



H AJW

H AJW and its synonym *hejā* are two of the many terms which denote types of humorous writing or light verse in Persian (cf. the list of more than two hundred items drawn up by Ḥalabi, pp. 97-180, and the article HUMOR). The wide range of meaning attached to the word “satire,” which in English is the nearest equivalent of *hajw*, requires a further specification to assign *hajw* its proper place within the wider areas of Persian humorous literature. Its special meaning was determined to a large extent by its history. Already in pre-Islamic Arabia both terms were current as references to the almost magical force that was attributed to the words of the poets in bedouin warfare. Through their poetic invectives poets could damage an opponent’s reputation, either personally or collectively as a member of a rival tribe (Goldziher). Essential to the effectiveness of *hajw* as a verbal weapon was that its smears on the name of a victim should reach the ears of as many people as possible. Therefore, a lampoon also had to be a successful poem in its own right. A display of wit and rhetorical virtuosity in the poem were necessary tools to achieve the goal.

In the Islamic period *hajw* survived under the quite different conditions of urban literature and acquired the status of an accepted literary genre, both in Arabic and Persian poetry (Van Gelder). Satire aimed maliciously at personal enemies was seen as the exact opposite of *madḥ*, the panegyric which was the most prominent genre of court literature. According to Key-Kāvus, anything said in praise of someone could be turned around and then used as an argument in *hajw*. Although one should not make a habit of composing satires,



as such it is not to be condemned (pp. 190-92).

The conventions of courtly life, where poets were competing with each other for patronage, assigned a special place to this kind of poetry: it could be used, on the one hand, to remind a patron of the rewards due to the poet, if only by the threat of turning praise into biting satire; on the other hand, to humiliate the person as well as the poetry of a rival in the never-ending fight for the patron's favor. No special poetic form was created for this type of satire. It could be molded into any form, but the short forms of the *qeṭ'a* or *moqaṭṭa'a* and the *robā'i* or quatrain were the most appropriate, because they could easily be improvised and memorized. Hajw poetry often betrays features of oral poetry, insofar as it is essentially a verbal reaction to a topical situation from which it derived its full colors. A rare example of purely literary satire is the *hajw-nāma* that Ferdowsi would have written against his patron Sultan Maḥmud, which, if Neẓāmi 'Aruẓi's report is to be believed, was meant to be inserted in the introduction of the *Šāh-nāma* (see also [FERDOWSI II](#)). The offensive argument in this satire is the reference to Maḥmud's low descent, an attack to which the sultan must have been extremely vulnerable:

If the king's father had been king,

He would have placed on my head a golden crown.

And if the king's mother had been a princess,

I would be up to my knees in silver and gold.

As there is no greatness in his ancestry,

He cannot bear to hear the name of great men.

A tree which by nature is bitter,

You may plant it in paradise's garden,

You may water it from the eternal stream,

And irrigate its roots with purest honey,

In the end its essence will come to effect:



It will bring forth nothing but bitter fruit.

Ferdowsi adds the advice to beware of a poet's revenge because:

An offended poet will write a satire,

And satire remains till the Resurrection (Ferdowsi, pp. xc-xcii)

Invective poetry strives to achieve its aim by soliciting the laughs of the bystanders at the cost of the satirist's victim. If it is stripped of this malicious intention, it can still be appreciated as humorous verse, and *hajw* is actually often put together with *hazl* into the same category of light verse. The latter term, as well as its synonyms *moṭāyaba* and *ṭanz*, covers the entire range of humor in poetry which is not meant to be aggressive. Obscenity is one of its most conspicuous features, and the same could be said of *hajw*, which targets the opponent's good name by insinuating his cuckoldry, sexual intercourse with boys and animals, and other kinds of scandalous behavior. The free mention of the taboo words for the sexual organs plays an important role in satirical language.

It should be considered, however, that in all kinds of humorous literature a great comic force was attributed to obscenity. Undoubtedly, the satiric bite of *hajw* was enforced by the use of foul language, but this need not always be the principal ingredient. In the following specimen of *hajw*, by which the Central Asian court poet Rašidi replies to the criticism of his rival 'Am'aq, the poetic effect resides entirely in the clever reversal of the critic's argument, whereas the invective "cuckold" (*qaltabān*) is no more than an additional insult:

You blame my poems for being tasteless (*bi-namak*, lit. 'without salt')?

