



THE MIRROR OF MY HEART

A Thousand Years of
Persian Poetry by Women

BILINGUAL POEMS EDITION

Introduced and Translated by

Dick Davis



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For Afkham, of course

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The liberating space that was Persian poetry ... allowed subversive – indeed, heretical – expressions forbidden in any other media. Skepticism, even about the most sacred beliefs and duties, and sneering at the authorities, religious and political, was tolerated as the fruit of poetic imagination.

Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*^{*}

Woman's crime in our country is to be a woman.

Alam Taj (Zhaleh), Iranian poet (1883–1947)[†]

^{*}(New Haven: 2017), p. 21.

[†]*Divan-e Alam Taj Qa'em-Maghami, Zhaleh*, ed. Ahmad Karami, (Tehran:1374/1995), p. 149.

Introduction

A significant feature of Persian poetry that distinguishes it from most verse written in a European language is that almost all of it – from the earliest poems, written over a thousand years ago, to the present day – remains relatively accessible to a contemporary speaker of the language. The seventeenth-century English poet Edmund Waller bemoaned the fact that, already, his contemporaries could no longer easily read the works of the fourteenth-century poet Chaucer:

But who can hope his lines should long
Last in a daily changing tongue ...
We write in sand, our language grows,
And like the tide our work o'erflows.

Chaucer his sense can only boast,
The glory of his numbers lost!*

And as if to confirm Waller's complaint, it was in Waller's lifetime that passages from Chaucer were first "translated" into contemporary English, by Dryden. The Persian language, especially its literary form, has remained far more stable over

*Edmund Waller, *Seventeenth Century English Minor Poets*, ed. Anne Ferry (New York: 1964), p. 143.

the past millennium than is true of most European languages. There have been some changes of vocabulary and grammar but by Western standards they are minor: a modern-day Iranian can read the works of the tenth-century poet Ferdowsi with about the same ease as a modern-day English speaker can read those of seventeenth-century authors such as Waller and Dryden; there are some difficulties for a non-specialist in the period, but they do not obscure what is usually the obvious sense and rhetorical force of any given passage. A side-effect of the fact that poems from centuries ago can seem and sound relatively “contemporary” to the Persian reader is that such poems could be – and were – taken as models by poets from a much later date, and this in turn has led to a quite extraordinary continuity of poetic rhetoric from the earliest poems until at least the mid nineteenth century, and even beyond that period.

There is perhaps something else at work in this rhetorical continuity: all poetry is artificial in its language, but poetry in English has frequently tended to aim at “language really used by men,” as Wordsworth put it,^{*} and when this is the case it tries, as far as possible, to disguise its artifice; by contrast pre-modern[†] Persian poetry tends to display, and delight in,

^{*}Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *Poets on Poetry*, ed. Charles Norman (New York: 1962), p. 138.

[†]“Pre-modern” is here used to refer to Persian poetry written in the “classical” metrical system (*aruz*) in which virtually all Persian poetry was written before the mid twentieth century. Though a number of poets still use this system, sometimes in a modified form, the last major woman poet to have used it exclusively was Parvin Etesami (1907–1941).

its artifice. To say a poem in English sounds “artificial” is to condemn it; the same remark about a pre-modern Persian poem could well elicit the response, “Of course it does; it’s a poem, isn’t it?” And so the fact that a particular metaphor or rhetorical trope has been used by many other poets, and is thought of as intrinsically “poetic” rather than as colloquial, is not so much a barrier to its continued use as a validation of it. The poets Ayyuqi (tenth–eleventh centuries) and Nezami (twelfth century) both say that the poet is like the woman who tends to a bride’s physical appearance before her wedding; that is, the poet uses his or her skill and artifice to make the subject as dazzlingly beautiful as possible. Other common metaphors used by poets themselves to describe poetry are that it is something woven, such as brocade, or a piece of jewelry, such as a pearl necklace. All three of these metaphors emphasize the aesthetic, artificial, fabricated, and artisanal nature of the craft, rather than, say, its sincerity or its truth-telling qualities as they are foregrounded in much Western poetry (“to hold ... the mirror up to nature,” as Shakespeare’s Hamlet says).

To indicate something of the density and complexity of this artifice in pre-modern Persian poetry, here is a translation of a very early poem that is made up almost entirely of motifs that belonged to a common stock widely utilized by other poets for centuries to come. The poem is by the tenth-century poet Rabe’eh who, as is appropriate for this volume, is the earliest-known woman poet to write in Persian:

The garden shows so many flowers, as though
Mani had painted their resplendent glow

Dawn's breezes never bore Tibetan musk,
How is the world so musky when they blow?

Are Majnun's eyes within the clouds, that they
Shed Layli's cheeks' hue on each rose below?

Like wine within an agate glass, his tears
Have filled each tulip with their crimson glow

Raise up the wine bowl, raise it generously
Since bad luck dogs deniers who say "No"*

Narcissi glow with silver and with gold
It's Kasra's crown their shining petals show

Like nuns in purple cowls the violets bloom
Do they turn into Christians as they grow?(p. 5)

*This line contains a relatively rare word that comes twice, once in each half of the line, the meaning of which is not obvious. The admonition to drink wine copiously is not affected by the word, but the rest of the line can mean either, (1) one should not be close-fisted and hold back, because bad luck comes to those who do, or (2) one should not trust the world (because it is fleeting and no-one knows what fate can bring in the future), since bad luck comes to those who do. I've taken the first suggested meaning, as being more in keeping with the spirit of the rest of the poem, but the second meaning is also possible. Whichever interpretation we follow, the line's overall import, to drink wine copiously since it would be foolish not to, remains the same.

The poem is a *baharieh* – that is, a poem welcoming the spring, a form that is still, a thousand years later, a recognized category of Persian poetry – and it is set in the archetypal beautiful place for Persian culture, the *locus amoenus* to end them all, a garden. But what is “Mani,” the third-century founder of the religion of Manicheism, doing in the poem? In Persian lore he was also a painter whose beautiful paintings looked so true to life that they deceived both people and animals, and this accounts for “painted” in the second line. Because the flowers are compared to Mani’s paintings, this means they must be very beautiful, and Persian poetry takes it for granted that beauty is a major concern of every civilized person. And something else is also going on here: Mani was the founder of a pre-Islamic religion seen as a heresy by Moslems, and yet he is mentioned, apparently favorably, in a poem written by someone we presume to be a Moslem. Persian poetry often mentions religions other than Islam, and in short lyric poems, like this one, the reference is almost always either favorable or neutral; it virtually never implies condemnation (this is less true of long didactic poems, in which religions other than Islam are sometimes implicitly or explicitly condemned). This suggests that Persian lyric poetry perhaps sees itself as somewhat at odds with an exclusively Islamic world-view, or at least as not prepared to denigrate other religions in its favor, and this is indeed the case. Persian lyric poetry is in general welcomingly receptive to both the pre-Islamic past and non-Islamic faiths. The implication is that there is not one sole Truth applicable at all times to all people; that other ways of being, from the past or as an adherent of another faith, can be considered to be equally valid. Later on, such references were read as allegorical (the mention of a figure from another religion, for example, was seen as a

metaphor for one who transmits mystical knowledge – that is, a knowledge outside of the mainstream of “orthodox” Islam), and in later poems they often *are* allegorical, but they were meant quite literally, for themselves, in Rabe’eh’s poems, as they were in the poems of her contemporaries and of many subsequent poets.

Regarded as particularly refreshing and pleasant, the cool breeze of dawn, referred to in the second stanza of the poem, is a constituent of the idealized landscapes of much Persian poetry. This breeze apparently brings the scent of musk, the most valued and expensive of medieval perfumes, and again we see that we are being presented with an idealized situation in which everything, including the scented air, is as beguilingly charming and special as possible. The musk comes from Tibet, a remote and exotic place for the speaker, and the poem momentarily opens on a distant, almost fabulous, reality, as with the mention of Mani. Here the musk is a metaphor for the scent of the garden’s flowers as it is diffused by the breeze, the logic being that musk is the most precious perfume, so the flowers in this idealized garden share its scent, and this rare, idealized loveliness provokes wonder in the speaker. Wonder at what seems perfect (a garden, a person, a state of mind – usually love or grief), or extreme to the point of unreality, is a very commonly evoked effect in Persian poetry.

