (lit. 'response'). Poets would sometimes gather and share different *javāb*s that they had composed to the

same well-known *qaṣīda* or *ghazal*. (Examples of these phenomena will be described below). It is also worth noting that, insofar as *ghazal*s were crafted to suit various performance contexts on a day-to-day basis, they could, if anything, fill the role of occasional poetry more frequently than *qaṣīda*s – which were more like 'special-occasion poems.' The early modern *ghazal* represents one of the most active research areas among Persianists today, including from the perspective of social history (see *e.g.*: Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*; Kinra; Mikkelson).

The *Taẕkira* Genre

The next question, which will bring us closer to the specific intervention of this paper, is how we can learn about the activities of Persian poets as they gathered and exchanged their work. When reading a panegyric *qaṣīda*, it is sometimes obvious from the content of the poem when it was composed and for what occasion – for instance, in celebration of the enthronement of a certain ruler, the date of which is known from other sources.[17] This is rarely the case for a *ghazal*, as it is a shorter form whose content is conventionally lyric. The beloved may be described in great detail, but not by name, let alone with a time frame indicated; and it is often unclear, if not irrelevant, whether the author has an actual person in mind. The corpus of *ghazal*s produced by a given poet can therefore appear as something of an undifferentiated mass in their collected works (at least with regard to the circumstances of composition). This is despite the fact that some of those poems may originally have been performed in quite distinct contexts.

Fortunately, we can achieve greater insight into this process by studying works written in an ancillary genre to Persian poetry; namely, biographical anthologies of poets, or *taẕkira*s.[18] These are books that collect biographical information on large numbers of poets, while also presenting selections of their verse. For those who have studied Renaissance European cultural history, a *taẕkira* is not entirely dissimilar to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. Or, for those with a background in the classics, there is Suetonius' series of works on prominent grammarians, rhetoricians, poets, and historians. The Persian *taẕkira* is roughly analogous. One point that should be emphasized is that, in the early modern era, when the *ghazal* had reached full ascendancy over other forms of Persian poetry, the *taẕkira* genre also exploded in popularity. Only a handful of *taẕkira*s were written prior to the late ninth/

17. The great eleventh/seventeenth century poet Ṣāʾib Tabrīzī (d. *c.* 1087/1676), for example, has a *qaṣīda* on the occasion of the coronation of the Safavid Shah Sulaymān I, which took place in Shawwāl 1078 AH (March 1668 CE). This was a particularly sensitive event, since the ruler in question had previously been enthroned as Shah Ṣafī II in 1077/1666. The beginning of his reign was deemed so inauspicious that he was recrowned under a new name. See the edition of Ṣāʾib's *dīvān* by Muḥammad Qahramān, vol. 6, 3597–99. The text of the poem is also available in the Ganjoor corpus (last access on 4 October 2024).

18. For a more comprehensive general introduction to this genre, see Losensky, "Biographical Writing."

fifteenth century, but the early modern period saw the production of dozens, even hundreds of these texts across Iran, Central Asia, and especially on the Indian subcontinent – which was then a major center for Persian literature.

In a *taẕkira* entry on a given poet, one will typically find some description of that individual's life, along with at least a line or two excerpted from their work. What is of interest with regard to occasional poetry is that a biographer will sometimes link a certain snippet of verse to an anecdote. There are, for instance, accounts in which a handful of poets gather to share their work (or to extemporize new verse), and some noteworthy occurrence is linked to one of the resultant poems. As will be demonstrated below, such an anecdote can offer us a window into the occasional dimension of poetry, lyric or otherwise.

Among the many Persian *taẕkira*s written during the boom in the genre's popularity in the early modern period is the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, completed around 957/1550 by Sām Mīrzā, a prince of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. The remainder of this paper will center on the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* as a *taẕkira* that is, in some ways, particularly well-suited to the study of the social history of Persian poetry in the tenth/sixteenth century – including the matter of occasionality.

