Encyclopædia Iranica

COURTS AND COURTIERS X. COURT POETRY
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Published: December 15, 1993
Last Updated: December 11, 2017

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x. Court poetry

Until modern times there were strong incentives to patronize poets and other writers wherever the seat of power was renowned as a center of culture. Such incentives arose mainly from the service of literature to a reigning dynasty, particularly in glorifying the ruler's status and helping to legitimate his exercise of power. Courtly protocol and ritual often required the use of highly ornamented poetry. The practice of literature was useful to courtiers and state officials, as it helped them to cultivate their verbal skills. The royal life style demanded the production of texts to provide entertainment, as well as instruction. Court literature was therefore apt to take on similar forms in societies otherwise not sharing the same cultural background.

In view of the long history of the Persian monarchy, there is reason to assume that court literature was an equally ancient tradition in Persia. The scarcity of documentation on pre-Islamic courts makes it difficult, however, to substantiate this assumption fully. Before the advent of Islam the use of writing was limited in Persia and hardly included artistic literature. The absence of adequate means for preserving texts ensured the loss of most of the evidence. On the other hand, this very condition also hampered the develop-

ment of a sophisticated court literature (Boyce, “Middle Persian Literature,” pp. 31-33).

At the court of the Achaemenids oral poetry of some kind must have been in use already, for mention is made in the classical sources (Athenaeus, 14.633d; cf. Strabo, 15.3.18; Xenophon, *Cyropœdia* 1.2.1; cf. Cook, p. 226) of singers who entertained the king of kings and his attendants. The references to “royal books” in the Book of Esther (6:1-2,10:2) and in an unreliable report by the Greek physician Ctesias (Cook, pp. 235-36) are too vague to be of much value. Nevertheless, according to Strabo (15.3.18), the Persian epic was of some importance in the education of princes of the royal house (cf. Nöldeke, pp. 130-34).

The existence of a minstrel tradition can be attested as early as the Parthian period, if only through echoes in parallel traditions and a few remnants that survived into Islamic times. Some texts preserved in the Pahlavi books (notably, the tenson *Draḵt-ī asūrīg* and the epic poem *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*) have their roots in Parthian court literature. In the Persian version of the Parthian story *Vīs o Rāmīn*, Faḵr-al-Dīn Gorgānī (p. 220) introduced a minstrel, called a *gōsān*, who uses enigmatic allusions in his song to inform King Mowbed about the secret love of the two protagonists of the story.

A great deal more is known about Sasanian poetry. To medieval Muslim writers the reign of Ḵosrow II Parwēz (591-628) seemed the apogee of ancient Persian court life. In many historical and literary sources there are references to the artists at this king’s court, particularly Nagīsā and Bārbad), whose fame continued in the early Islamic period. Court poets were still no more than minstrels (Mid. Pers. *huniyāgar*, NPers. *ḵonyāgar*). In the Pahlavi text *Xusraw ī Kawādān ud rēdag-ē* (Ḵosrow son of Kavād and the page) the king’s page boasts of his skills as a minstrel (par. 13). The complete loss of this body of oral poetry cannot be compensated for by the examples occasionally cited by later Persian writers. Ferdowsī, for instance, introduced Bārbad in an episode in which he sings an elegy at the catafalque of Ḵosrow (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, pp. 278-79). The anaphoras in this elegy are reminiscent of Farroḵī’s famous *qaṣīda* at the death of Maḥmūd of Ḡazna (pp. 90-93). Neẓāmī Ganjavī inserted several other specimens in his *Ḵosrow o Šīrīn*. In one instance a singing harpist (*rāmešgar-e rūd*) presents a *ḡazal* in which the transience of life serves as an excuse for drinking wine, a motif familiar from later anacreontic poetry. In another ten female attendants lead the royal court in a contest of riddles (*afsāna*), all referring to the love between Ḵosrow and Šīrīn. Bārbad displays

his skill as a musician in a series of thirty melodies (*sī laḥn*); together with Nagīsā, he enacts a dialogue between the royal lovers in an exchange of *ḡazal*s (pp. 98-99, 131ff., 190ff., 355ff.). Such verses are, however, no more than pastiches of what Muslim poets imagined the ancient art of the minstrel to have been. Although they may represent the survival of pre-Islamic forms, no documentary value can be attached to them.

