



MOḤTAŠAM KĀŠĀNI

MOḤTAŠAM KĀŠĀNI, Šams-al-Šo‘arā Kamāl-al-Din, Persian poet of the Safavid period (b. Kashan, between 1528 and 1529; d. Kashan, February 1588). Like many poets of the time, Moḥtašam had mercantile origins. His father, K̄vāja Mir Aḥmad (d. 1554), was active in [Kashan](#)’s prosperous cloth industry, and the poet seems to have pursued the same occupation before a business setback led him to take up poetry as a full-time occupation. His brother, K̄vāja ‘Abd-al-Ġani, died in the [Deccan](#) as a young man in 1552 (see [INDIA vi. Political and Cultural Relations, 13th-18th centuries](#)). The poet himself suffered from a chronic debility of the foot, and though he occasionally expressed the desire to migrate to India, he remained in the city of his birth throughout his life. In one poem (*Haft divān*, I, p. 435), he refers to a brief marriage that ended in divorce, and he apparently died childless. Shortly before his death in February 1588, he entrusted the collection and arrangement of his literary remains to the poet and literary biographer Taqi-al-Din Kāšāni. His tomb today stands at the site of his house in Kashan.

This uneventful biography belies Moḥtašam’s significant role in the cultural life of 16th-century Persia. Though Tabriz and Qazvin served as the political capitals of the [Safavid dynasty](#) during the poet’s lifetime, Kashan held pride of place as the main center of literary activity. In addition to a profusion of locally grown talent, most aspiring poets from around the country, such as [Naẓiri Nišāpuri](#) and [Ṭāleb Āmoli](#), passed through the city at some point in their careers. Taqi-al-Din’s description of Moḥtašam as the “absolute master” (*ostād-e ‘alā’l-eṭlāq*) of the poets of the time was more than mere hyperbole: an edict



apparently issued by [Parikān Kānom](#) (1548-78), the daughter of Shah [Ṭahmāsp I](#) (r. 1524-76), required other poets of Kashan to submit their work to Moḥtašam for inspection before sending it on to the royal court (*Haft divān*, I, pp. 84-91). Such power and influence inevitably aroused hostility, and both Moḥtašam's own works and the biographies of poets (sing. *taḍkera*) of the time give ample testimony to the animosity that the poet could inspire and harbor. In a contemporary memoir, *Kayr al-bayān*, Malek-Šāh Ḥosayn Sistāni describes how the young [Vaḥši](#) was promoted by those in Kashan who envied the wealth and pomp that Moḥtašam enjoyed. He nursed a grudge long after this potential rival had retreated to his hometown of Yazd and composed an ingenious, but grudging chronogram on Vaḥši's death: *kačal Vaḥši-i bud šāḥeb-ṭabi'at / vali dun o bi-gowhar o bi-ḥaḡiqat* ("there was a bald wild man [vaḥši] endowed with genius / but he was base, ignoble, and untruthful") in which both halves of the verse yield the year 991/1583 (*Haft divān*, II, p. 1601). Moḥtašam had similar feuds with a number of other poets, yet clearly had many backers as well, and some of his students, such as [Zohuri Toršizi](#) and [Now'i Kabušāni](#), went on to achieve considerable fame in the courts of India (see [INDIA xxviii. Iranian Immigrants](#)).

Though he lived at a distance from the palace, Moḥtašam stayed in close touch with the royal family and courted its patronage throughout his life. He dedicated many poems in various genres to the praise of Shah [Ṭahmāsp I](#) and his successors [Esmā'il II](#) (r. 1576-77) and [Moḥammad Ḳodābanda](#) (r. 1578-88). However, in the political chaos that followed [Ṭahmāsp's](#) death in 1576, kingship was only rarely synonymous with power, and allegiances changed rapidly. Moḥtašam's collected works suggest a frantic attempt to stay afloat on these shifting and dangerous political currents. He addressed poems to the main princely contenders for the throne, [Ḥaydar Mirzā Šafavi](#) and [Ḥamza Mirzā](#), to administrators such as [Mirzā Salmān Jāberi](#) and [Mirzā Loṭf-Allāh Šarif](#), and to a variety of [Qezelbāš](#) tribal leaders like [Moḥammad Khan Torkomān](#) and [Moršed-Qoli Khan Ostājlu](#). Perhaps in an effort to find a safe haven in India, as a number of his younger contemporaries did, Moḥtašam also dedicated poems to the 'Ādelšāhis and Nežāmšāhis, the Mughal emperor [Akbar](#) (r. 1556-1605), and 'Abd-al-Raḥim [Kān-e Kānān](#). Whether or not these poems reached their addressees, Moḥtašam remained in Persia; he lived long enough to celebrate the arrival of Prince 'Abbās in Qazvin, but not to enjoy the stability and prosperity the young king would bring to the country.