Next we come to Layli and Majnun, star-crossed lovers from an originally seventh-century Arabic tale that quickly spread all over the Islamic world. Since he is a tragic figure, unable to be united with his beloved, Majnun is often represented as weeping and this is why he is mentioned in the third stanza of the poem as being “within the clouds” – he is weeping the dew onto the flowers below him (dew continues the implication that the poem is describing a scene in the

early morning, which is considered to be the loveliest and most refreshing time of day). Layli's cheeks are imagined as red, either as an indication of her beauty or of her flushed, bewildered distress, or both, so Majnun's tears, which are the same color as her cheeks, are red. The conceit is that the tears are bloody, indicating that Majnun has wept so long and so hard that his eyes are injured and he weeps blood; with the same implication of relentless injurious weeping, tears are almost always referred to as red in pre-modern Persian verse (an exception is when they are compared to pearls). So the roses are red because Majnun has wept his red tears onto them. The metaphor is continued in the next stanza, in which tulips are compared to wine glasses (short wild tulips, whose shape is easy to imagine as like that of a wine glass, are meant), and in which the dew/bloody tears present in these wine glasses is implicitly being compared to red wine. The association of red flowers (almost always roses or tulips), bloody tears, and wine is common in Persian verse, with any one of the three being able to stand in metaphorically for either of the other two.

Having implied the presence of wine, Rabe'eh now runs with the idea and brings literal wine into the poem, admonishing the reader (in Rabe'eh's time more likely a listener, as lyric poetry was meant to be performed rather than silently read) to drink deeply, and to ignore those who would censor such behavior. The obvious candidates for people who would find fault in this way are strictly orthodox Moslems, as the drinking of wine is forbidden by Islam. This trope, of the wine drinker criticized by the strictly orthodox (often characterized as being hypocrites), with the poet explicitly siding with the drinker against the orthodox, became extremely common in Persian lyric verse. Again we see behavior that is

at odds with strict Islamic norms being celebrated, and again we find later generations taking the trope as an elaborate metaphor for Sufi (mystical) experience (wine is the mystical knowledge or practice which brings about the “drunkenness” of mystical experience). This is true of later Persian poetry, and from the late fifteenth century onwards, mention of wine in a poem *is*, as often as not, allegorical. However, this “Sufification” of the vocabulary of secular Persian poetry had not even begun in Rabe’eh’s time and there can be no doubt that she is talking about literal wine here.

As the poem is written to welcome the coming of spring, it would be associated in the minds of its first readers/auditors with Nowruz, the pre-Islamic festival held at the spring equinox which heralds the Persian New Year. This festival is still celebrated in Iran and is perhaps the only festival in which all Iranians, whatever faith they profess, participate. Wine was drunk in the pre-Islamic celebrations of Nowruz, and because of this and similar ceremonies, wine retained its association with pre-Islamic Iran, and the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, Zoroastrianism. The mention of wine drunk in spring therefore introduces another non-Islamic religion into the poem, not explicitly but by an implication any educated Iranian reader would recognize. Also, by implication, the line that dismisses those who criticize the drinking of wine, who are most likely to be orthodox Moslems, suggests a tension between the religion that condemns wine (Islam) and the religion that celebrates it (Zoroastrianism). The opposition does not merely consist of refraining from wine or drinking it, but by extension of celebrating worldly pleasures or of condemning them; many Persian poems implicitly associate worldly pleasures such as wine drinking with Zoroastrianism and pre-Islamic Iran, and the conjunction of the two is

contrasted with Islam, which is often characterized, in poetry at least, as condemning such pleasures. This tacit association of pre-Islamic Iran with Zoroastrianism and pleasurable celebration leads us to the poem's next lines, which include a mention of "Kasra."

Kasra is a corruption of "Khosrow" and refers to the pre-Islamic king Khosrow I, also known as Anushirvan ("Of Immortal Soul"), who ruled Iran from 531 to 579 CE, and was one of the most successful of the pre-Islamic kings, to the extent that his reign was remembered as a golden age of justice and prosperity. Rabe'eh has made specific the suggestion of pre-Islamic Iran, implied by the lines on wine, by alluding to what was in folk memory the country's most splendid imperial moment. That it is the imperial aspect of his reign that is emphasized is indicated by the reference to the gold and silver of his crown, to which the color of the garden's narcissi is compared. Two related tropes common to Persian verse are present here: one is the lost glory of Iran's imperial past; and the other is that all glory is fleeting, that dynasties die and the sites of their splendor return to nature.

The last two lines bring the poem back to the present, but not to the immediate circumstances of Rabe'eh's daily life, which will of course have been Moslem; by referring to Christian nuns the poem ends by evoking another non-Islamic religion. She is referring to something that is known to her but absent from her own life's immediate Moslem circumstances, something which she would not have experienced directly, just as she would not have known the Zoroastrian glories of Kasra's reign; the poem ends by reaching out to two "exotic" realities, one from the past and one from another religious community, that are nevertheless imaginatively present for the poet. And we can say that, if the poem is by

Rabe'eh, it also ends with what looks like an approving, or at least certainly not disapproving and perhaps affectionate, smile for her non-Moslem sisters. If the poem is by Rabe'eh, that is, because the last thing it shares with many other short Persian poems is that it has been mistakenly attributed to at least two other poets of the early medieval period, Rudaki and Suzani-ye Samarqandi. Different manuscripts attribute a large number of short Persian poems to different authors and the authorship of many poems, particularly from the earliest periods, remains doubtful; in this case, though, the scholarly consensus is that the poem is by Rabe'eh.

And so, packed into one short poem, we have: spring, a garden, the breeze at dawn, the most valued medieval perfume (musk), an evocation of a distant land (Tibet), wonder at an ideally beautiful situation, a reference to a tragic Arab love story, blood-red tears, non-judgmental references to two non-Islamic faiths (Manicheism and Christianity) and the evocation of a third (Zoroastrianism), a reference to a glorious pre-Islamic Persian king, the admonition to drink wine, and a kind of flippant contempt for those who would frown on this. The poem is superficially a simple celebration of the coming of spring, and this is a perfectly legitimate way to read it, but it is implicitly and deliberately entangled in a complicated mesh of cultural references that would be obvious to its original audience and to later readers from the same culture but which can be elusive for a reader from another cultural tradition. All of these poetic strategies, tropes, and metaphors constantly recur in Persian poetry as it was written for a thousand years subsequent to Rabe'eh's poem.

The Medieval Period

Persian poetry begins in the tenth century and, as we have seen, Rabe'eh was one of its earliest practitioners. Iran had been conquered by an Arab invasion that brought the then new religion of Islam to the country in the seventh century, and the culture of Iran, including its language, was radically transformed by this conquest. Here an analogy with a somewhat similar Western cultural transformation may perhaps be useful. England was conquered in the eleventh century by the Norman French, and French culture, and the French language, dominated the court and virtually every level of society above the peasantry for the next three centuries. In the fourteenth century, Chaucer is one of the first, and certainly the greatest among his contemporaries, of the poets to write in the new form of English, which was an amalgam of Anglo-Saxon and French. Like Rabe'eh's verse, his too seems to us simple and direct, and in the nineteenth century Chaucer's verse was sometimes referred to as being written in the "springtime" of British poetry, with all the connotations of newness, freshness, and innocence the word implies. But Chaucer's verse, like Rabe'eh's, is immensely sophisticated beneath its beguilingly charming surface, and it is written very consciously in the shadow of the French culture and language which had been brought by Britain's conquerors three centuries before; indeed, Chaucer began his career as a poet with a partial translation of the most popular French long poem of the age, *Le Roman de la Rose*. Both Chaucer and Rabe'eh wrote at a time when a new indigenous literary culture was emerging from the shadow of a linguistic and cultural conquest that had occurred three centuries before their own time. Both are learned poets who paradoxically seem in many ways much more innocent

and untutored than their successors, but this “innocence” is built on an urbane awareness of a complex literary culture to which their own poetry is consciously indebted but from which it is providing as it were a literary way out, with the founding of a new indigenous poetry.

