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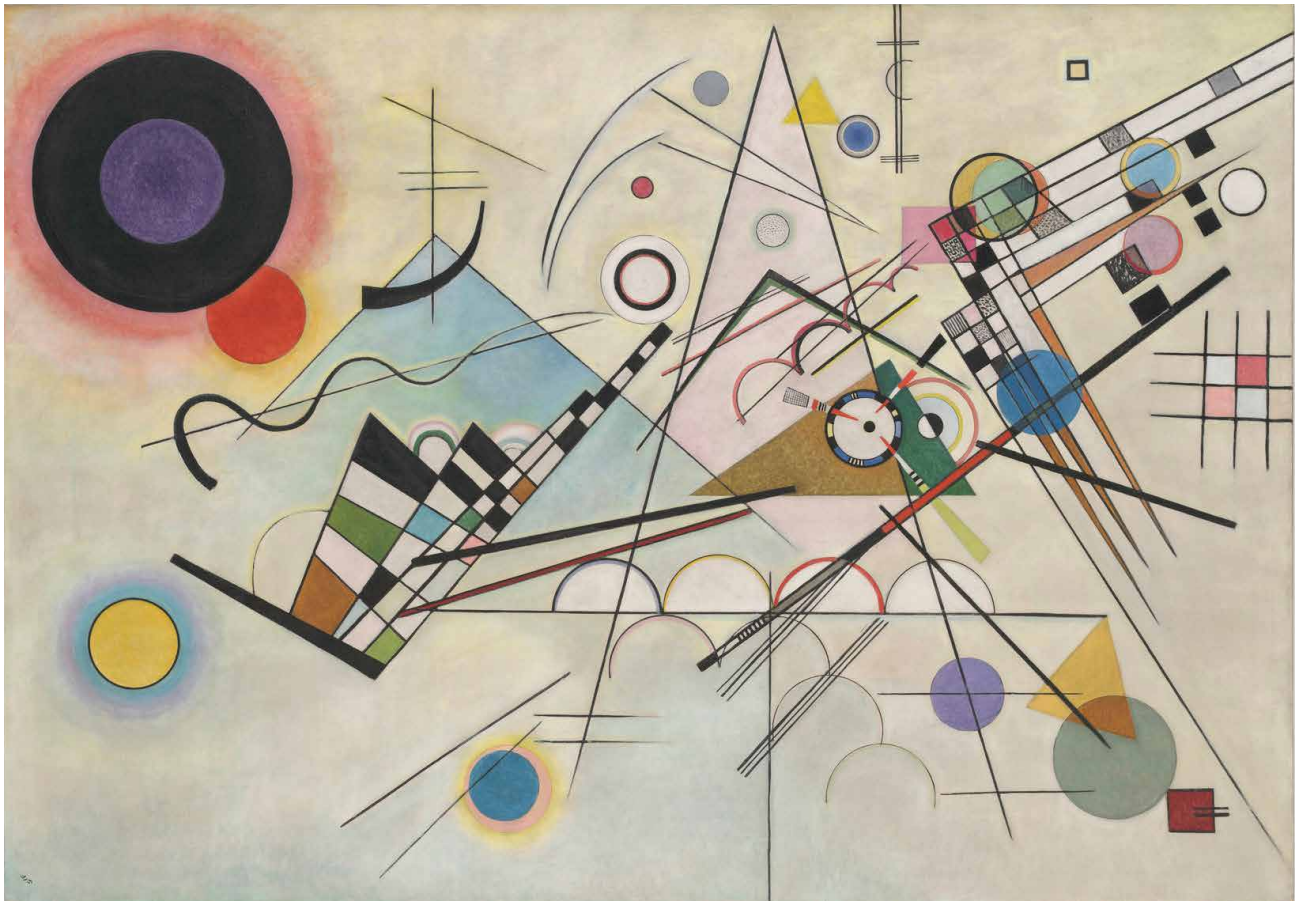
Occasional Literature and Patronage in Later Medieval and Early Modern Periods



Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition 8* (*Komposition 8*), July 1923, Oil on canvas, 55 1/8 x 79 1/8 inches (140 x 201 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift 37.262 © [2025] Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

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NIKOS ZAGKLAS AND INGELA NILSSON

Alle meine Gedichte sind Gelegenheitsgedichte: the Problems and Possibilities of Occasionality

Abstract

This introductory paper sets the stage for the five contributions in this special issue, which examine the occasional literature across various linguistic traditions (Greek, Latin, and Persian) from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries. It offers reflections on the interplay between occasion, lyric, and literature, suggesting that occasional literature can be regarded as a precursor to lyric. Additionally, it explores the close relationship between occasional literature and patronage, which has significantly shaped the modern dismissive attitude toward the former.

Keywords

Occasional literature, Patronage, Lyric, Poetry, Medieval and early Modern times.

> Die Welt ist so gross und reich und das Leben so mannigfaltig, dass es an Anlassen zu Gedichten nie fehlen wird. Aber es müssen alles Gelegenheitsgedichte sein, das heisst, die Wirklichkeit muss die Veranlassung und den Stoff dazu hergeben … Alle meine Gedichte sind Gelegenheitsgedichte, sie sind durch die Wirklichkeit angeregt und haben darin Grund und Boden.

According to Johann Peter Eckermann, this is what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) said almost exactly two hundred years ago, on September 17, 1823 (cited also in Oppenheimer 1). Coming from a central figure in the period marked by *Sturm und Drang* – the movement that resulted in the first flowering of romanticism in German literature and music in the 1790s – Goethe's remarks on the inherent nature of occasionality in his own poetry are highly interesting. They run counter to the view of many of his contemporaries, who denounced any links between poetry and occasion: poetry was seen as the result of inner inspiration, not in relation to any factual situation or reality. At about the same time, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

(1770–1831), introduced a tripartite system of poetic taxonomy into the philosophy of art that distinguished between epic, drama, and lyric. The last category was to be understood as the perfect medium for the expression of personal emotions and thus came to remain far removed from any given occasion.

Pre-modern authors would not have shared the idea that 'lyric' is a self-contained category of poetry, but etymologically this category derives from poetry written by Sappho, Anacreon and Pindar, and in particular from the musical instrument which accompanied the performance of their works: "the lyre" (Gr. λύρα). Various characteristics associated with modern lyric poetry can indeed be recognized retrospectively in poetry composed from the time of Sappho and Pindar onwards, all the way up to Bob Dylan (b. 1941) and Louise Glück (b. 1943), to mention but two of the most famous modern poets whose emotional expression affect millions of people. In Antiquity, Pindar affected a more limited circle of listeners with his poems in similar ways, including lyrical elements within the frame of so-called epinikian poetry: poems written for the winners of athletic games. Modern readers of his poems get affected by the same lyrical quality, musing on human beings as "dreams of a shadow" (*Pythian* 8.96), overlooking the fact that these poems were written for very real occasions and for financial compensation.

This brings us back to Goethe and the genesis of his poetry as always being intertwined with an occasion. Pindar wrote occasional poetry, but that does not mean that his work lacked personal and lyrical features. Quite the contrary: lyrical and occasional poetry share many features, because they share the same aim of affecting the emotions of listeners and readers. Long before the romantic eighteenth-century movement when lyric was elevated into a new category of poetry, 'brevity' – the expression of personal feelings – and 'passion' were characteristics of occasional poetry. Broadly speaking, what we now refer to as lyric (as a self-contained genre of poetry) in ancient, medieval, and early modern periods used to be represented by a wide category of occasional poems. One might even go a step further and argue that occasional poetry, as in the example of Pindar, is the precursor of lyric. But despite their proximity, authors and literary critics have treated them very differently. Lyric has been placed on a pedestal, far above other types of literary expression, as a superior medium of aesthetic value. Occasional literature has been described as ephemeral, performed at a specific occasion and most often without any afterlife, or with an afterlife of trivial importance for posterity.