Sām Mīrzā and the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*

The *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, as has been noted above, was completed in 957/1550 or not long thereafter. The author, Sām Mīrzā, was one of the sons of Shah Ismāʿīl, the founder of the Safavid dynasty as a ruling entity.[19] There is a fair amount to be said (though not here) about the relationship between Sām Mīrzā's political career – which was characterized by frustration and failure and ended with his execution at the order of his brother in 975/1567 – and, on the other hand, his literary career.[20] The *Tuḥfa* turned out to be one of the most famous Persian *taẕkira*s ever written.

Perhaps the greatest distinguishing feature of the *Tuḥfa* is that its notices, which number a bit over seven hundred, represent a selection of individuals who came from many stations in society. The chapter organization of this *taẕkira* is largely on the basis of social class, in a descending hierarchy, whereby the first chapter is devoted to members of various ruling dynasties who were known to have composed verse; the second chapter is for religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) and descendants of the Prophet (*sayyid*s); and so forth, until the seventh and

19. The Safavids are the dynasty responsible for converting the majority of the population of Iran to Shiʿi Islam, as well as for building a polity whose borders corresponded roughly to those of modern Iran. Readers looking for a concise general introduction to the Safavid period in Iranian history may refer to Newman, or to Quinn.

20. For much more on this topic, see, "The Lives of Sām Mīrzā;" "A Safavid Text."

final chapter, which addresses members of lower socioeconomic strata who had some interest in poetry. The chapter that is set aside for "actual poets" (*shuʿarāʾ*), and by far the largest in the book, is the fifth.

The importance of the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* as a source is, for the most part, twofold. First, the famous Persian poets of the early tenth/sixteenth century are given entries in this *taẕkira*. Sām Mīrzā thus provides key documentation of these poets' careers and the initial reception of their work. Second, and more in terms of the social history of Persian poetry, the *Tuḥfa* has received attention for its discussion of people of lower social status. This is one of the few *taẕkira*s of its era that tell us, for example, about the literary activities of men who worked humble jobs in the bazaar.[21] Another consequence of the *Tuḥfa*'s concern for painting a broad portrait of the types of people who were participating in the poetic culture of tenth/sixteenth century Iran, is that this sometimes involves describing occasions on which poetry was composed (or extemporized) and performed. In what follows, we will review a handful of examples of such phenomena, drawn from different sections of the *Tuḥfa*.

21. One noteworthy example of a category of people included in the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* is professional storytellers, or *qiṣṣa-khwānān*. See Khan, 35–36.

Examples of 'Occasional Lyric'

The cases discussed here will represent various kinds of 'poetic occasion' as reflected in the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*.[22] Furthermore, not all of the poems in question will be *ghazal*s. As has been explained above, the *qaṣīda* continued to be a significant form of Persian poetry in all eras; it was simply overshadowed in popularity and versatility by about the eighth/fourteenth century. It also seems to be the case that, over time, *qaṣīda*s were increasingly likely to be written as meditations on philosophical themes (or similar), rather than in the context of panegyric. And there are still further poetic forms to consider, such as pieces of satirical verse, which are often quite short. One of the common themes that emerge from these examples – *i.e.*, a typical way for the composition or performance context of a poem to be described – is the practice of *javāb-gūʾī*.

22. All citations of the text of the *Tuḥfa* will point to the *c.* 1967 edition by Rukn al-Dīn Humāyūn Farrukh. For good measure, three other editions are listed in the bibliography: those of Mawlavī Iqbāl Ḥusayn (1934), Vaḥīd Dastgirdī (1936), and Aḥmad Mudaqqiq Yazdī (2009).

Our first passage is from the entry on a minor poet – perhaps more of a poetaster, in the elitist perspective of Sām Mīrzā – called Qāsim Qaranbū. This is an individual that Sām encountered in the city of Harāt (modern-day northwestern Afghanistan), where he spent much of his youth as a Safavid prince. He recounts in this notice that a group of Harātī poets were gathered, and that they were all compos-

ing *javāb*s to a certain *ghazal* by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), the most famous Persian poet of the ninth/fifteenth century. To jog the reader's memory, Sām Mīrzā quotes the opening line of Jāmī's poem: "From love for you, there is a strange tumult in my heart today / grief at your absence has given me a different ecstasy today" (*az ʿishq-i tu shūrī-st ʿajab dar saram imrūz / dāda-st ghamat bī-khwudī-i dīgar-am imrūz*) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 362). It could probably be assumed, for the proximal audience of the *Tuḥfa*, that they would be familiar with many of the *ghazal*s of Jāmī, and that a small prompt like this would be sufficient for them to understand which poem was intended. Such *aide-mémoire* quotations can be seen at several points in the *Tuḥfa*.