Like Chaucer’s, Rabe’eh’s is a simplicity that hides a great deal of learning and sophistication. For example, she is, as far as we know, the first Persian poet to write macaronic verse – that is, verse that is written in two languages, usually in alternating lines; in Rabe’eh’s case the alternating lines are in Arabic and Persian. This implies fluency in Arabic, and what we know of her biography seems relevant here. Her family name indicates an Arab origin at a time when the court language of most Persian princedoms (her father was just such a local prince, in Balkh) was in the process of changing from Arabic to Persian, which means that she was almost certainly bilingual. Her father’s name was K’ab and her own name as it appears in early sources is Rabe’eh bint K’ab; her brother’s name was Hareth. All three names are Arabic, and indeed the family claimed descent from Arab immigrants who had established a petty kingdom centered on Balkh in what is now northern Afghanistan.

Rabe’eh appears at the beginning of the revival of Persian poetry after the “two centuries of silence” (the phrase was coined by the twentieth century Iranian scholar Abdolhossein Zarrinkub) that ensued after the Arab/Islamic conquest of the seventh century. Referring to English literature in particular but implying literature in general, the eighteenth-century literary historian Thomas Warton pointed out that after a “dark ages” in which learning and literacy are largely lost, at least in their native linguistic form, “writers are chiefly employed in imparting the ideas of other languages into

their own.”^{*} In the case of Rabe’eh’s generation, the “other language” in question was obviously Arabic; the great Italian Persianist Alessandro Bausani wrote of this earliest period in the revival of Persian poetry, “We are in the presence of ... a linguistic Iranization of Arabic conceptual traditions and lyric conventions.”[†] The language still used to describe Persian poetry confirms its early debt to Arabic: virtually every word descriptive of poetic rhetoric in Persian (meter, rhyme, metaphor, pun, etc.) is Arabic.

Let us consider Rabe’eh’s position: she grows up at a provincial court where we can presume she had access to whatever literary learning was available in her time and place, as is attested by her surviving poems; she is bilingual in Arabic and Persian as her macaronic poems indicate; she lives at a moment when Persian poetry is effecting a rebirth by, as Bausani says, “a linguistic Iranization of Arabic conceptual traditions and lyric conventions”; and given the fact that she uses them, her familiarity with the rules and tropes of Arabic versification can be taken for granted. These circumstances render her almost uniquely able to effect the transfer of Arabic poetic conventions to Persian verse. This suggests that Rabe’eh was not merely a woman who happened to write verse at the moment when Persian poetry was being reborn, but that her role in this revival was crucial and perhaps decisive. Her circumstances and achievement indicate that she was someone whose example made possible the revival of Persian poetry, at least in terms of its major non-Persian

* Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century* (London: 1781), p. 226.

† A. Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana* (Milan: 1960), p. 310.

model. This is not at all to imply that she was the only person who did this, but she was certainly in a privileged, influential position and well qualified to contribute to this process. We can see her as an instigator, someone who pointed the way in which Persian verse was to develop, rather than as just one of the small number of Persian poets who happened to be writing at this time, and one who happened to be a woman.

Rabe'eh was a court poet, as were virtually all medieval Persian poets (the exceptions were poets whose main subject was Sufism, although Sufis were sometimes court poets too). But there is a crucial difference between her and almost all of her male counterparts. The men were professional poets, dependent on the largesse of the prince or of the courtiers at the court at which they worked. Rabe'eh was a princess, not a court employee, and as such it's unlikely that she was paid for her poetry, or if she did receive some kind of emolument or reward for her poems, this wasn't something she depended on for her livelihood. So she was, in the literal sense, an amateur poet – that is, someone who wrote poetry because she wished to do so, not as a paid profession. Many of the women poets who followed in Rabe'eh's footsteps, princesses or aristocrats like her, were also “amateur” poets in this sense, members rather than employees of a ruling family. When we do find women poets later on who were employed by noble families, they were virtually never employed as poets; they were usually entertainers of some kind, sometimes courtesans, employed not for their poetry but for other skills and for their personal charms.

Yet it has to be said that although we find women poets writing in Persian in almost every generation from Rabe'eh on, their number is comparatively small when compared with that of their male contemporaries. It is, however, on a par with

the relatively small number of women poets to be found in most cultures during the pre-modern period (perhaps the major exceptions are the cultures of medieval China and Japan, both of which produced a goodly number of women poets), and at certain times for particular cultures – such as English literary culture during the Middle Ages – it considerably exceeds that number.

Pre-modern Persian poetry can be broadly divided into three different kinds: long narrative poems, short lyric poems, and epigrams. There are no surviving long narrative poems by women from the pre-modern period; so far as women poets are concerned, we are dealing with lyric poetry and epigrams. Persian lyric poetry developed a very specific set of conventions, some of which presupposed both a male author and a male addressee, and these conventions were also tacitly present in the epigrammatic forms. The ambiguity of Persian personal pronouns – “he” and “she” are the same word in Persian – means that it is almost never wholly clear which gender is being addressed or talked about in a love poem (ghazal), and it seems likely that many lyric poems by men were addressed to women, but the fallback assumption was that such poems were written by a mature male to an adolescent male; that is, as far as poetic convention indicated, women were wholly excluded from the world of lyric poetry. Again, a Western parallel may help to illustrate what is going on when a woman writes within this traditionally male form.

Early medieval Persian poetry is in many ways similar to the early medieval poetry of southern Europe during the same approximate period – that is, the poetry of the troubadours (this is not the place to go into whether the resemblance was more than a coincidence, given the palpable

Arabic proximity to, and apparent influence on, both literatures). The approximate lyric equivalent to the ghazal in troubadour poetry was the canso; female troubadours were called *trobairitz*, and they were, like their female counterparts who wrote in Persian, almost always members of the nobility/aristocracy. The canso was “normally” written by a man to or about a woman, so the particular gender complication (that both poet and addressee were assumed to be male) of the Persian ghazal is absent, but in other respects a female poet writing a canso was in a similar situation to a female Persian poet writing a ghazal. As Linda Paterson has written of the *trobairitz*:

Conventions are particularly problematic for women composing cansos or love lyrics. The canso form cannot be straightforwardly adapted to a female voice. By placing the woman in a position of dominance, the troubadour canso reverses the gender hierarchy obtaining in real life: the speaking male subject chooses to renounce in fiction the superiority of status he enjoys in fact, as far as gender if not class is concerned. If a woman adopts a submissive position in poetry she conforms to rather than reverses her real situation ...*

All this is true of women’s love poetry in Persian; the added complication that Persian lyric poetry by men is usually assumed to be addressed to a male adolescent does not change the reversal of power dynamics involved, since in a ghazal these male adolescents are conceived of as playing

*Linda M. Paterson, *The World of the Troubadours: Medieval Occitan Society, c.1100–c.1300* (Cambridge: 1993), p. 262.

the conventionally female role in a relationship – that is, they are the recipients of admiration, affection, and sexual advances, rather than their initiator. The result is that, when a woman writes a ghazal, she is assuming what is traditionally a man’s role; however, as that fictive man she renounces the culturally expected role of male dominance and assumes the woman’s role of supplication and inferiority; she is a woman pretending to be a man who pretends to adopt what was traditionally the female role of subservience (we find a somewhat parallel situation in Shakespearean comedy, when boy actors pretended to be women who pretended to be boys). Linda Paterson also writes that “some scholars have identified elements of a female rhetoric in *trobairitz* poetry relating to particularly intense feelings of frustration and deprivation, and a particular concern with real relationships with members of the other sex.”*

This too seems to be true of certain Persian women poets; even though it is foolhardy to try to extract biographical detail from what are largely conventional poems, love poems by Persian women can often seem more rooted in real circumstances than do the ghazals of many male poets. The vividness and intensity of feeling in some of the love poems of Jahan Malek Khatun (c.1324–c.1382), for example, can at times seem to indicate something deeper and stronger than the largely conventional emotional gestures to be expected in many ghazals by male poets. The fact that most of the Persian women poets were “amateur” poets (unlike male professional poets, they had no reason to write poems other than their own individual inclination to do so) also suggests that much

*Ibid.

more personal feeling may be expressed in their lyric poetry than seems to be the case in the poetry of many professional (male) poets.

Before we leave the question of gender, and its ambiguity in love poems by women, it is as well to remember the convention behind the “normative” male ghazal, which is that the poem is, all other things being equal, likely to be about a same-sex relationship, imaginary or real. By the same token, there is nothing to prevent a woman’s ghazals from also being about a same-sex relationship, and given the relatively restricted social life of most Persian-speaking women in the pre-modern period, it seems more than possible that some if not many of the love poems collected in this anthology were written not only *by* women but also *to* women (as Sunil Sharma has pointed out,^{*} one obvious candidate is the little poem addressed to “Arezu” – an exclusively female name – by the fifteenth-century poet Zaifi Samarqandi, on p. 103).[†]

*Sunil Sharma, “From A’esha to Nur Jahan: The Shaping of a Classical Persian Poetic Canon of Women,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 2 (2002), p. 157.