Moḥtašam's fame today rests almost entirely on a single poem—his elegy in



twelve strophes (*davāzdah-band*) on the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn at [Karbala](#), beginning *bāz in če šureši-st ke dar kalq-e 'ālam ast / bāz in če nowha o če 'azā o če mātām ast* (“What is this tumult now among the world’s creatures? / What now is this wailing, this mourning, this lamentation?” *Haft divān*, I, pp. 460-68). This poem achieved renown even during the poet’s lifetime; the contemporary literary biographer Awḥadi Balyāni writes that “if his poetry were limited to this one work, it would be enough” (*Golčin-e Ma‘āni*, p. 477). This judgment was prescient; at the beginning of the 20th century, E. G. [Browne](#) (IV, p. 172) praises the “true pathos and religious feeling” expressed in the “extraordinarily simple and direct” language of the poem, and even a Marxist critic like Jan Rypka (p. 298) is taken by its “charm of genuine sincerity and intimacy.” Recently, Karen Ruffle has pointed out how Moḥtašam integrated the pre-Islamic Arabic tradition of women’s *elegy* (*martīa*) into the context of the Moḥarram ceremonies that had received a new impetus under the Shi‘ite dispensation of the Safavid state. The poem reached the peak of its popularity during the Qajar period, generating dozens of responses and imitations. Moḥtašam’s elegy remains one of the best-known works of classical poetry up to the present day and is often pressed onto long pieces of cloth that drape entire cities in Iran during Moḥarram ceremonies (see [‘ĀŠURĀ](#)).

The affective power and critical renown of this poem has colored the perception of Moḥtašam’s career, his other works, and even Safavid literary patronage as a whole. In a famous episode from the *‘Ālamārā-ye ‘abbāsi*, the historian [Eskandar Beg Monši](#) tells how Moḥtašam submitted a panegyric ode (*qašida*) dedicated to Shah Ṭahmāsp through the princess Parikān Kānom; the king reproached the poet for polluting his tongue with the praises of temporal rulers and directed him to turn his talents to extolling the virtues of the Imams. Moḥtašam responded with a seven-strophe poem (*haft-band*) in praise of ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (*Haft divān*, I, pp. 288-98) closely modeled on an earlier work by Mawlānā Ḥasan Kāšāni (fl. early 14th cent.). The regal payment that Moḥtašam received led to a flood of further imitations by other poets (*Eskandar Beg*, tr. Savory, I, pp. 274-75). Browne, followed by most modern scholars, mistakenly identified this poem with the elegy on Karbala, resulting in a misleading exaggeration of the importance of the anecdote itself. It came to be regarded as an expression of the attitude of the Safavid dynasty toward poetry and the literary arts in general, “whereas it probably only points to a personal change of heart of one monarch” (de Bruijn, 1995, p. 775a).

Even a cursory examination of the rest of Moḥtašam’s sizeable *divan* –



consisting of some 13,000 verses and two substantial prosimetric works – suggests that characterizing either the poet or the age as fanatically religious is open to question. Taqī-al-Din Kāšāni’s “deathbed” edition divides the poet’s works into seven topical sections. The first and longest of these (*Šaybiya* “On mature themes”) contains poems devoted to panegyric and eulogistic themes in nearly all the forms available to the classical poet: *qasida*, *ḡazal*, *qeṭ’a*, *tarkīb-band*, *robā’i*, and *maṭnawi*. According to Dabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā (V, p. 795), Moḥtašam’s *qasidas* look back to the style of 11th- and 12th-century masters such as *Anwari*, and Awḥadi Balyāni deems the amatory preludes of some of these poems “incomparable” (Golčīn-e Ma’āni, p. 477). This section also contains the famous poems on the Shi’ite Imams, as well as the strophic elegy on the death of his brother (*Haft divān*, I, pp. 625-36; see Massé for a French tr.). Eulogistic themes are also prominent in the sixth section of his *divan* (*Žoruriyāt* “For special occasions”), which consists of Moḥtašam’s substantial collection of *chronograms* (sing. *mādda-ye tārik*). Utilizing the numeric values of the Arabo-Persian alphabet (*abjad*) to record dates of significant events in memorably apt phrases was a technique much in fashion during the 16th century, and Moḥtašam was an accomplished master; each half-verse (*mešrā’*) of his 32-line poem on the accession of Esmā’il II, for example, yields the value 984 (1576), the year he was enthroned (*Haft divān*, II, pp. 1552-54). Over half the poems in this section record dates of death, the deceased ranging from the famous to the obscure, including both the poet’s friends and foes. Others commemorate happier occasions, such as the birth of a child, the dedication of a building, or appointment to high office.