In any case, Qāsim Qaranbū took the occasion of this exchange of *javāb*s to direct a bit of satire toward two of his friends and fellow Harātī literati. Sām Mīrzā quotes what appear to be the first three lines of Qāsim's response-*ghazal*. (We can tell, at least, that the first line quoted is also the opening line of the poem, since both hemistichs follow the rhyme – whereas, in subsequent lines, the rhyme is observed only at the end of the second hemistich). The quoted lines are as follows:

> dīvāna u āshufta-dil u abtar-am imrūz / dar pīsh-i raqīb-i tu zi sag kamtar-am imrūz;
> tā na-shnavam āvāz-i Hilālī u na-bīnam / kūr-am chu Zulālī u chu Qawsī kar-am imrūz;
> Ḥaydar ki bi har kūcha davīdī bi kulūkhī / dar khāna-yi khwud rah na-dahad Ḥaydar-am imrūz.
>
> (I'm crazed, agitated, and destitute today / Next to my rival for your love, I'm less than a dog today;
> Until I hear the voice of Hilālī and see him / I'm blind like Zulālī and deaf like Qawsī today;
> Ḥaydar, who runs through the streets with clods of dirt / Even Ḥaydar will not let me in his house today) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 362–63)

Apparently fond of this *javāb*, Sām Mīrzā also excerpts a line from later in the poem: "Tomorrow I will not wish for the shade of the tree of Paradise / if your cypress-like shadow is cast over my head today" (*fardā na-kunam ārizū-yi sāya-yi ṭūbā / gar sāya-yi sarv-i tu fatad bar saram imrūz*). Sām notes that this line "came out well" (*khūb vāqiʿ shuda*), and that it was out of a desire to quote it that he brought up the rest of the poem (*murād az īrād-i īn ghazal hamīn bayt ast*). The

'good line' must come from later in the poem, but it is probably not the final line. Again, a *ghazal* generally consists of between five and fourteen lines. The opening line, or *maṭlaʿ*, is special in that both hemistichs must follow the rhyme scheme. It is also often the case – though not in this piece by Qāsim Qaranbū – that the *maṭlaʿ* is the most pithy and quotable line in the poem. The 'final' line of a *ghazal*, or the *maqṭaʿ*, conventionally has the poet referring to him or herself by pen name (*takhalluṣ*). It becomes a moment of personal reflection on the ideas that have been expressed in the poem. In this case, Sām Mīrzā gives us (most likely) the opening three lines of Qāsim's *ghazal*, and one later but non-final line.

Formal Requirements of a *Javāb*

It is worth pausing to explain, on a basic level, how *javāb-gūʾī* operates in Persian poetry. The rule is that a *javāb* should share all the formal characteristics of the original poem: the meter, the rhyme syllable (or syllables), and, if applicable, the refrain (*radīf*). That is, a line from the *javāb* could be inserted into the source poem without creating a technical problem. Qāsim Qaranbū's *javāb* of Jāmī functions nicely as an example of this practice. He has used the same meter (a particular variant of *hazaj*), the same rhyme syllables (*-ar-am*), and the same *radīf* (*imrūz*, "today"). It can be easier to identify responses to a poem that has a *radīf* – which is not an uncommon feature, but is also far from ubiquitous. The refrain becomes a significant added constraint on the content of any *javāb*, and this makes coincidences less likely. If one were to find, in the *dīvān* of a post-Jāmī poet, a *ghazal* in this variant of *hazaj*, with the rhyme syllables *-ar-am* and a *radīf* of *imrūz*, one should have at least a strong suspicion that the more recent poem is a *javāb*. In the case of a *ghazal* without a *radīf*, on the other hand, the odds of a coincidence – *i.e.*, matching meter and rhyme – would be higher. Having said that, there are poems that reached such a degree of fame – the first *ghazal* in the *dīvān* of Ḥāfiẓ, for example – that any use of the same meter-rhyme pairing risks being interpreted, correctly or otherwise, as an attempt at *javāb-gūʾī*.