The very term 'occasional' has been burdened with pejorative connotations and attitudes have traditionally been dismissive. Such derogative positions often result from misconceptions about these types of texts or even the difficulty to describe their form and function in a concrete manner: "Occasional literature is notoriously difficult to define," Margaret Mullet writes in her contribution to this collection of essays.[1] The definition offered in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is inclusive and thus, perhaps, not very helpful: "all literary works are occasioned in some sense" (Miner et al. 966). One might wish to compare the occasional nature of literature to its instructive nature: in the broadest sense, all literature imparts learning in a way or another. Similarly, all literature arises from an occasion. But then again, how helpful are definitions that are all-inclusive? Or do definitions perhaps rather stand in our way?

1. See p. 17 in the present thematic cluster.

In the study of the Greco-Roman tradition, occasional literature has been seen primarily in relation to epideictic rhetoric and ceremonial literature, ranging from panegyrics and triumphal songs to *epithalamia* ("wedding songs") and dedicatory epigrams. These may be considered the prime examples of occasional literature, but it is worth remembering that various narrative genres and drama, too, were performed at specific occasions and, in many cases, were composed for that specific event (see Nilsson 6). Think, for instance, of *The Persians* by Aeschylus, performed at the Athens Dionysia in 472 BCE and clearly a comment on historical political events. This brings us to another main distinction that has often been drawn between lyric and occasional literature, namely the idea that lyric was usually addressed to a private reader, while the latter was meant to be performed in a public sphere. But historically, all lyric was performed privately and all occasional works were not performed at public occasions. To offer but one example, dozens of medieval religious dedicatory epigrams or prayers directed to a holy figure by a donor were frequently performed in a private environment. What differs, then, across various types of works is the degree of occasionality or its nature. For some texts, the occasion is made clear through the addition of prologues or epilogues; for others, the extratextual end is exhibited rather through internal evidence; and then there are texts for which the original occasion has been lost and very often is impossible to reconstruct, but that does not make them less occasional to their nature.

One important reason behind the dismissive attitude to pre-modern occasional literature is its incompatibility with the cult of authorial genius which has prevailed in modern literary criticism since the

nineteenth century. Occasional literature usually flourishes within the system of patronage: an economic arrangement that fosters the exchange between patron and client (the author). It has long been recognized that patronage is a pervasive feature of both traditional agrarian societies and modern commercial communities. In discussing personal patronage in the Roman period, Richard Saller has listed three necessary criteria for its definition:

> First, it involves the reciprocal exchange of goods and services. Secondly, to distinguish it from a commercial transaction in the marketplace, the relationship must be a personal one of some duration. Thirdly, it must be asymmetrical, in the sense that the two parties are of unequal status and offer different kinds of goods and services in the exchange – a quality which sets patronage off from friendship between equals. (Saller 1).

Saller here emphasizes the exchange of resources between patron and client: the former offers material assistance, the latter a series of services. Moreover, the element of reciprocity is of paramount importance in the system of patronage. But how is reciprocity achieved in the relationship between an author and a patron? What do patrons offer and what do authors provide in turn? This depends very much on the nature of an occasion, the period or even the cultural environment to which the relationship of patron and client belongs. Moreover, complete reciprocity is achieved only in the ideal form of patronage relations. On many occasions, theory and practice do not go hand in hand, mainly because relations between individuals are complicated.[2]