†Gender is conceived of as extremely fluid in pre-modern Persian poetry, with the same epithets being used to describe both beautiful girls and beautiful boys; the physical ideal implied by descriptions of the beloved in a ghazal is androgynous – a very boyish girl or a very girlish boy. A striking example of this is that in one poem (ghazal 321, in Khanlari’s edition, Tehran: 1359/1980, vol. 1, p. 658) Hafez begins by describing the subject of the poem as being “an angel-like houri,” and houris are of course conceived of as female; later in the same poem he remarks on the “black line” of the beloved’s incipient mustache, who is now clearly being depicted as an adolescent boy.

The most prolific women poets writing in Persian during the period before 1500, or at least those from whom most poems have survived, are Mahsati (c.1089–1159), Jahan Khatun (c.1324–c.1382), and Mehri (fourteenth/fifteenth century). It is significant that all three of these women were associated with courts whose rulers were descended from central Asian conquerors who had either adopted Islam relatively recently, or only adopted it once they had settled in Iran. Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, Iran was overrun first by the Seljuk Turks, then the Mongols under Genghis Khan, and then the Timurids under Timur the Lame (Tamburlaine). All of these peoples were originally nomadic tribes who descended on Iran from the steppes of central Asia, and for the first generations of their rule in Iran they retained much of their central Asian nomadic culture. Gender roles in nomadic cultures tend to be much less strongly demarcated than in sedentary cultures, and women's participation in many aspects of public life is taken for granted in ways that would seem scandalous in traditional sedentary cultures; when the rulers were of nomadic descent, this was true even in Islamic courts, at which we might have expected the women to be secluded from public life as was then the case in much of the rest of the Islamic world. Nomadic peoples did not balk at being ruled by women, and in the Seljuk era (1037–1157) a number of women actively participated in politics, while Mongol women were involved in virtually all aspects of public life, including religious, economic, and military activities. In particular, the Mongols were used to women wielding political power, and at various times in the thirteenth century the Iranian provinces of Kerman and Fars were both ruled by Mongol princesses. Even when female rule was not so unambiguous, the

Mongols often married their daughters to members of the local nobility, and in these mixed marriages the Mongol wife tended to have at least as much authority as her native-born husband, if not more. Although it had begun to diminish somewhat, this tradition of relative gender equality, at least at the upper levels of society, continued under the Timurids (mid fourteenth to late fifteenth century).

Given the openness of these dynasties to women's participation in court life, it is unsurprising that Mahsati was said to have sought and gained employment as a scribe at the court of the Seljuk king Sanjar (r. 1118–57), that Jahan Khatun, an Inju princess descended from a mixed Mongol-Persian marriage, became well known as a poet in her own lifetime, or that the poet Mehri was an intimate of the Timurid empress Gowhar Shad (who was seen as a virtual co-ruler while her husband was alive and became the empire's sole ruler after his death in 1447). That the women of the Inju court routinely went unveiled was a mark of their relative social freedom, as was noted by the fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battuta, who also recounts a revealing anecdote concerning a member of Jahan Khatun's family. During a palace coup one of Jahan's female relatives (the mother of Jahan Khatun's uncle, Abu Es'haq) had been seized by her enemies and was being taken through the bazaar; she tore off the veil in which she had been shrouded by her captors, and appealed for help from the local populace, who immediately recognized her, rallied to her defense, and killed the men who were attempting to abduct her. The fact that she was identified so quickly and so easily indicates that not only did this woman appear at court unveiled, but that she also appeared unveiled in such mundane and potentially disreputable surroundings as the public bazaar. The relative freedom and more or less gender

equality of at least aristocratic women in Mongol society was paralleled by the Mongols' religious tolerance, at least during the first century or so of their conquests; historically they were shamanists, but by the time they embarked on their conquest of Asia many were either Christians (especially women for some reason), Moslems, or Buddhists. The Mongol Great Khans enjoyed having the scholars of different religions debate with one another about the true faith,^{*} and the thirteenth-century historian Matthew Paris recorded that when a Mongol ambassador reached the court of England's King Edward I in 1287 what most surprised and shocked him was that only one religion was allowed there, even though he himself was a Christian and it was his religion that was the favored one.[†]

*The Great Khan Möngke (r. 1251–9), a grandson of Genghis Khan, is said to have remarked to a French envoy: "It is proper to keep the commandments of God. But the Jews say they have received these commandments from Moses, the Arabs say they have them from Mohammad, and the Christians from Jesus. And there are perhaps other nations that honor their prophets, through whose hands they assert they have received the divine precepts. Therefore how shall we arrive at concord?" Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), quoted in Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: 2004), p. 239. Writing in the early fourteenth century, Marco Polo puts a virtually identical sentence into the mouth of the thirteenth century Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, Marco Polo, *Travels* (London 1908, reprinted 1954), p.159.

† Weatherford, *Ibid.*, p. 219.

From 1500 to the 1800s

Iranian society underwent a radical transformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when at the age of fourteen the Safavid ruler Shah Esmail I (r. 1501–24) established his court in Azerbaijan (northwest Iran), declared himself Iran's king, and set about conquering the country to ensure its loyalty. From the Arab conquest onwards, Iran had been a very varied nation, with different kings and dynasties ruling in different places, often simultaneously, and with various religious affiliations (predominantly Sunni Moslem but also Shia, with pockets of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism scattered about the country, and with a number of Sufi orders that had flourished especially vigorously during the period of Mongol rule). Esmail was a Twelver Shia and he declared Iran to be a Shia country; not only did he insist on political suzerainty, uniting the whole country into one political entity under his own rule, but also on religious conformity. Almost overnight, from having been something of a religious hodge-podge with a rather *laissez-faire* attitude toward private belief, Iran became, nominally and in public at least, a Shia country. Although Sunnism survived in many places, it was relegated to a state of relative political powerlessness and Sunnis were frequently persecuted. The Safavid family, to which Esmail belonged, were members of a Sufi order, and one might have expected Esmail to have had a tolerant attitude toward other Sufi orders than his own, but in reality he saw them as possibly subversive rivals and did his best to eradicate them.

The cultural variety of pre-Safavid Iran, with its concomitant regional differences of government, tradition, and belief, was replaced by a would-be monolithic state that insisted on

religious uniformity in so far as this was achievable. Esmail fancied himself as a poet, and in his poetry he claimed semi-divine status, implying that his rule was divinely sanctioned, so that political rebellion became equivalent to religious blasphemy. Esmail's successor, Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76), advised his court poets to occupy themselves with writing poems in praise of the most revered figures of Shia Islam, and the exuberance and diversity of secular Persian poetry found little encouragement at the Safavid court; as courtiers tend to imitate their prince, the patronage of secular poetry by the rich and powerful declined precipitously.

The relative freedom that at least aristocratic women had enjoyed at a number of the courts of pre-Safavid Iran also disappeared. At the court and in the cities the only unveiled women were entertainers, musicians, and courtesans; respectable women lived in seclusion from the world of men. A further curtailing of women's agency is shown by the way in which, with their retreat from the public sphere, fewer women were now taught to read and write, and in seriously religious families illiteracy became the expected norm, even for well-born women. Some Shia clerics were still fulminating against the pernicious evils attendant on women's literacy well into the early twentieth century.

It seems almost inevitable then that there is little evidence of women poets writing in Persian in the heartland of Iran during the Safavid period (1501–1736); with a few exceptions it is only toward the end of the eighteenth century that we begin once again to come across poems by Iranian women poets in any substantial number. And when we read the few poems that were written by women in Iran during this period, we encounter none of the witty high spirits, bawdiness, and flirtatious frivolity that we find in poems

by, for example, Mahsati or Mehri or many of their female contemporaries. Instead the predominant tone is proper, serious, unexceptionable.