So much for the technical requirements of a *javāb*; there is, of course, supposed to be more to the practice. A poem becomes a 'response' to another not only through shared formal characteristics, but by playing with some of the same themes, images, and words that are found in the original. A *javāb* can modify the perspective articu-

lated in the source poem, or reject it entirely. The general idea, anyway, is that the second poet engages in a kind of conversation with the first. And there should be enough to link the *javāb* to the original – including formal aspects, but also, more subjectively, points of connection in content – that the relationship will be legible to readers.

Returning to the *Tuḥfa*

In the case of Sām Mīrzā's discussion of Qāsim Qaranbū, of course, we are given a more direct explanation of the context: this was recited at a gathering of poets, at which multiple people shared their *javāb*s of the same *ghazal* of Jāmī. We may or may not opt to view the practice of *javāb-gūʾī* as creating its own type of literary occasion; but in this instance, at least, we know from Sām Mīrzā that there was a *literal* occasion. With regard to the content, Qāsim seems to be poking fun at his friends Zulāli, Qawsī, and Ḥaydar, while also expressing his desire to hear the voice of Hilālī (d. 936/1529) – who was one of the great Persian poets of that period in Harāt. There is little to nothing stylistically noteworthy about this satirical *javāb* by Qāsim. Sām Mīrzā seems to have recorded it mainly because he found one of the lines well-formed, and perhaps out of amusement. But the poem does have an occasional aspect, which is shown to us through the accompanying anecdote.

Next, on a similar theme, we have the entry on Āgahī Khurāsānī, who served as a bureaucrat at the court of the Timurids (one of the predecessor dynasties of the Safavids) at the end of the ninth/fifteenth century. Among the curious phenomena that Sām Mīrzā describes in the *Tuḥfa* is that certain poems would have phases of popularity, such that numerous poets would each compose a *javāb*. This could take place in an *ad hoc* setting, as with the anecdote above, in which the poets of Harāt were riffing on a *ghazal* of Jāmī. But a 'circle of *javāb*s' could also be composed for longer poems, and on more of a correspondence basis. One example of this evidently occurred in the late ninth/fifteenth and early tenth/sixteenth centuries, during which time there was a vogue in composing *javāb*s to a famous *qaṣīda* by the poet Amīr Khusraw (d. 725/1325). The poem in question is known as the *Daryā-yi abrār* ("Sea of the Pious"), and it addresses religious and philosophical ideas. The wave of *javāb*s of this *qaṣīda* that appeared around the turn of the tenth/sixteenth century involved both famous poets, such as Jāmī and ʿAlī Shīr Navāʾī (d.

906/1501), and lesser-known figures. Sām Mīrzā mentions four *javāb*s of the *Daryā-yi abrār* in the *Tuḥfa*.

One of those responses was written by Āgahī Khurāsānī, the aforementioned bureaucrat. Sām explains that Āgahī was frequently in conflict with people in the city of Harāt, so he took the opportunity of composing a *javāb* of Amīr Khusraw's *qaṣīda* to satirize the Harātīs. Āgahī's poem is also referred to here as a *shahr-āshūb* ("disturber of the city"), a flexible genre in which the poet comments – often in a risqué manner – on the various inhabitants of a given city. (This is a great oversimplification of the *shahr-āshūb* tradition in Persian poetry, but it will have to do for the moment; see Sharma, "The City of Beauties"). The lines quoted from Āgahī are as follows:

> ʿarṣa-yi shahr-i Harī rashk-i sipihr-i akhżar ast /
> dargahash rā shamsa-yi khurshīd gul-mīkh-i zar ast;
> jirm-i ṭīn yak musht-i khāk az khāk-rīz-i khandaqash /
> nargis-i bāgh-i jahān-ārā-yi ū haft akhtar ast;
> pāyitakht-i ṣad hazārān khusraw-i gītī-gushā-st /
> kuhna tārīkh-i basī shāhān-i anjum-lashkar ast;
> charkh-i kaj-raw bīn ki az taʾṡīr-i ū shahrī chunīn /
> maskan-i jamʿī parīshān-rūzgār-i abtar ast
>
> (The square of the city of Harāt is the envy of the azure firmament / Its court has the sun itself for a decorative element;
> This globe of clay is just a handful of dirt from the wall of its moat / The narcissus of its world-adorning garden[23] is equal to the seven heavens;
> It is the capital of a hundred thousand world-conquering rulers / It holds the history of so many kings with soldiers as numerous as the stars;
> Look at the crookedness of the heavens, by whose influence such a city / has become the home of a group of ill-fated losers) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 208–09)

23. This was the proper name of a garden in Harāt.

The response-*qaṣīda* apparently continued from this point to satirize specific Harātī individuals, but Sām Mīrzā explains that much of the poem is so off-color that it would be inappropriate to quote in his *taẕkira* (*ān rā ẕikr kardan lāyiq-i siyāq-i kitāb nīst*). Sām further notes that Āgahī wrote this satirical poem after a certain incident at the Timurid court, in which he had been accused of malfeasance and nearly lost his position, before being forgiven by the ruler. We therefore see

in this case the production of poetry that has both a kind of literary occasion (*i.e.*, *imitatio* of an earlier *qaṣīda* by Amīr Khusraw), and a more concrete political occasion (*i.e.*, taking a potshot at one's rivals).

For the next example, we will draw from a curious entry in the final chapter of the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* – the chapter in which Sām Mīrzā describes members of the lower classes and their attempts to compose verse. Some of those attempts are characterized as incompetent. There are notices that are included in this section of the *Tuḥfa* simply because Sām Mīrzā finds novelty and amusement in the efforts of uneducated people in the bazaar to come up with their own poetry.

One such individual is Nūrī Quflgar, or 'Nūrī the Locksmith.' Sām Mīrzā describes Nūrī as a true master in the art of locksmithing, then he explains, "After seventy years [of life], it occurred to his exalted mind that he should become a poet" (*baʿd az haftād sāl bi khāṭir-i sharīf-i īshān rasīd ki shāʿir mī-bāyad shud*) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 365). It is not mentioned where Nūrī lived, but the most likely option is again Harāt, where Sām Mīrzā spent his formative years in the 1520s and '30s, and which serves as the setting of many of the colorful anecdotes in the *Tuḥfa*. Of Nūrī's poetry, Sām states that "it does not follow the rules of meter and also has no meaning" (*nā-mawzūn ast va maʿnā ham na-dārad*). And one of the examples that he cites is a supposed *javāb* of a *ghazal* by the great eighth/fourteenth century poet Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz (d. *c.* 792/1390). Sām Mīrzā quotes the elegant opening line of Ḥāfiẓ's poem: "I saw the green field of the heavens and the sickle of the crescent moon / I thought of my own farm and the harvest time" (*mazraʿ-i sabz-i falak dīdam u dās-i mah-i naw / yādam az kishta-yi khwīsh āmad u hangām-i diraw*) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 365). As with the earlier example from Jāmī, it can be assumed that everyone would recognize this.

Then comes Nūrī's *javāb*, which is unmetered and almost nonsensical: "I saw the quick ball of the heavens, running back and forth / I told it 'Don't go so fast, barley, barley, barley!'" (*kura-yi tund-i falak dīdam u ū dar tak-u-daw / guftam-ash tund ma-raw, jaw jaw jaw, jaw jaw jaw*). By way of at least partially explaining this poem, Sām Mīrzā notes that, when reciting it, Nūrī would shake the front of his tunic, just as someone would put barley in the front of his tunic and shake it to attract a horse that had run off. Like much of the poetry in the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, this snippet by Nūrī Quflgar has no intrinsic significance. What is of literary-historical and social-historical interest in such anecdotes is that we see how the poem came into being: what prior work it was meant to imitate; how and in what context it was

performed; and so forth. (Having a record of the literary activities of a locksmith in early Safavid Iran may also be meaningful). Again, an entry in a biographical anthology can give a sense of 'occasion' to a poem that would not otherwise display clear signs (and would otherwise probably not survive).