In the late Sasanian courts there was a keen interest in the epic of the Iranian kings, culminating in compilation of dispersed traditions in the *Ḵwadāy-nāmag*, an official codification of the epic (cf. Yarshater, pp. 391-93; Ṣafā, 1363 Š./1984, pp. 58-72). A taste for foreign lore is also attested in the integration of the Alexander Romance, from a Syriac source, into the Iranian epic (see Eskandar-nāma), as well as in the interest of the Sasanian rulers in the Indian fables from *Kalīla wa Demna* (see borzūya).

Because of the great gaps in documentation of the earlier periods, direct knowledge of Persian court poetry is possible only from the 9th century, with the rise of a number of small local courts in the remote eastern parts of the ʿAbbasid caliphate. An important incentive for literary use of the Persian vernacular in place of Arabic was the shift of political power to rulers who did not have sufficient erudition in Arabic. This shift is clear from a story about the Saffarid Yaʿqūb b. Layṯ, who, after his conquest of Herat (253/867), ordered his secretary Moḥammad b. Waṣīf to compose a panegyric to him in Persian verse, so that he might be able to understand it (*Tārīḵ-e Sīstān*, pp. 209-13). The most important primary sources for medieval Persian court poetry are chapters 35 (on *šāʿerī*) and 36 (on *ḵonyāgarī*) in the *Andarz-nāma* (q.v.) of Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar (pp. 189-97) and the second essay in Neẓāmī ʿArūżī's *Čahār maqāla* (ed. Qazvīnī, text, pp. 42-86).

Muslim writers of the Middle Ages did not regard Sasanian minstrelsy as the true ancestor of classical Persian poetry. Instead, the consensus was that Persian poets had continued the tradition of Arabic poetry in a new linguistic medium (e.g., ʿAwfī, *Lobāb* I, pp. 19-20), certainly a biased view. The Persian literary language, initially known as *fārsī-e dārī* (courtly Persian; see dārī), actually originated in the polite speech of the Sasanian court. There can be no doubt that the earliest poetry written in this idiom was also influenced by the artistic conventions of its original environment. Furthermore, it came into being at Persian courts, where the ancient tradition of minstrel poetry was still very much alive. It is undeniable, however, that the Arabic contribution to Persian poetry was of primary importance and quite consciously accepted by

poets and connoisseurs alike. Local princes in the east sought to emulate the etiquette and the bureaucratic apparatus of the ʿAbbasid court in Baghdad—themselves largely based on Sasanian models. Under the political and cultural conditions prevailing after the Islamic conquest Arabic poetry had become a courtly art. The *qaṣīda* was still the basic poetic form, not least because it provided a convenient pattern for panegyrics. The "modernists" (*moḥdaṯūn*) of the 8th and 9th centuries had expanded the repertoire with several new genres, for example, poems of love, wine, hunting, and warfare, which were appropriate to courtly life. In addition, the poetic idiom had been enriched by the introduction of new rhetorical devices and metaphors.

More important still was the impact of Arabic philology, which in the early centuries of Islam had been developed into a solid foundation for the transmission of written literature. An entire new dimension was brought to poetry collected in divans and anthologies or quoted as examples by the authors of dictionaries and other scholarly works. Not only could poems survive their authors, but they could also easily be disseminated. The advantage for court poetry can hardly be overestimated. Poets could establish reputations, both for themselves and their patrons, reaching far beyond their own time and place. According to a well-known topos often cited in defense of court poetry, famous court poets conferred immortality upon rulers whose empires had crumbled and who would otherwise have been forgotten (e.g., *Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, pp. 44-45). Rūdakī performed this service for the Samanids, ʿOnṣorī and Farroḵī for the Ghaznavids. The lasting success of these poets and their works proved the effectiveness of court poetry.