But while the Safavids were setting up a dynasty in Iran, the Moghuls were establishing theirs in northern India. The Moghul court was rich, Sunni, and, under most of its emperors, relatively tolerant of religious differences. Above all, in the eyes of Iranian poets, it was Persian-speaking,^{*} and during the Safavid period many Iranian poets who had found such slim pickings at home flocked[†] to India to try their fortunes there. As one such émigré poet (Ashraf Mazandarani) put it:

In Iran there's no market for knowledge
Even though there's a lot of it for sale;
In India fame comes to those with skill –
In the night the brightness of a lamp is visible.

* “Nor let it seem strange that in India, in the countries of the Moghol, the Persian tongue is us'd more perhaps than the Indian itself, since the Mogholian Princes being originally Tartars, and of Samarkand, where the Persian is the natural tongue of the country, have therefore been willing to retain their natural speech in India; in brief, the Persian is the language of the Moghol's court, most spoken and us'd in all publick writings.” Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), quoted in Sunil Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court* (Cambridge, MA: 2017), p. 3.

† “Flocked” is not an exaggeration: an anthology confined to poets who were born in Iran but worked in the Indian Moghul empire between 1500 and 1796 – Ahmad Gulchin Ma'ani, *Karavan-e Hend* (Mashhad: 1990) – lists over 1,500 poets, and quotes verses by most of them.

Persian culture had been present in much of northern India before the appearance of the Moghuls; the first Moslem incursions occurred in the early eleventh century, and continued Moslem expansion culminated in the establishment, in 1206, of the Delhi sultanate, which ruled over much of northern India until 1526. The conquerors in this period were mainly of Turkic origin, but among Moslems during the medieval period Persian culture was seen in western and southern Asia as a civilizational ideal (much as French culture was seen in Europe in the eighteenth century), so that Persian mores and the Persian language permeated Moslem rule in India from its inception. It was during this period, for example, that Urdu, a Persianized form of Hindi, emerged as the lingua franca of the area. The establishment of the highly Persianized culture of the Moghul empire, by the first Moghul emperor, Babur, in 1526, was therefore building on what had become by this time a centuries-old philo-Persian foundation. When Babur's son Humayun lost power for a while, it was natural that he should turn to Iran for help, and the Safavid court welcomed him until he was able, with Safavid assistance, to regain his throne in 1555. But despite this cultural proximity, the two empires were beginning to diverge in their general ethos; as Safavid Iran became politically and religiously more monolithic and isolationist (as a Shia country in a predominantly Sunni part of the world), Moghul India was entering into a particularly complex relationship with its host country. The emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), for example, extended the empire by conquest but also abolished the tax on non-Moslems that was customary in Moslem-ruled countries, and under the influence of Sufi teachers first espoused a form of Islam that attempted to transcend sectarian differences within the faith

(his mother was a Persian princess, and both Shia and Sunni were welcome at his court), and then elaborated his own even more inclusive religion (the *din-e elahi* or divine faith) with the intention of reconciling Hindu and Moslem beliefs. His descendant Prince Dara Shukoh (1615–59) went even further, translating the *Upanishads* into Persian (or so it is claimed, although it seems likely that he commissioned the translation rather than doing it himself, as this would have been an enormous undertaking to manage single-handedly, in terms both of the scholarly knowledge and the time required),* again with the intention of finding common ground between the faiths.

This relatively open and latitudinarian attitude extended to the position of women at the Moghul court. It was only with the accession of Akbar that the institution of the harem was introduced, and it's clear that royal princesses and consorts of the emperor usually enjoyed a kind of freedom that was in many ways similar to that which had been enjoyed in Iran by women of the court under Mongol rule. If the women of the Moghul court were in theory secluded, this usually did not prevent them from appearing at court functions and festivities, and some of them – for example, Golbadan Beigum, Nur Jahan, and Zib al-Nissa – becoming a byword in the general culture in a way that would by this time have been thought shameful in Iran (the names and characters of a number of imperial consorts and princesses at the Moghul court have become part of the general lore

*It is this translation that was translated into Latin by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in the late eighteenth century, the version that was used by both Hegel and Schopenhauer, and so became known throughout nineteenth-century Europe.

of the Moghul empire; by contrast, although they were often important in squabbles over the royal succession, few female members of the Safavid court have left much trace behind them or are known to any but specialists in Safavid history).*

It is also obvious that many women of the Moghul court were literate, and not merely in the technical sense that they could read and write in a basic fashion, but as accomplished and respected authors. For example, Golbadan, one of Babur's daughters, wrote a biography of her brother Homyayun (the *Homyayun-nameh*), while her sister Golchehreh's talent was for witty poetry. The best-known such poet was Nur Jahan (1577–1645), the favorite wife of the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–27); she was a widow aged thirty-four when Jahangir fell in love with her (and this was certainly a love-match since there would have been no other reason for an emperor to marry someone middle-aged, as she would have been considered at this time, and a widow to boot). She had been born in Qandahar, in Afghanistan, to Persian parents who were on their way east as members of the steady stream of Iranians emigrating to India at this time. Her poetry has a distinctive individuality, one that is quite independent, even acerbic at times, but also self-possessed and gently playful. Virtually all pre-modern Persian poetry was written under a pseudonym, and Nur Jahan was said to have used the name

*One important exception is the daughter of Shah Tahmasp, Pari Khan Khanom (1548–78), who was known as a poet, although only one poem attributed to her with any certainty has come down to us (see p. 109). She was ambitious and powerful, and for a short time after her father's death was de facto ruler of Iran; at the age of twenty-nine she was murdered at the instigation of a political rival.

“Makhfi” (“Hidden”) as her poetic name. This became a name used by a number of women at the Moghul court, the best known of whom was Zib al-Nissa (1638–1701), the daughter of the emperor Aurangzib (r. 1658–1707), who had her locked up for many years as he disapproved of the man she had become engaged to marry (they never did marry). Her poetry, like Nur Jahan’s, has a distinctive character – in Zib al-Nissa’s case, both witty and wistful, feisty but with an undertow of sorrow. The often personal nature of Moghul women’s poetry seems analogous to the portrait tradition that grew up in Moghul painting. Persian miniature depictions of people at this time represented idealized types (the lover, the warrior, the Sufi, and so on) with no attempt at realistic representation or portrayal; Moghul painting, which derived its technique from Persian miniature painting, quite quickly diverged from its model and became personalized, so that any given picture seemed to be of something (or someone) specific, rather than of the kind of Platonic ideal of a subject that Persian painting still aimed for.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century we find two important women poets writing in Persian outside of India, at the outer limits, as it were, of Iran. One was Afghan, and the other Kurdish. Associated with the court of the Afghan king Timur Shah Durrani (r. 1772–93), Aysheh Afghani wrote in a number of genres, including quasi-mystical verse and fairly conventional love poems. Perhaps her most distinctive poem is one that reads as a heartfelt elegy on the death of her son, killed fighting in one of Timur Shah Durrani’s wars. The Kurdish poet Mastureh Kurdi lived from 1805 to 1848. She too was mistress of a number of poetic genres, including poems in praise of wine (a traditional

form going back to the origins of Persian poetry), poems of unrequited love-longing, and poems of religious regret, but her most distinctive poems are addressed to her husband, either regretting his absence or celebrating his presence, declaring her love to him or describing moments in their shared life. She is one of the very few pre-modern Persian women poets who not only wrote about marriage but did so positively, in a way that leaves the reader with the impression of eavesdropping on a real relationship, one that seems to have been in general mutually congenial but that also involved the ups and downs and difficulties attendant on any marriage.

In the same period, the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, we also find again, at last, a major woman poet from the Iranian heartland, the poet Reshheh, who was the daughter of the most famous Persian male poet of the period, Hatef Esfahani (d. c.1783). Reshheh's poems are polished and elegant, though it must be admitted that they lack the personal distinctiveness of both Aysheh Afghani's and Mastureh Kurdi's poetry; it is as if Aysheh's and Mastureh's relatively peripheral affiliation with the heartland of Persian culture is what enabled each of them to retain an individual voice within the general confines of Persian poetry's conventions, which they both observe and at times slightly stand aside from.