In supporting the ideal form of patronage, many authors throughout history hoped for some tangible resources from their patrons, including money, a one-time specific gift, or even a pension. The authors could also be granted hospitality, ranging from a dinner invitation to an extended stay at a patron's house. But patrons also provided authors with more things: they could encourage the author to finish a work, elevate an author's social status, or protect an author from abusive attacks by other rivals. They could also impose authority on a work, since the status of the patron can enhance the importance of a work and have a direct impact on its circulation. Overall, the patron could create the appropriate circumstances for a successful trajectory for an author. At the other end, patrons fostered this arrangement because they could gain valuable services and benefits. A literary work could become a property of the patron, especially in premodern time

2. A very good example is the case of the twelfth-century Byzantine author John Tzetzes who frequently complains about his patrons in his writings. See, more recently, Lovato.

when the concept of copyright did not exist. The author offered entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to the patron, he could provide his professional expertise, and even offer fame and magnificence. By expressing his or her view about a work, a patron could have a significant impact on the cultural production of a particular period.

The romantic period has shaped our notion of the writer as an independent creator of literature, condemning any connection between literature and patronage. But as already noted in the case of Pindar, the admired authors of the Greco-Roman canon were supported by patrons in various ways. The Sicilian tyrant Hiero of Syracuse was a patron of Pindar. In Alexandria, King Ptolemy II was the patron of Theocritus, father of pastoral poetry. The father of Alexander, king Philip II of Macedon, housed Aristotle. Gaius Maecenas, the well-known statesman and adviser of emperor Augustus, both before and during his reign, fostered the literary pursuits of poets like Virgil, Horace, and Propertius. Literary patronage continued to thrive in the medieval period, reaching its peak during the Renaissance and in early seventeenth-century England.[3]

3. As has been noted in Griffin 46: "The great age of patronage in England, so it has been suggested since the days of Goldsmith, was the period from the Revolution in 1688 until the death of Queen Anne in 1714."

Needless to say, patronage and occasional writing did not remain unchanged throughout their long history. The invention of printing and the transition from a limited manuscript circulation among friends or a small group of literati and patrons to the large-scale commercial book trade transformed the literary scene for good. Even so, patronage persisted in many cultural environments by acquiring new forms and ways of expression. In England, for example, literary patronage continued to flourish throughout the eighteenth century (Griffin). Patronage also persisted in our modern world, veiled in new and different forms. One could even go so far as to say that the notion of autonomous artists is a fallacy: these days they may not be enslaved to an individual patron, but to the whims of the public. In the words of Dustin Griffin, "both the academy and high culture generally continue in our own time to be dependent on, and the beneficiaries of, a system of patronage, disguised though it may be in the form of foundation grants, tax policies, fellowships, academic appointments, art collectors, theatre subscribers, and private contributors" (Griffin 4). As academics, we often work on commission, as do modern artists, musicians, and artists.

The relation between artist and patron in many ways remain the same, with artists lending their cultural capital of various kinds to mighty patrons, often through performance. A case in point that many of our readers will remember is the performance of Amanda

Gorman, reading her spoken word poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration ceremony of Joe Biden in Washington, D.C. on January 20, 2021. This performance had all the characteristics of occasional poetry, from the political situatedness of the words to the powerful act of the artist herself and, not the least, the cultural impact of both words and act for the new president. The poet, in return, achieved global fame, book deals, and even a contract with IMG Models. This kind of situation enables modern readers to fully comprehend the workings of both patronage and occasionality.

Academia often functions as a reflection of society at large, and in recent years, modern scholars have shied away from the suspicious treatment of occasional literature and literary patronage outlined above. Various studies have paved the way for a better understanding of the particularities of this kind of literature by focusing on the devices these authors had to shape their voice, manipulate or resist the mechanisms of patronage to their advantage, recycle their material across various occasions, and eventually establish their literary brand within a highly antagonistic environment. All these issues are well known in literary studies and have been investigated in various fields, including classics, medieval, and early modern studies. The collection of essays presented here follows in these scholarly trajectories and applies a transcultural perspective by looking at occasionality and patronage across languages and cultures in the late medieval and early modern periods (*c.* 1100–1700). The aim is to shift the attention from famous cases to less-known texts, and also to explore approaches across linguistic and cultural borders.