This change in attitude toward the usefulness of poetry gave rise to a new social status for the poet. The poet (*šāʿer*) of Islamic times enjoyed a far higher status at court than his predecessor, the ancient minstrel, had ever achieved (see, in particular, the comparison between poets and minstrels in the two chapters of the *Andarz-nāma* mentioned above). He could rise to the rank of boon companion (*nadīm*) and thus enter the inner circle of his royal patron (e.g., *Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, p. 52). The poetic profession could in fact be divided into two distinct classes, the poets and the minstrels. The distinguishing feature of the new kind of poet was his connection with a written tradition, which brought his art close to the realm of scholarship. Although this development had already taken place in Arabic poetry before the development of Persian poetry, the sources permit a view of the process during the earliest period of the latter. Neẓāmī ʿArūżī (*Čahār maqāla*, ed.

Qazvīnī, p. 52) described the Samanid court poet Rūdakī as a minstrel who performed his own poetry and was also a renowned musician. The early Ghaznavid poet Farroḵī was also still close to the minstrel tradition. Nevertheless, both poets also participated fully in the tradition of written poetry. In the mid-11th century, however, Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar made a sharp distinction between the two professions. In his view, the craft of the poet (*šāʿerī*) was related to that of the minstrel (*ḵonyāgarī*) in the same way that theory is related to practice. As poets were writers of texts they had to command all the learning that such a task required. Minstrels, on the other hand, were basically performers of the works of others and had even to be discouraged from adding their own compositions to the repertoire (pp. 194-95). Kaykāvūs also noted a social difference between the two professions: The poet was advised to learn courtly behavior (p. 192), whereas the place of the minstrel was among other performers, the musicians and dancers, who were not allowed to mingle with the guests (pp. 196-97).

The number of poets at a single court could become quite considerable, but very few among them were able to reach positions of trust and intimacy with the ruler. The highest social status accrued to those who became boon companions, with whom the ruler spent his leisure time. Only rarely did poets assume state duties, and in those instances the appointments were not always to their advantage, as the disgrace of Masʿūd-e Saʿd-e Salmān attests (*Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, pp. 71-73; see also De Bruijn, 1983, pp. 47-48). Although a formal organization of court poets did not develop, the position of poet laureate, *amīr-* or *malek-al-šoʿarāʾ*, seems to have carried with it the authority to decide on the admission of would-be poets at court. The 15th-century anthologist Dawlatšāh (ed. Browne, pp. 44-45) recorded the formal appointment of ʿOnṣorī to this office by Maḥmūd of Ḡazna (388-421/998-1030), possibly following earlier precedent. Already in the 8th century the Barmakids had entrusted to Abān b. ʿAbd-al-Ḥamīd Lāḥeqī the direction of the *dīwān-al-šeʿr*, a branch of the bureaucracy responsible for distributing rewards to poets.

Patrons bartered gifts for the services that poets could provide. There was therefore nothing dishonorable in court poets' frequent requests for rewards (*ṣela*). Equally their frequent praise of their own accomplishments was no more than legitimate marketing of their professional skills. The nature of the rewards could vary according to the needs of the poet or the degree of his favor with the patron. The amount was often determined by mere impulse: A well-chosen improvisation might result in extravagant remuneration (e.g.,

Čahār maqāla, ed. Qazvīnī, pp. 70-71, 74-75; Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 515-16). Apart from cash, gifts in kind were common; clothing, particularly the robe of honor (*ḵeleʿat*), constituted the most precious items. A poet laureate received more consistent remuneration through the assignment of sources of regular income like those assigned to other officials. For instance, a salary (*jāmagī*) and an allowance (*ejrā*) from the revenue of Isfahan were granted to Moʿezzī (*Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, p. 68).