By the time we get to the beginning of the nineteenth century, Safavid rule is a thing of the increasingly distant past. In 1722 the Safavid capital Esfahan had been taken by an invading Afghan army, and the Safavid dynasty to all intents and purposes came to an end. The disintegration of the country (it was invaded more or less simultaneously by the Afghans, the Russians, and the Ottoman Turks) was

halted by the warlord Nader Shah, who not only won back lost Iranian territory but invaded northern India and sacked Delhi. He was assassinated in 1747; for a while southern Iran was ruled wisely and well – at least by the chaotic standards of the time – by Karim Khan Zand and returned to relative prosperity, but on his death in 1779 civil war broke out to be finally ended with the armies of the Qajar family declaring victory in 1794 (when the last ruler of the Zand family was deposed), establishing their court in Tehran, and beginning the dynasty that lasted until the 1920s. The second Qajar monarch, Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834), had a very large number of children (generally calculated as fifty-seven sons and forty-six daughters), and one of the notable features of women’s cultural presence in the early nineteenth century is the numerous daughters and other female relatives of Fath Ali who wrote poetry. Many of the women in early nineteenth-century Iran who wrote poetry (of what tends to be a rather tentative one-toe-in-the-water kind) that has survived were connected with the Qajar tribe and/or court. But there are two important exceptions to this rather tepid state of affairs: one is the aforementioned Mastureh Kurdi; and the other is Tahereh, also known as Qorrat al-Ayn (1814–52).

From the 1800s to the Present

The nineteenth century in Iran began with an autocracy that was in many respects indistinguishable from the autocracies of most of the previous centuries, and the fundamental social status of women remained as restricted as it had ever been; indeed, women from rich and powerful families were arguably more restricted than had been the case in some parts of Iran during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The

century ended with widespread demands for representative government, and with a gradually increasing participation of women in literary and political movements that went hand in hand with growing demands for women's emancipation and social parity with men. The social and political ferment of the century, which grew ever more urgent and widespread, had a striking effect on the kind of poetry women began to write, and was itself fed by the developing consciousness of women's status as this was reflected in their poetry. Obviously women had always known that they were considered to be, and therefore treated as, subservient to their menfolk; the difference was that they now began to feel that it might, at last, be possible to do something about this.

The woman whose life perhaps best represents the beginning of the radically innovative direction in which women's consciousness began to move in the nineteenth century is the poet Tahereh (or Qorrat al-Ayn). Educated by her father, Tahereh from a young age showed an interest in both theology and poetry, and she set off quite literally in search of spiritual enlightenment. Although she never met him in person, she became a follower of Mirza Ali Mohammad of Shiraz, known as the Bab ("the Gate"), who was in the process of founding a new faith derived from Twelver Shi'ism but including aspects considered heretical by the Shia themselves, one of which was the belief that another Prophet would appear in succession to Mohammad (who is known to all Moslems of whatever sect as the "seal" – or the last – of the Prophets). Tahereh became one of the Bab's chief acolytes and proselytizers and took a prominent part in the Babi Conference of Badasht in 1848, the meeting at which Babism is considered to have irreparably broken away from Islam. Her appearance at the conference caused a scandal as

she gave her address to the assembled delegates unveiled. As we have seen, aristocratic women had appeared unveiled in Iran at various times during the Middle Ages, and women of the nomadic tribes that still inhabited large areas of Iran often went unveiled; nevertheless, for an educated woman, and one who claimed proximity to someone considered by the conference's audience to be a revered religious figure, to appear in this state at this time was regarded as both unprecedented and disgraceful, even though the Bab himself later defended her decision. After the formal schism with Islam, the Bab and his followers were persecuted wherever they could be found, and the movement went underground. The Bab himself was captured and executed in 1850. In 1852 an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the monarch, Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96), was blamed on the Babis, and many were killed in retribution, including Tahereh, who was strangled, perhaps on direct orders from the shah himself.

The chief events of Tahereh's life – her personal quest for a spiritual leader, her joining and outspokenly supporting a generally despised and reviled religious movement, and not least the symbolic act of her deliberate unveiling in public – all indicate a fiercely independent and strong-minded woman. In terms of her contribution to women's emerging consciousness of their potential roles in public life, the importance of her unveiling should not be underestimated; it said in effect that, in the same way that for her the Bab's teachings represented an emancipation from the old religious order, so her unveiled appearance in public represented an emancipation from the status of women as being hidden and subservient.

But as a poet she looked back as much as she looked forward. For all the daring of her intellectual and public life, she is an almost wholly traditional poet, writing within the tropes and conventions of medieval and subsequent poetry, in which the speaker is supplicatory (and/or celebratory) vis-à-vis the poem's addressee or subject. She differs from most of her female predecessors in the emphatic no-holds-barred religious ardor that she brings to some of her poems, but the rhetoric of these poems, the driving rhythms and the metaphors of drunkenness and erotic obsession, derives virtually unchanged from medieval religious poetry, especially perhaps that of Rumi (1207-73). It was in the two or three generations that came after Tahereh that the substance and rhetoric of women's poetry began to change, and to reflect more clearly women's evolving consciousness of their status, a psychological and social shift of which Tahereh can be said to have been the main harbinger.

A number of social factors facilitated this change. Literacy was becoming more widespread among the daughters of the wealthy and the as yet relatively small middle class. Various newspapers began publication (almost all of them agitating for political reform, and many of them published outside of Iran, in India or Turkey, and then smuggled into the country); some of these papers welcomed contributions, including poetry, by women. Poetry was quite quickly becoming a more democratic medium, often in the form of political or social satire, with a life of its own outside of both court and Sufi circles. Educated women were beginning to form their own social and intellectual groups, some of which joined in the growing agitation for reform. In the period leading up

to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11,^{*} politically oriented poetry by women began to appear in various publications, many of them more or less clandestine. The main demand of such poems was usually that foreign governments cease their interference in the political and economic life of Iran, as the Iranian government was widely seen, with a great deal of justification, as being incapable of warding off foreign influence, particularly that of the Russians and the British, who had spent much of the nineteenth century jockeying with one another for control of the country.[†] This

*Widespread demand for political reform, including representative government, developed throughout Iran in the late nineteenth century. This finally led to Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1896–1907) signing a new constitution in 1906, but he died shortly afterwards, and his successor on the Persian throne, Mohammad Ali Shah, abrogated the new constitution and had the parliament building bombarded by a Cossack regiment in 1908. Renewed protests led to a march on Tehran by supporters of the constitution, and Mohammad Ali Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Ahmad Shah Qajar, who re-ratified the constitution in 1909. A long period of turmoil ensued, culminating in the coup of 1921, which marked the end of the Qajar dynasty (although in theory Ahmad Shah continued to rule until 1925). The soldier Reza Khan, who had risen quickly through the ranks after joining the Persian Cossack Brigade at the age of sixteen in 1894, took over the government; he declared himself king in 1925, formally taking the name Reza Shah Pahlavi, and was crowned in 1926.

†This culminated in the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907, which divided Iran into three separate areas of influence: a northern zone in which Russia could have a relatively free hand economically and politically; a southern zone in which the British were to have the same privileges; and a neutral zone between the two. Iran was not invited to send representatives

was often coupled with two other demands, for representative government, and for the emancipation of women. A number of women's poems at this time take up an admonitory and even mocking attitude toward Iranian men, implying that they are too pusillanimous to do anything about the dire political situation; the implicit question these poems pose is: What use is your vaunted machismo if women have to rouse you to defend your country? Sometimes there almost seems to be a sexual subtext in the verses, as if they are a nineteenth- or twentieth-century equivalent to the relatively frequent poems by medieval women that mocked old men's sexual deficiencies, implicitly comparing their inadequacy with the angry vitality of their dissatisfied partners.

Some of these political poems openly state that if women were socially equal to men, the country would not be in such dire straits. The demand for female emancipation is often made in comparison with the perceived social position of European women, the implication being that if Iranian women could have the same status as their European counterparts, the country would be much better off all round. How far the women voicing these ideas were familiar with the actual status of women in Europe at this time is perhaps open to doubt. Some of their "information" about Europe may well have come from European novels, particularly those written in French, which were beginning to be translated into

to the conference that arrived at this agreement, and Iranian resentment of its provisions was naturally emphatic and widespread.

Persian* (and some women from richer families were able to read French novels in the original), so there was probably an element of fantasy in the literate Iranian women's view of the status of European women in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Nevertheless, many were quite sure that, even if they hadn't got all the details exactly right, most European women had a better chance of leading a personally satisfying and relatively free life than most Iranian women, and their poems say this. And here we come upon a paradox inherent in a number of socially conscious poems by women from this period: while insisting that European countries absent themselves from Iranian economic and political affairs, and be forcibly ejected if necessary, a demand is also being made that Iranian women have a similar social status to that of European women. Europe was seen as both the rapacious foreign exploiter of the country, and as a beckoning symbol of what enlightened gender relations could be in a better world. Of course, Iranian opinion was not alone in simultaneously holding these two views of Europe as being both an exploitative adversary and, in some senses at least, a model for desired reforms.