Finally, we will turn to an example of a different sort. This occurs in the notice on an individual called Sawsanī – a man of Turkic background who served the Safavids and apparently fancied himself a poet in both the Turkic and Persian languages. Sām Mīrzā reports that Sawsanī was notorious for taking poetry composed by others, repurposing it in some way, and claiming it as his own work: "He reads the poetry of [other] people in his own name" (*shiʿr-i mardum bi nām-i khwud mī-khwānad*) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 358–59). There is a rather amusing anecdote in this connection, which Sām relates secondhand from one of his acquaintances.

The story goes that a group of young men, including Sawsanī, were socializing in the city of Tabrīz. Their program was to amble about, and whenever they saw an attractive young man or adolescent boy, they would all try to extemporize poetry about his beauty. On the day in question, this group happened to pass by a butcher's apprentice, and they stopped so that each of them could create a bit of verse about the charming youth. Before any of the others, Sawsanī recited a pleasing line, which was indeed about falling in love with a butcher: "Whenever that butcher places a blade to my throat / I set my head upon the ground so that he can tread on my face" (*har gah ān qaṣṣāb tīghī bar gilū-yi man nahad / mī-zanam sar bar zamīn tā pā bi rū-yi man nahad*) (Sām Mīrzā Ṣafavī, 359). Then, every few moments, while the other friends were still deep in thought, Sawsanī would recite yet another line – until he had completed a fine *ghazal* of seven lines. The whole group praised Sawsanī for his triumph of extemporaneous poetry. Later, they were relaxing at a barbershop, and one of them opened a book that was lying on a shelf – a copy of the collected works of an eighth/fourteenth century poet named Kamāl Khujandī (d. 803/1400–01). The friend flipped to a random page in the book and saw the very *ghazal* that Sawsanī had just claimed to compose. To make matters even more embarrassing and comical, Sawsanī insisted that he had never seen this poem by Kamāl,[24] and that his re-authorship of it must have been a coincidence. This is, of course, not really a story about the occasional composition of a *ghazal*; but it is a case of what one might call 'occasional plagiarism.'

There are many other passages in the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* comparable to

24. It should be noted that, as best we can tell, the poem is actually attributed to Hilālī, not to Kamāl as Sām Mīrzā narrates. See Hilālī Astarābādī Chaghatāʾī, 67. The text can also be found in the Ganjoor corpus (last access on 4 October 2024).

those that have been highlighted as examples. As we have seen, perhaps the most characteristic type of anecdote in the *Tuḥfa*, relating to the circumstances of composition of poetry, involves people of Sām Mīrzā's time composing *javāb*s of well-known poems – usually (though not always) from earlier generations. When an entry also mentions something about the context in which a *javāb* was performed or shared with fellow poets, we find a reflection of both literary and social occasionality – at least, if we apply a flexible definition of 'occasional.'

Conclusions

The larger issue at stake is whether our understanding of occasional poetry within the Persian tradition can be broadened and elaborated to encompass the phenomena discussed here. Any student of classical Persian literature will acknowledge the panegyric *qaṣīda* as the quintessential form/genre of occasional verse – and I do not seek to challenge this idea. (Again, some types of *qiṭʿa* have also been treated as occasional. That association need not be disputed, either). After all, the 'indicators of occasionality' suggested at the beginning of this paper still apply to the *qaṣīda* more clearly than to any manifestation of the *ghazal*. What I would advocate is the consideration of a wider corpus of poetry in other forms as 'potentially' occasional, while affirming the role of the *qaṣīda*.