You may have a point there, perhaps.

My poetry is like sugar and honey

And in both, salt does not taste good;

The poems you made are turnips and beans:



It is you, cuckold, who needs the salt! (Nezāmi 'Aruzi, p. 74)

Also, Anwari's sneer at the stinginess of a patron is remarkable for its wit, but can hardly be called obscene:

If the Emir gives you no more than a small present,

Take it, since coming from him this is very much.

His liberality is like circumcision:

It happens only once in your lifetime. (*Divān* II, p. 183)

Although much of the effect of satirical poetry is lost as soon as it is detached from the situation for which it was intended, still many specimens were considered interesting enough to be preserved for posterity. Dictionaries and anthologies, such as Asadi's *Loġat-e-Fors* and 'Awfi's *Lobāb al-albāb*, quote many examples of hajw written by the earliest Persian poets. During the 11th and 12th centuries, when courtly panegyric was in full flower, the genre of hajw also had its greatest day. Probably the best specimens can be found among the *moqaṭṭa'āt* of Anwari, but he was only one of many poets who tried their hand at this genre. A famous literary duel of the period is that which Kāqāni fought with his rival Abu'l-'Alā of Ganja (cf. Rypka, 203). No poet, however, became more closely associated with the genre than Moḥammad b. 'Ali Suzani, who lived at the court of the Qaraḳānids of Samarqand in the middle of the 12th century. In his *Divān*, two different types of hajw poems can be distinguished. The first consists of a series of odes or *qaṣidas*, in many of which the satire serves as an introduction to the praise of one of his patrons. The second are poems in the *ġazal* or short lyric form among which the "answers" (*jawāb*) to the works of other poets are the most interesting. His best known victims are either poets who were not his contemporaries, such as Sanā'i, or poets whom Suzani probably never met, since they lived in another part of Persia, such as Qewāmi of Ray. These *jawābs* should therefore be regarded as persiflage rather than satire in the strict sense. They were meant to amuse the courtiers whom Suzani served, and the excessive use of coarse language for which Suzani has become notorious undoubtedly reflects the tone of the conversation in those circles.

The satirizing of groups of people is attested for the first time in a group of



topical poems from the 11th and 12th centuries, for instance a *qaṣida* by ‘Am‘aq, who describes an imaginary journey through a stony desert full of “inferior and despicable men,” obviously people in his environment at whom he aims his invectives; a *maṭnawi* or verse in couplet form by Mas‘ud-e-Sa‘d-e-Salmān describing the conviviality at the Ghaznavid court of Lahore; and Sanā‘i’s *Kār-nāma-ye Balkī*, where he makes fun of his fellow-poets in Ghazna. These works undoubtedly contain passages that should be classified as hajw, although it is difficult to make out whether the intention was really to be aggressive or merely to indulge in a comparatively harmless kind of jesting (cf. de Bruijn, pp. 194-200).

In the prose works of ‘Obayd-e Zākāni (14th century), the greatest satirist of Persian literature, a note of social criticism may be discerned, especially in his *Aḳlāq al-ašrāf* (“The Morals of the Noble”), but the target at which he aims is not specific enough to fit the definition of hajw as it is used in the present article. However, the tradition of poetic invective remained alive and was practiced by many, among whom the 19th-century poet Yaḡmā should be singled out for mention.

In modern Persian literature the term hajw is still in use, but its social function has changed essentially. At the time of the Constitutional Revolution of the early 20th century the pattern of courtly patronage, which for centuries had provided the main structure of literary life in Iran, fell apart. Poets and prose-writers of the *mašruṭiyat*, such as ‘Āref, Bahār, and Dehḳodā, turned hajw into a weapon in politics. Even when they satirized individuals, the purpose was to attack them for political reasons, not to revile them on account of personal grievances. The effectiveness of their satire was enhanced by the emergence of a free press, through which it could reach a much wider public than the traditional forms of hajw. During the years following upon the collapse of the Constitutional Movement, Iraj Mirzā earned himself a reputation as a poet of satire which was intended to criticize injustices in Iranian society, in particular with regard to the rights of women. His tone is usually rather mild and humorous, but he did not shrink from using taboo words just as the classical poets of satire had done.



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