Two of the most important Persian-language women poets of the past five hundred years dominate the first half of the twentieth century, or at least they do so in retrospect, as

*Novels by Alain-René Lesage, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, François Fénelon, and the Comtesse de Ségur, as well as some of Molière's plays, and Voltaire's *L'Histoire de Charles XII*, were all translated into Persian before the period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. Translated works by Dumas and Molière were particularly well received.

the poetry of one of them was almost completely unknown until after her death. The poets in question are Alam Taj (1883–1946), whose pen-name was “Zhaleh” (“Dew”), and Parvin Etesami (1907–41). Alam Taj, who has been called the first feminist poet to have written in Persian, came from a prominent aristocratic family, and her first poems were published when she was still a teenager at the suggestion of the then poet laureate (Malek al-Shoara Bahar), who was a family friend. But she was married off at the age of fifteen to a military man, Ali Morad Khan, who was much older than she was and who had no interest in literature or indeed in any of the arts; if Alam Taj is to be believed, he was also incapable of showing her affection or approval. He forbade her to write,^{*} and though she continued to do so, she wrote secretly and hid her poems in books and drawers and various other places around the house, where they remained until they were discovered, after her death, by her son. She outlived her husband, and it’s not wholly clear why she continued to hide her poems after his death; perhaps she had by then despaired of ever having an audience, and the habit of secrecy, developed over so many years, had become too internalized and ingrained to break.

Her poems are intensely personal and in the main intensely unhappy. One of her chief subjects is her

*This of course seems appalling to us, but before we rush to judgment, we should remember that at this time such husbandly prohibitions were also considered quite normal in the West. For example, Gustav Mahler forbidding his wife Alma to compose any more music once they were married, in 1902, happened four years after Alam Taj’s husband forbade her to write any more poetry once they were married, in 1898.

loathing – the word doesn't seem too strong – of her husband, but she extrapolates this sense of personal injury into vehement protests against the social norms and customs that had put her into her intolerable marriage in the first place; as she succinctly puts it in one poem, “Woman’s crime in our country is to be a woman.”* She inveighs against the marrying-off of young women to old men for familial reasons; she argues that women should be men’s equals socially, and that intellectually and spiritually they *are* men’s equals, if not their superiors; she protests at the subjugation of women by men, and she advises women to burn their veils. In one of her most poignant longer poems, she looks forward to a future, one in which she will not share, when the women of Iran will be equal citizens in their own country, and more than almost any other poet she sees this change as coming from the West:

A breeze blows from the land of the living
Towards this country, making my limbs revive;
The song of women’s freedom comes from the west
To the east, but my place there will be empty.

The biography of her much better-known contemporary, Parvin, was in its early stages remarkably similar to that of Alam Taj. Both were extremely close to their fathers, who encouraged their writing when they were young; both were first published when they were still adolescents at the instigation of Bahar; both made unhappy marriages with military men who were uninterested in their poetic vocation and

**Divan-e Alam Taj Qa'em-Maghani, Zhaleh*, ed. Ahmad Karami (Tehran: 1374/1995), p. 149.

who provided them with little or no emotional support. The major difference is that Parvin's poems were published in her own lifetime, and although appreciation of her poetry was grudging at first, * some was enthusiastic (and Iran's foremost literary historian Zabihollah Safa was later to call her "the most accomplished of all Iran's woman poets"), † whereas Alam Taj's poems remained unknown till after her death; another difference is that Alam Taj's father, who also seems to have been her closest friend, died shortly after her marriage, whereas Parvin's father lived for almost as long as she did. As an adult, Alam Taj was emotionally extremely isolated and she lacked even the satisfaction of knowing that others could read her poems; if Parvin's (very brief) married life was unhappy, at least she experienced the praise and respect of a number of the most important poets of her time, which must have given her some solace, and she didn't lose the love and support of her father until a few years before her death.

The subject matter Parvin constantly returns to is the sufferings of those in the lower reaches of society – ragamuffin children, the working poor and the unemployed poor, the

*Ridiculous as it may seem, a number of articles and even books were written claiming that Parvin's poems could not be by her since they had obviously been written by a man; the main "evidence" for this claim was that the poems had such a sophisticated vocabulary and were so well written that it would be absurd to think that a woman could have written them. This idiotic claptrap was still being repeated in the 1970s, over thirty years after Parvin's death in 1941. Frequently the highest praise that was bestowed on Parvin by writers who accepted that her poems were in fact by her was that she "wrote like a man."

† *Ganj-e Sokhan* (Tehran, n.d.) vol. 3, p. 291.

aged who have no one to turn to for help or support – but despite the strong sense of economic and social injustice that permeates her poetry, she has no political agenda, no revolutionary call to arms, and there is no sense in her writings that the despised and rejected should rise up against their oppressors.* Given her social conservatism, it is perhaps not surprising that her technique is strictly traditional and owes a great deal to the widespread history of moralized “advice” poetry in Persian, especially to the didactic verse of the major thirteenth-century poet Sa’di (one foreign influence was that of the seventeenth-century French poet and fabulist Jean de La Fontaine; her affinity for his poetry probably sprang from the fact that La Fontaine’s fables were in some ways similar to the moralizing anecdotes to be found in traditional Persian poetry). Farzaneh Milani has pointed out that Parvin is one of the very few Persian-language poets who wrote no love lyrics or erotic verse of any kind,† and we can occasionally see in her poems something that is also discernible in some of Alam Taj’s poetry, which is a kind of revulsion at female sexuality and female vanity, and to any sort of display that is meant to attract erotic attention. She is not as extreme in her condemnation of what she sees as women’s failings as Alam Taj can be

*For an English-speaking reader, she can seem like a poetic Dickens: that is, one who empathetically records the sufferings of the lowest members of her society (often in terms that can seem to readers untouched by such sufferings to be grossly sentimental), but who, like Dickens, has no remedy to offer other than the generosity and kindness of society’s wealthier members. Like Dickens, she is constantly, explicitly or implicitly, admonishing her readers and herself to be kind.

†Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: 1992), p. 120.

(see, for example, the section “Woman” in Alam Taj’s poem “Life’s Image” on p. 275), but she implies that if women don’t want to be considered solely in sexual terms, they should not dress or behave in ways that are likely to provoke unwanted male interest. Both of them emphasize that it is far better for women to be modest and chaste in their demeanor than to be showily attractive, or even particularly noticeable; that is, for all their innovative genius, and their demands for both education and social equality with men, they have internalized their culture’s standards of how the ideal woman should behave, and certainly how she should behave in public.

Although their childhoods were spent in literate families that valued their daughters’ poetic talents and aspirations, when they became adults Alam Taj and Parvin were each quite isolated as a poet. It’s unlikely that Parvin even knew of Alam Taj’s existence, and neither of them belonged to a group of like-minded women poets who could provide one another with mutual support, act as a sounding-board for new ideas, or offer friendly but critical advice on their latest verse. For the generation of poets who followed, and who came to define modern Persian poetry by women as a self-consciously contemporary phenomenon that broke with many of the traditions of the past, the situation was very different. As young women, Simin Behbahani (1927–2014), Lobat Vala (b. 1930), and Forugh Farrokhzad (1934–67) met regularly to discuss poetry and to share their new poems with one another. As Simin Behbahani later wrote:

We made up a group to which a number of women poets, as well as those interested in poetry, painters and other kinds of artist, were invited and every week we met together. We read our poetry to each other and we discussed poetry and

other subjects. At that time we were three poet friends and Dr. Sadraddin Elahi called us “the three musketeers”. The three of us went to every literary gathering ...*

One of the subjects the three discussed was the break with the traditional metrical system that had been initiated by Nima Yushij (1897–1960), who became known as the father of modern Persian poetry. Among Yushij’s technical innovations was the popularization of a loosely metrical quatrain in relatively short lines that rhymed *abcb*, and a number of the early poems by the “three musketeers” were written in this form, which became a kind of halfway house to the fully fledged free verse that came increasingly to dominate Persian poetry in the second half of the twentieth century.