The first two contributions deal with twelfth-century Byzantium and texts written in Greek. Margaret Mullett, in her "The Occasional Muse: Textual Genesis and Literary Innovation in Komnenian Byzantium," considers the literary production of the twelfth century from the perspective of innovation. Focusing on occasion rather than occasionality, and understanding it as 'event' or *kairos*, Mullett reminds us that the assumed constant of occasion and patronage sometimes needs to be teased apart. As the basis of her analysis, she divides the Byzantine twelfth-century production into four groups: 1) Commissioned occasional performative texts; 2) Commissioned non-occasional non-performative texts; 3) Not commissioned occasional (or non-occasional) performative (or non-performative), job-related texts; and 4) Not commissioned non-occasional highly experimental texts. Even if these categories admittedly remain somewhat crude and overlapping, Mullett's analysis shows, in particular,

how the fourth group contains a large number of works that do not fit into a model of dominant patronage and pervasive occasionality. These are texts marked by hybridity and experimentation, perhaps aimed at achieving commissions through performance in the literary circles of Constantinople, the so-called *theatra*, but possibly written by authors for themselves or friends, relying on a "poetics of hybridity". Mullett thus concludes that innovation does not always come from the "occasional Muse", in the form of commissions and constraints pushing creative boundaries, but that there is a need to make space for inspiration as well as patronage.

In contrast to Mullett's broad approach to the entire corpus of twelfth-century literature, Aglae Pizzone targets a particular kind of occasional texts, namely those that teach the Greek language. As indicated by her title, "The Occasionality of Byzantine Didacticism: a Case Study from the Twelfth Century (Milan, Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C 222, inf. f. 218r)," she also examines a particular text: a didactic poem on prosodic quantity, attributed to John Tzetzes. Pizzone opens her essay by noting how the very notion of didactic poetry is modern and imbued by eighteenth-century aesthetics – similarly to the notion of occasional poetry, as noted above – but argues that didactic poetry in Byzantium was marked by improvisation and personal experience: in other words, a kind of occasionality. The poem that she analyses, edits and translates opens with a classroom question that occasions the teacher's answer, which is the poem itself – an improvised display of the very problem at hand. It is not uncommon in the twelfth century to stage the classroom situation in this manner, putting on display the occasion as such, but also the personal experiences and improvisational skills of the teachers. Pizzone argues that such poetry contains an autobiographical and personal component that has a lyrical dimension, again contradicting the way in which both didactic poetry and Byzantine poetry is traditionally understood. Moreover, manuscripts such as the one under investigation may be seen as sites for both the frozen moment of the teaching occasion and a continuation of the debate in the form of authorial comments on and to the scribe. Both circumstances and emotions may thus be retraced through careful analysis.

Theo Beers' contribution, "The occasional *ghazal* in an early modern Persian *taẕkira*," takes us forward in time by a few centuries and offers a consideration of classical Persian poetry from an occasional perspective. What does it mean for a Persian poem to be occasional, how can the term be applied, and where can we look for ev-

idence in cases where context may be lacking? Beers suggests that a form traditionally thought of as purely lyric – the *ghazal* – was in practice occasional: performed in a variety of contexts, often composed for specific occasions and in competition between poets. As a way of exploring cases where the context is missing, he turns to *taẕkiras* – biographical anthologies of poetry – for information about compositional and performative circumstances. Beers focuses on one such *taẕkirah*, the *Tuḥfa-i Sāmī* (*c.* 1550) by Sām Mīrzā (d. 1567), a prince of the Safavid dynasty who acted as both littérateur and patron. The *Tuḥfa* includes anecdotes about poets' circles in cities across Iran that are crucial for such information; on the level of composition, the practice of *javāb* ("imitation") is sometimes noted, explaining how a *ghazal* is imitating a specific earlier poem. Such a poetic conversation through and across works might constitute, argues Beers, an occasion in itself.

