



VAḤŠI BĀFQI

VAḤŠI BĀFQI, Kamāl-al-Din (or Šams-al-Din Moḥammad), Persian poet of the Safavid period (b. Bāfq, ca. 1532; d. Yazd, 1583). Vaḥši was born in the agricultural town of Bāfq, southeast of Yazd, where he received his earliest training in poetry from his elder brother Morādi and the local literary luminary Šaraf-al-Din ‘Ali of Bāfq. He continued his education in the provincial capital of Yazd before moving to Kashan, the great center of literary activity in the early Safavid period. He was working here as a schoolteacher when his poetry first attracted the attention of the regional governor. Vaḥši seems to have been welcomed on the scene by many local poets who were tired of the laurels showered on Moḥtašam of Kashan, and he quickly became embroiled in the bouts of poetic flyting that were a prominent feature of literary culture of the time, exchanging invectives with rivals, such as Fahmi of Kashan and Ġazanfar of Koranjār. His panegyrics (*qašidas*) in honor of shah Ṭahmāsp I probably also date from this stage of his career. From Kashan, he traveled to other cities of western Iran such as Arāk and Jārun (Bandar ‘Abbās) before making his way back to Yazd.

Vaḥši was free of the wanderlust that would possess Persian poets over the next fifty years, and he spent the remainder of his life in Yazd and the nearby palace-town of Taft. Although he sometimes complains of his poverty, he seems to have enjoyed a fairly prominent position as the foremost poet at the court of the hereditary rulers of the region, Ġiyāṭ-al-Din Mir (-e) Mirān and his son Ḳalil-Allāh, who were descendants of the Sufi shaikh Shah Ne‘mat-Allāh Wali and in-laws of the Safavid royal house. Vaḥši also dedicated praise poems



to the governors of Kerman (in particular Bektāš Beyg Afšār) and wrote two short chronograms on the enthronement of Esmāʿil II. Vaḥši seems to have been retiring by nature, and there is no evidence that he ever married. According to his eventual literary executor, Awḥadi of Balyān, Vaḥši died of a strong dose of drink in Yazd in 1583 at the age of 52. He was buried in this city, although tombs built in his honor have regularly fallen victim to political upheaval.

Awḥadi gathered some 9,000 verses of Vaḥši's poetry after his death, and this divan contains poems in all the classical genres. Vaḥši's *qaṣidas* include not only panegyrics to the patrons mentioned above, but also several devotional poems in honor of the Shi'ite Imams. The *qeṭ'a* genre served Vaḥši primarily as a vehicle for panegyric and other occasional themes. Invective, praise, and architectural description also provide the topics for some ten short, untitled poems in rhymed couplets. But it is in the various strophic forms, the ghazal (*ghazal*), and his longer *matnawis* (poems in couplet form), that Vaḥši most distinguishes himself. His sole *tarji'-band* (stanzaic poem with a refrain) is an extended celebration of mystical intoxication with the full-verse refrain: *mā guša-nešinān-e karābāt-e alastim / tā bu-ye meyi hast dar in meykada mastim*, "We are recluses in the primordial tavern / while there's even a scent of wine in this wine-shop, we are drunk." This poem was quoted in full by Faḵr-al-Zamāni in his *Tadkera-ye Meykāna* and set an important precedent in the new genre of the *sāqi-nāma* (wine server's song), which was followed by many later poets (see Šafā, *Tāriḳ-e adabiyāt*, V/1, pp. 620-21). Like Naziri of Nishapur a few years later, Vaḥši used the stanzaic poems (*tarkib-band*) effectively as a medium for personal eulogy in poems lamenting the death of his brother, his teacher Šaraf-al-Din 'Ali, and his student Qāsem Beyg Qesmi Afšār. In the *mosammāt* partially translated by Browne (*Lit. Hist. Persia* IV, pp. 238-40; *Divān*, ed. Naḳā'i, pp. 293-95), the five-line strophes take on a ballad-like quality, as the speaker tells how his attentions to a young and inexperienced male lover eventually emboldened him to seek out lovers on his own.