We ought to keep in mind, however, the magnitude of the gradual shift in literary taste (and in political and economic importance) away from the *qaṣīda* and toward the *ghazal*. In the late ninth/fifteenth century, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī was able to reflect on this change in a matter-of-fact tone, in his *Bahāristān*, a wide-ranging educational text that includes a *taẕkira*-esque chapter on Persian poetry. It is obvious, from Jāmī's discussion, that the transition from *qaṣīda* to *ghazal* was long since a *fait accompli* (Jāmī 123, see also Lewis). He explains that "poetry comes in different forms" (*shiʿr bar aqsām ast*), listing the examples of the *qaṣīda*, *ghazal*, *maṡnavī*, and *qiṭʿa*. Jāmī then notes that some poets compose in all the forms, while others have clearer preferences or specializations. By way of example – and here is the key point – Jāmī states that "poets from earlier periods" (*mutaqaddimān*) "placed emphasis on *qaṣīda*s, in panegyric, exhortation, etc., and some of them focused on the *maṡnavī*" (*ihtimām-i īshān bi qaṣāyid būda-st dar madāyiḥ va mavāʿiẓ va ghayr-i ān, va ihtimām-i baʿżī bi maṡnavī*). This is in contrast to "more recent

poets" (*mutaʾakhkhirān*), whose work, according to Jāmī, "has been composed mostly in the *ghazal* form" (*akṡar bar ṭarīq-i ghazal vāqiʿ shuda-st*). He goes on to note that "the number of this group [of poets] is beyond limit or counting, and mentioning their details would exceed the basis of comprehension" (*ʿadad-i īn ṭāʾifa az ḥadd va ḥaṣr bīrūn ast, va ẕikr-i tafāṣīl-i īshān az qāʿida-yi iḥāṭa mutajāviz*). That is, there were far too many *ghazal* poets in Jāmī's era for him to mention more than a tiny selection of them in the *Bahāristān*.

This situation – an effectively limitless quantity of *ghazal*s being generated on all sides – would persist throughout the centuries, up to (and into) the modern period. (It was, in fact, not limited to Persian; the *ghazal* became a similarly vital poetic form in other languages, including Ottoman Turkish and Urdu). The culture of Persian poetry after the ascendancy of the *ghazal* – the culture reflected in the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* – was one in which literati were overwhelmingly interested in composing love lyrics (of various kinds), and decreasingly likely to participate in the traditional model of court panegyric. Where, then, should occasional poetry be situated? Is it not reasonable to look for occasionality also in the omnipresent, versatile, extemporizable *ghazal*? To be fair, it seems likely that many Persianists would be sympathetic toward this perspective. The field suffers not from a misunderstanding of occasional verse, but from an under-theorization of it.

If one is inclined to entertain a somewhat more liberal concept of occasionality in Persian poetry, then among the logical courses of investigation is to study *taẕkira*s for their discussion of the circumstances – sometimes quite specific – of the composition of poems, typically *ghazal*s. A meeting of an urban literary salon in the tenth/sixteenth century was, per a certain understanding, comparable to a circle of court poets in the fifth/eleventh century. Each of these settings provided the dominant context for the performance and exchange of poetry in its own era. We are, admittedly, usually more limited in what we can determine about the background of a *ghazal* – since there may be nothing in the lyric content that can be associated with a certain time, place, or event. But this is where biographical and anthological sources like the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* could be summoned to help. If a *taẕkira* notice quotes from a *ghazal* while describing the moment of its composition or recital, then, depending on the specifics, a frame of occasionality may have been added.

A final question is whether it is tenable to extend this idea to cases in which the composition of a poem is described as *javāb-gūʾī*, and a connection is drawn between the 'call' and 'response' texts. Is this,

too, a kind of literary occasion, perhaps across a substantial temporal and/or spatial gap? This may appear to stretch the definition of occasionality beyond sensible limits. There are, however, descriptions in *taẕkira*s of gatherings at which poets would share their *javāb*s of a given source poem. Such cases, of which we have seen an example from the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, suggest that *javāb-gūʾī* was, at minimum, 'linked' to poetic occasionality. Could a *javāb* also *create* an occasion – one of dialogue among the poets involved – without reference to a discrete gathering or other event? If we are willing to take steps like this, then still further avenues of interpretation will be opened.

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