The ceremonial function of court poetry consisted mainly of bestowing praise on the royal patron on appropriate occasions, prominent among which were seasonal festivals, especially Nowrūz, the Persian New Year, but also, at least in the early period, the autumn festival Mehrgān and the mid-winter celebration of Sada. The *ʿīd al-feṭr* at the end of Ramażān was the greatest annual event from the Muslim calendar at court. Other occasions calling for the activity of poets were the accession of the ruler, his departure on a military campaign, the return of his victorious army, and his feats on the hunting ground. Poets also commemorated the construction of buildings and parks and events in the ruler's personal life like births and deaths. Formal presentation was usually made, particularly in later periods, by the poet himself standing before the throne.

The characteristic genre of this kind of court poetry was the panegyric (*madḥ*). The anthologist ʿAwfī (p. 8) divided those concerned with court poetry into two categories: the praised (*mamdūḥ*) and the praisers (*mādeḥ*). Under the influence of Arabic poetry, the *qaṣīda* became the common, though not exclusive, form for a poem of praise. Stanzaic poems often served the same purpose, and even *ḡazal*s were sometimes intended as panegyrics, as can be concluded from reference to a patron in the final passage of a *ḡazal*. Passages of praise, often designated as *ḵeṭāb-e zamīnbūs* (address by means of kissing the ground) were inserted in the introductions to narrative and didactic works in *maṯnawī* verse or in prose.

It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the pattern of laudatory speech and its realizations in one particular form or the other. The centerpiece of this pattern was the actual eulogy (*madīḥ*) directly following mention of the patron's name. In lyrical poetry the eulogy was nearly always preceded by a prelude (*nasīb*, *šabīb*) on a subject that was connected with the main theme only by analogy. The transition from the prelude to the eulogy (originally *taḵalloṣ* or *maḵlaṣ*, later *gorīzgāh*) involved an elegant comparison between one feature of the introductory theme and the person praised. In panegyric

*ḡazal*s the eulogy was reduced to this transitional passage. The conclusion of the laudatory address consisted of a prayer (*doʿā*) for the well-being of the patron, usually phrased in conditional form (*šarīṭa*).

Beside these basic elements the structure of the panegyric allowed for the introduction of optional items, for example, specific requests to the patron (*ṭalab*), praise of the poet's own professional merits (*faḵrīya*), and other topics concerning his relationship with the patron (*ḥasb-e ḥāl*). In many instances the panegyric was at the same time a topical poem, containing more or less detailed references to the occasion for which it was primarily intended. Matters of topical interest were further dealt with in fragments (*qeṭʿahā*, *moqaṭṭaʿāt*) and quatrains (*robāʿīyāt*), which provide valuable insights into the daily life of the courts, though the specific circumstances referred to are not always clear. One group of short *maṯnawī*s, all dating from the early 12th century, specifically treat aspects of court poetry: Moḵtārī's *Honar-nāma*, containing a demonstration of the versatility expected from a court poet, especially in the use of enigmatic descriptions (pp. 699-745); Sanāʾī's *Kārnāma-ye balḵī*, in which he surveyed his circle of professional contacts, extending far beyond the immediate surroundings of the Ghaznavid sultan (pp. 142-78); and Masʿūd-e Saʿd-e Salmān's description in an untitled *maṯnawī* of the conviviality at the court of the Ghaznavid viceroy at Lahore, in which the entire array of participants and performing artists is described (II, pp. 787-817).

The performance of entertaining poems was still left to the minstrel (*moṭreb*), who was also a singer and instrumentalist. The convivial gathering (*majles*) devoted to merrymaking and wine (*našāṭ o šarāb*) was the appropriate setting for his performances, and the *ḡazal*, with its anacreontic themes, was the suitable form for this purpose. Even after the *ḡazal* was adopted by Sufis as one of their principal forms of mystical expression, it continued to be cultivated at the courts.