With the essay of Francesco G. Giannachi, "Poetry and patronage in the Barberini entourage: the *Technopaignia* of the Southern Italian Greek-speaking poet Francesco Arcudi Bishop of Nusco (1590–1641)," we move on to a different place but return to the issue of Greek language skills and manuscript studies. Francesco Arcudi was from the Greek-speaking area of Apulia, came to Rome to study at an early age and became one of many scholars who worked under the auspices of the mighty Barberini family. This environment was international and multilingual, as witnessed by the huge poetic anthology *Monumentum Romanum* (1637), whose last section Παγγλωσσία contains poems in all languages known at the time, ranging from Sanskrit to Peruvian. Arcudi devoted himself to collecting Greek manuscripts for the Barberini library and provided all of them with his own epigrams composed in Greek, but he also wrote in Latin. Some of these are analysed, edited and translated in Giannachi's essay. Arcudi's epigrams are inspired and occasioned by specific events, stated in the verses ("For a statue…" or "For a book…"), and the poet's devotion to his patrons is expressed in the imagery that symbolizes the Barberini family: the bee, the honeycomb, and honey. What is important to note here is the extent of Barberini patronage: the number of people, object and texts involved in this movement, and the immense contribution to not only antiquarianism and philology, but also poetry. Much of this production remains unedited, so there is much more to come.

Further north in the same century, poets were writing their praise of mighty patrons in Latin. Elena Dahlberg's "How to succeed as a favour seeker: two foreign epicists' quest for patronage in seven-

teenth-century Sweden," describes a situation that is similar to the one in the south, but perhaps even more competitive due to the smaller scale of the courts at which favour could be sought. Dahlberg focuses on foreign poets from Protestant minorities that sought protection and support by eulogizing the Swedish kind Gustavus Adolphus II and his intervention in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Two such poets – the Bohemian humanist Venceslaus Clemens and the Dutch writer and physician Johannes Narssius – were clearly interested not merely in religious protection, but also in financial support. In contrast to Arcudi's rather concise epigrams and poems, they both wrote very long epics, impossible to perform in their entirety but probably impressive by their sheer length. The two authors were similar in their quest for favours not only at the Swedish court but also among the aristocratic entourage, they both released their epics in 1632, and they wrote poetry for and about each other. And yet, Clemens failed and eventually died in poverty, while Narssius had a successful career. Dahlberg's analysis explores the possible cause for this difference in two seemingly similar careers in occasional writing, suggesting that Narssius was a more versatile person with a variety of skills, including networking. He seems to have handled the changing conditions of society better than others; improvisation is indeed the best friend of both teachers, diplomats, and occasional poets.

Collectively, our authors address similar questions: How does the poetics of occasional texts transform across various genres and different social settings of production and consumption? What is the link between occasional literature and a school setting? What is the link between occasionality and patronage? How did authors create space to use the conventions of patronage to their advantage? What are the reasons for the success of an author within the system of patronage? Is it always connected to their literary skills or also other kind of services offered to a patron? How flexible are the authors in adapting during the transformation of the patronage system? By examining texts written in different languages and places, they reveal how occasionality and patronage were of global importance for literary cultures in premodern and early modern societies. Despite significant omissions of important cultural settings – Arabic, Georgian, Hebrew, Ottoman Turkish, Armenian, Church Slavonic, Old French, and many others – we hope that this collection of essays will inspire further investigation from a transcultural point of view.

Finally, we wish to thank our own patron, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, for fund-

ing and housing the workshop at which the essays published here were first presented (in January 2022). We take this opportunity to thank also the participants who did not have time to revise their papers for publication here, or who decided to take them elsewhere, but who importantly contributed to the fruitful discussions on that cold day in Stockholm, whose icy streets will remain part of that occasion for as long as we remember it.

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