The first section of the *divan* contains some one hundred *ghazals* (*ḡazal*), placed here because of their eulogistic content. *Ghazals* on more purely amatory themes are found in the second (*Šabābiya* “On youthful love”) and third (*Šabā’iya* “On adolescent passion”) sections of the collected works. The reason for dividing these poems into two groups is unclear. Based on the remarks of the 18th-century literary historian Āzar Bigdeli, Ṣafā (V, p. 796) proposes that Moḥtašam’s predilection for verbal figures and rhetorical ornamentation, while appropriate for ceremonial genres such as the *qasida*, ran counter to the prevailing trends in the lyric, which prized figures of thought and a more naturalistic language. Like his contemporaries, Moḥtašam looked back to earlier poets such as Sa’di and Ḥāfeẓ for patterns of rhyme and meter, and Ṭahmāsp’ daughter, Parikān Kānom, commissioned Moḥtašam to write 80 responses to Jāmi’s *ghazals* (Ašufta’i Naṭanzi, p. 71). Moḥtašam’s *ghazals* (*Haft divān*, I, pp. 103-124), in turn, served as models for later poets



from Kashan, such as *Kalim Kāšāni* (d. 1651) and Najib (d. 1711). Moḥtašam's lyric poetry, however, has received little critical attention, and few definite conclusions can be drawn pending further study.

Sets of ghazals also form the basis of the fourth and fifth sections of the *divan*, two self-standing works in mixed verse and prose – *Noql-e 'oššāq* (“The lovers’ confection”) and *Resāla-ye jalāliya* (“The glorious treatise”). The two share a common narrative premise and structure: the poet-narrator tells in prose the story of one of his love affairs, explaining the circumstances under which he composed and delivered a series of lyric poems. *Noql-e 'oššāq* was composed between 1558 and 1559 and builds its narrative around 39 ghazals and a number of other scattered verses. Although not explicitly named, the object of the narrator’s affections is a woman, likely one of the cultured and well-to-do courtesans who moved with ease on the margins of Safavid high society. The poems are primarily epistolary, a means of negotiation and arranging assignations in a refined dance of courtship. The prose is highly crafted and abounds in the metaphorical language of deference, innuendo, and politesse that was typical of the Safavid “figured” style. Though a less polished work, *Resāla-ye jalāliya* has gained a measure of notoriety due to its homoeroticism, though this can hardly be considered unusual in the context of the time. Moḥtašam claims to have written the work in 1572 at the request of a writer friend to explain the genesis of a series of poems that had circulated widely during the course of his affair with a young man named Jalāl a decade earlier. Jalāl first comes to Kashan in his professional role as *šāṭer*, one of the handsome youths who adorn court ceremonies acting as footmen, couriers, and entertainers. As he begins to make the rounds of elite society, his good looks and skill as a dancer attract many admirers, Moḥtašam among them. The melodramatic whirlwind of their relationship pulls in a number of rivals and inept helpers, and the sequence of 64 ghazals range in mood from giddy delight to bitter recrimination, ending with a wistful melancholy over what-might-have-been before Jalāl is transferred to Isfahan by his supervisor (Losensky, 2009).

It is likely that Awḥadi Balyāni had the abovementioned works in mind when he accused Moḥtašam of pandering to popular taste and falling gradually from the regard of the elite (*Golčīn-e Ma‘āni*, p. 477). To exculpate Moḥtašam from charges of moral turpitude, his most recent editors use numerological reasoning to argue that *Resāla-ye jalāliya* is a very well disguised Sufi allegory (*Haft divān*, I, pp. 207-18). However, Sirus Šamisā’s suggestion that the work is



a sort of “romantic novel” (*romāni* ‘āšeqāna, p. 200) seems closer to the tenor and spirit of both the *Resāla* and *Noql-e* ‘oššāq. They are almost manifestos of the sensibility and aesthetics of the *maktab-e woqu*’, the school of poetry that flourished in Persia for most of the 16th century and emphasized the precise depiction of the delights, tantrums, and banter of all-too-human lovers. Though Moḥtašam’s claim of telling us “what really happened” probably cannot be taken at face value, he takes pains to depict the background of contemporary social life and its urban setting, rigorously avoids idealizing either lover or beloved, and offers a convincing picture of how poetry served as a medium of interpersonal communication and manipulation in the everyday discourse of the educated class.

Finally, Moḥtašam claims to reveal the name of his beloved in *Noql-e* ‘oššāq in the form of a *mo’ammā*, a riddling logogriph, and the seventh and shortest section of his *divan* is devoted to this form of sociable word play that was so popular at the end of the 15th century (Losensky, 1998, pp. 154-60). Although these casual, little enigmas are unlikely to interest modern readers, they are another sign of the versatility of this powerful and preeminent poet of the dynamic, flourishing world of Persian art and culture under the reign of Ṭahmāsp.

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