This poem ends with the speaker washing his hands of the relationship, and such a note of confident willfulness is often found in Vaḥši's ghazals as well. This attitude, so different from the long-suffering self-effacement typical of the classical lyric, came to be known as *vā-sukt*, the rejection or repudiation of the beloved: *čo didam k'vār kod-rā az dar-e ān bivafā raftam / rasad ruzi ke qadr-e man bedānad ḥāliyā raftam*, "When I saw myself humiliated, I left that faithless lover / a day will come when he or she may recognize my worth, but for now

I'm gone" (*Divān*, ed. Naḳā'i, p. 132). *Vā-suḳt* is one dimension of the larger movement of the *maktab-e woqu'*, "the realist school," which was much in vogue in 16th-century Persia. It examined anew the amatory origins of the ghazal and reduced the idealization of the beloved in the interest of depicting the full range of the psychological negotiations of mundane love. In other lyrics, however, Vaḥši's lamentations have a quality of passionate yearning and despair that is reminiscent of Bābā Fāḡāni (d. 1519), with whom he has often been linked by contemporary and later critics. In any case, the emotionalism of Vaḥši's lyricism left little room for the philosophical or ethical themes that figure so prominently elsewhere in the ghazal tradition.

Such themes, however, do appear in the shortest of Vaḥši's titled *matnawis*, *Ḳold-e barin* ("The highest heaven"). This poem follows the structure and meter of Neẓāmi's *Maḳzan al-asrār* and, at less than 600 verses, may be unfinished. Vaḥši also wrote two narrative romances in rhymed couplets. *Nāẓer o Manẓur* tells the tale of the passionate relationship of the prince of China, Manẓur, with the son of the king's vizier, Nāẓer. To avoid scandal, the vizier packs his son off to Egypt when his ardor for Manẓur causes him to misbehave in school. When Nāẓer reveals his secret love in a letter, however, Prince Manẓur set off in pursuit, and after many adventures and exploits, the two are reunited in Egypt, where Manẓur marries the princess of the country, becomes king, and appoints Nāẓer as his prime minister. Some 1,500 verses long and completed in 1588-89, this poem has received little critical attention, but offers an ingenious re-combination of older motifs, and its story of the mutual, platonic passion of two men is somewhat unusual in the tradition of Persian narrative romance.

Like *Nāẓer o Manẓur*, Vaḥši's *Farhād o Širin* is also written in the meter of Neẓāmi's *Ḳosrow o Širin*, but draws more directly on its model for its narrative material. Vaḥši focuses on one episode of Neẓāmi's story—the tragic affair between the sculptor, engineer, and architect Farhād Kuhkan (Mountain-Cutter) and the Armenian princess Širin. Although the work was left unfinished at the time of Vaḥši's death, with the introduction and barely 500 verses of the story completed, *Farhād o Širin* has been recognized as the poet's masterpiece from the time of its first appearance until today. Nearly a hundred manuscripts of the work have been catalogued around the world. In a systematic comparison of Neẓāmi's and Vaḥši's treatment of Farhād, Parviz Ḳānlari has argued that Vaḥši elevated the character into a symbol of the proud, strong-minded artist whose life and work are driven by the same



creative passion. At the beginning of the tale, Vaḥši famously identifies his own experience explicitly with that of his hero: *man-am Farhād o Širin ān šekar-kand / k-az-ān čon kuhkan jān bāyad-am kand*, “I am Farhad, and that sweetly smiling girl, Shirin / for whom I, like the Mountain-Cutter, must chip away my life” (*Divān*, ed. Naḳā’i, p. 520). Two poets of Shiraz, Weṣāl and Šāber, took on the task of completing Vaḥši’s poem in the 19th century.

Unlike other poets of the Safavid period, Vaḥši has enjoyed a consistently positive critical reception from his own day to the present. His poetry has little of the allusive or metaphorical complexity found in either his model Neẓāmi or in the “fresh style” poets of the following generations. Perhaps the greatest master of the plain style of the *maktab-e woqu*, Vaḥši’s artistry lies in his ability to turn the rhythms and language of everyday speech into a precise and elegant medium for capturing a wide range of emotions from a bitter sense of betrayal to helpless yearning. In this regard, Vaḥši’s style, like that of his great predecessor Sa’di, has been described as *sahl o momtane’* -a style whose apparent simplicity belies an inimitable and almost translucent immediacy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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and a survey of the poet's critical reception has been prepared by Ḥoseyn Maserrat (*Gozida-ye aš'ār-e Vaḥši-e Bāfqī*, Tehran, 1999). The oldest *taḍkera* sources are published in *Meykāna*, pp. 181-4 and Golčīn-e Ma'āni, pp. 616-18; others are listed in *Şafā*, V/2, p. 761.

See also:

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