Narrative poetry should be included among the literature intended for entertainment, but it served other purposes as well. The epics about kings and heroes of the past were highly appreciated because of their exemplary value. The choice of epic verses for an ornamental inscription in a Ghaznavid palace attests the ideological importance of this genre (cf. Bombaci). For the same reason, its contents could be adapted by historians and writers as "mirrors for princes." Occasionally there are historical references to the recitation of epic stories. According to Bayhaqī, for example, a storyteller (*moḥaddeṯ*) had to be present at the palace gate at night, so that he could be summoned immediately

to entertain a sleepless monarch (ed. Nafīsī, I, pp. 139-40). This practice perpetuated age-old customs of oral transmission.

Romances about famous lovers, akin to the genre of the *ḡazal*, were appreciated for various reasons. Apart from the attraction inherent in the stories themselves, these poems transmitted ethical values and provided moral guidance. They must have played a considerable role in fostering a courtly style of living.

Both in the heroic and in the romantic *maṯnawī*s didacticism was always a conspicuous element. The hortatory genre was already extremely popular in pre-Islamic Persia (cf. Boyce, "Middle Persian Literature," pp. 51-55); it permeated other genres and became an important item in the repertoire of the court poet before eventually being integrated into mystical literature.

The remnants of Samanid court poetry collected by modern scholars bear witness to a varied use of forms and literary themes. One of the rare poems that is preserved in its entirety is Rūdākī's "*mādar-e mey*"*qaṣīda*, in which the description of the making of wine introduces a sketch of the *majles*, with the amir sitting among his attendants (*Tārīḵ-e Sīstān*, pp. 317-23). Daqīqī's evocation of a palace garden in full flower at the time of the early morning audience is another characteristic specimen from this period (cf. Lazard, *Premiers poètes* II, pp. 151-54).

In the first half of the 11th century the court of Ḡazna provided the first well-documented example of a center of Persian court poetry. ʿOnṣorī, Manūčehrī, and Farroḵī, the leading eulogists of the sultans Maḥmūd and Masʿūd I (421-32/1030-41), set a high standard for future generations of poets, especially in the panegyric *qaṣīda*. Many details about the role of poets and minstrels in the daily life of the Ghaznavid court were recorded in the contemporary chronicle of Bayhaqī.

Other Turkish dynasties showed a similar interest in court literature. Under the Qarakhanids the Persian tradition of the Samanids was continued in western Transoxania, the best-known poet laureate being ʿAmʿaq Boḵārāʾī. The eastern branch of this dynasty promoted court poetry in Turkish. A revival of Ghaznavid poetry at about the turn of the 12th century gained momentum at the court of the Ghaznavid viceroys of Hindustan, at Lahore, where Abu'l-Faraj Rūnī and Masʿūd-e Saʿd-e Salmān began their careers. Slightly later, at Marv, the Saljuq sultan Sanjar (511-52/1118-57) emerged as a great patron of

poets. Initially Moʿezzī (d. ca. 519/1125) was the leading personality at his court. As a panegyrist he was considered the equal of Rūdakī and ʿOnsorī. His *dīvān* contains examples of the full range of Persian court poetry.

Until that time it had hardly been possible to distinguish between court poetry and Persian poetry in general, for only at court could poets find the protection and economic support without which the practice of their art was unthinkable. Outside this framework the writing of poetry was a pastime for dilettantes. Both rulers and members of their entourages indulged in it occasionally, but their output was minor in comparison to the enormous production of "professional" poets.

The dependence of poetry upon the patronage system was not without critics, however. Neẓāmī ʿArūżī adduced the imprisonment of Masʿūd-e Saʿd-e Salmān, during which he composed his famous "prison poems" (*ḥabsīyāt*), and Sultan Maḥmūd's miserly reward for the dedication of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* as examples of the ill-treatment some poets had to suffer from their patrons (*Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, pp. 71-73, 75-83). Court poetry was often blamed for insincerity, manifest in both the often fictional *nasīb*s and the flattery of the panegyric (see, e.g., ʿAwfī, *Lobāb*, pp. 10-15). A more fundamental criticism was expressed by Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow and Sanāʾī (De Bruijn, 1987, pp. 20-21), two poets who devoted their art to religious goals and denounced the insincerity and frivolity forced upon the professional poet guided by economic motives. They found new justification for the practice of poetry in the cause of Fatimid propaganda and in the service of Islamic preachers, respectively. Eventually poets who wished to devote themselves to lofty ideals found shelter in communities of mystics.

The growing importance of mystical themes in Persian literature had an effect on court poetry as well. Already in the 12th century the leading court poet of Sanjar's later years, Anwarī, sought greater depth of expression in panegyric. He was particularly distinguished as a *poeta doctus*, enriching conventional imagery with learned allusions derived from the sciences. The trend was enforced in the latter half of the century, when the main centers of patronage were located in the western parts of Persia. It is exemplified in the work of Jamāl-al-Dīn ʿAbd-al-Razzāq, who enjoyed the protection of nonroyal patrons in Isfahan, and especially in that of Neẓāmī Ganjavī and Ḵāqānī, the outstanding talents of the century. Neẓāmī maintained his distance from court life, though Ḵāqānī could never completely divorce himself from the court of the Šīrvānšāhs. This evolution also affected poetic forms. Ḵāqānī perfected the

qaṣīda, but more as a vehicle for moral and religious didacticism than for courtly panegyric. At the same time the *qaṣīda* began to give way to other forms of lyrical, narrative, and didactic poetry, probably because the ceremonial function for which it had always been the most obvious choice was no longer as favored at court as the functions of entertainment and instruction so fundamental to court poetry, wherever it is practiced.

During the following centuries *ḡazal*s and romantic and didactic *maṯnawī*s were the prominent genres in Persian court poetry. Mystical ideas proved by no means alien to the courtly atmosphere. They were intertwined with more mundane themes in remarkable fashion, which makes interpretation of the *ḡazal*s of Saʿdī and Ḥāfeẓ, both linked to the courts of the rulers of Shiraz, particularly difficult. ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Jāmī was a Sufi poet and also had close relations with the Timurid court in Herat.

In the 16th century a central court was again established in Persia, under the Safavids, but it did not provide a fresh impulse to court poetry. On the contrary, the theocratic nature of the regime tended to favor the development of religious poetry on Shiʿite themes. Shah Ṭahmāsb I (930-84/1524-76) discouraged Moḥtašam Kāšānī from writing panegyrics and advised him to write elegies on the martyrdom of the imams (cf. Ṣafā, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, p. 954). Nevertheless, court poetry was revived to some extent at Isfahan in the 17th century, though for the majority of contemporary poets the Indian courts offered more attractive prospects.

Shortly before the Qajars rose to power in the late 18th century there was a return to the style of early Persian poetry (*bāzgašt-e adabī*), which naturally entailed a renewed interest in ancient traditions of court poetry. The court of Ḡazna had remained an authoritative example throughout the centuries, and an effort was made to emulate it under Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah (1212-50/1797-1834). The *anjoman-e ḵāqān* (the king's assembly) was a circle of court poets serving the shah himself; the poet laureate was Fatḥ-ʿAlī Khan Ṣabā Kāšānī (Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 15, 193). The neoclassic tendency continued to dominate Persian poetry until the middle of the present century, though court poetry itself had come to an abrupt end in Persia as the result of social changes following the Constitutional Revolution of 1323-29/1905-11 (i, vii), in which poets played a significant role. Just as the *šāʿer* had emerged as the principal bearer of literary court traditions in the early Islamic period, so early 20th-century politics created the independent poet, whose loyalty was no longer to a patron but to political and social ideals.

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