Later in the same essay Simin Behbahani describes her two friends as they were when the three of them were young together:

Lobat was kind, naïve, sweet in her conversation, and magnanimous. She never said anything harsh. She never complained about anyone. She overlooked anything negative and was a very loyal friend ... Forugh on the other hand, because of being constantly highly-strung, and because of the difficulties in her life, was quarrelsome, reckless and full of expectations.†

* Simin Behbahani’s introduction to Lobat Vala’s poetry collection *Farda-ye Digar* (“Another Tomorrow”) (London: 2008), pp. 12–13.

† Ibid.

Forugh was to become easily the most famous of the modern women poets who wrote in Persian, and she is still perhaps the only one whose name is widely known outside of Iran.

Forugh Farrokhzad was born into a military family in 1934, and married at the age of sixteen. She had a son, and after three years of marriage she and her husband were divorced; one of the great sorrows of her life was that her husband's family received custody of the child (as was usual in Iran at this time after a divorce) and she saw him only occasionally for the rest of her life. In 1958 she met the writer and film-maker Ebrahim Golestan and began a relationship with him that lasted until 1967 when she was killed in a car crash. Forugh's eager hypersensitivity to experience, which often seems to find itself rebuffed by the world, is everywhere evident in her poetry, which can be read as a kind of psychological collodion plate responsive to every shade of light and dark that flits before it. Her "highly-strung" psychological state, as Simin Behbahani characterized it, together with her extreme sensitivity to the difficult vicissitudes of her life, had its cost in serious bouts of depression, and at least one almost-successful suicide attempt.

Taken together, the titles of the four books of poems she published in her lifetime spell out the trajectory of her life as she herself saw it: *The Captive*, *The Wall*, *Rebellion*, and *Another Birth*.^{*} The most famous, and at the time of publication scandalous, aspect of her poetry was its acknowledgment and celebration of female desire and sexual pleasure, whether or

* *The Captive* (1334/1955), *The Wall* (1335 / 1956) *Rebellion* (1337 / 1958) *Another Birth* (1343/1964). A fifth book, *Let Us Believe in the Dawn of a Cold Season*, appeared posthumously (1353 / 1974).

not – and it seems from her poems preferably not – this occurs within the confines of marriage. That she should discuss female sexuality at all in her poetry in Iran at that time was remarkable, and it is perhaps not surprising that hers is, at least in her early poems, a relatively fraught celebration of the subject. If we compare her poems that deal with sexuality with poems on the same subject by medieval women writing in Persian, we see a major difference. The insouciant bawdiness of a fourteenth-/fifteenth-century poet such as Mehri is predicated on finding sex available, normal, and funny; much of the sensuality of Forugh Farrokhzad’s poetry is predicated on notions of sin, the flouting of socially acceptable gender roles, and transgression. The subject is charged with tension, anxiety, and defiance, and there are few purely lighthearted moments. Sexual pleasure is equated with – or at least inextricably linked with – sin, even as the notion of sex as sin is denied, and it is no coincidence that what is perhaps her best-known poem about sex is called, exactly, “Sin” (see p. 367). The title can be read as ironic (the poet is saying that sexual pleasure outside of marriage is not a sin, whatever society may think) but “sin” still provides the context and ethos within which the subject is seen, and the possibility of sexual pleasure is linked to notions of transgression.

Forugh Farrokhzad has often been compared to Sylvia Plath,^{*} a comparison that is valid, both in reference to their

*For an informative, in-depth comparison between Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath, see Leila Rahimi Bahmany’s *Mirrors of Emancipation and Entrapment: Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath* (Leiden: 2015).

poetry and to the ways in which their work and more especially their lives have been mythologized since their deaths. Both poets can adopt a rather apocalyptic tone, especially when dealing with notions of patriarchy and masculinity; both write from deep within their own psyches and their own psychological preoccupations, so that their poems can sometimes seem to sweat with irresolvable anxiety or nausea. The lives of both poets, their unhappy marriages, their violent deaths, their often expressed wish somehow to transcend or escape from the circumstances in which they found themselves, have become iconic for a number of later women poets in their respective cultures, almost as though they constitute a kind of irresistible archetype of what it means to be a woman poet in the contemporary world.

The poet whom Simin Behbahani described as “kind, naïve, sweet in her conversation, and magnanimous,” Lobat Vala, is perhaps the most conservative of the three, both technically and in her choice of subjects and her expressed attitudes toward them. Much of her poetry had, and continues to have, a direct appeal that reached a much wider audience than was usual for contemporary verse, and a number of her poems were used as the lyrics of popular songs. About sexuality she is usually very modest (see, for example, her poem “Footprint” on p. 351), and Behbahani’s description of her personality is also applicable to many of her poems. She lived far longer than Farrokhzad (at the time of writing, she is still alive), long enough to experience both political and personal disillusion, and her later poems can sometimes have a bitter tang to them that is largely absent from her earlier work.

Simin Behbahani herself died in 2014 at the age of eighty-seven. Her range is very wide, and includes personal

love poems, poems of social anger and political commentary, poems of self-questioning introspection, and a number of moving vignettes of suffering (particularly the suffering of exploited and disadvantaged women). A reader of her work has a sense of someone whose whole life has been given to poetry and to the fight for social and political justice. To compare her to a non-Iranian writer, we have to reach for the names of similarly inclusive and compassionate authors who can rise to any technical challenge as if it were no challenge at all; perhaps the non-Iranian poet she most resembles, in the breadth of her sympathies, her steadfast personal and political integrity, and her mastery of formal possibilities, is Pablo Neruda.

When Simin Behbahani wrote about the “three musketeers,” she also referred to another poet friend, Zhaleh Esfahani (1921–2007), who occasionally attended their meetings. Zhaleh Esfahani, like many writers of her generation in many parts of the world, responded positively to the siren call of communism, and quite early in her life became involved in leftist literary and political circles. In 1946 she married a prominent member of the Iranian communist party (Hezb-e Tudeh), and in 1947 she left Iran for the Soviet Union. She studied in Moscow, where she wrote a PhD dissertation on Malek al-Shoara Bahar, the poet laureate who had helped both Alam Taj and Parvin Etesami publish their adolescent poems. She stayed in the Soviet Union for over thirty years, until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when she briefly returned to Iran (see her poem “Return” on p. 323). However, she soon became disillusioned with the course the Revolution was taking, and left Iran for London where she lived until her death. Her poetry is strongly marked by her political sympathies, and in retrospect much of it can seem naïvely

gullible about the promise of communism, but in this she is no different from many poets of her generation in many parts of the world, and her verse shows that she had a genuine lyric gift which never left her even in her most ideologically committed poems.

Zhaleh Esfahani, Lobat Vala, and Simin Behbahani all lived well into their eighties. All three poets were extraordinarily persistent and still occupied themselves in writing poems of hope at the end of their lives, never quite giving up the idealism of their youth. Whatever one thinks of their poetry in aesthetic terms, their sheer tenacity – to life, to their ideals, to their calling as poets – surely commands our admiration. To look at their achievements over such long lives, and often in such extremely difficult circumstances, brings to mind Edgar’s reverent valedictory words at the end of *King Lear*: “The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

For a while the Islamic Revolution of 1979 seemed as though it would be as transformative of Iranian society as the Safavid revolution of 1501 had been, and in some ways this has proved to be the case. The gradual secularization of Iranian society that had been going on since the 1920s was halted and in so far as was possible reversed, and women in particular bore the brunt of this reversal. In 1936 the ruler at the time, Reza Shah, had banned the veil and headscarf, and the edict was forcefully implemented; his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–79), did not withdraw the edict but neither did he vigorously enforce it, and whether a woman veiled herself or not became more or less a question of personal choice. With the Islamic Revolution the veil became mandatory; some aspects of male dress (for example,

the wearing of ties, which was seen as Western and therefore reprehensible) were also proscribed, and how a person dressed became a matter of political acquiescence or protest, with skirmishes between “guardians of public morality” and members of the public becoming a common occurrence. The dress codes have been relaxed at times and then tightened again, depending on which faction of the clerical government has the upper hand, and how much hair a woman was able to display uncovered by her veil became for many a daily preoccupation.

Of course the concern with how people dressed in public was only an outward symbol of a much deeper rethinking of gender roles throughout society, but there was no question of women being pushed back into a solely private and silent existence. Much of the female population of the country was now literate, and large numbers of middle-class women had gone on to undergraduate and graduate education; more women have been enrolled at Iranian universities than men for most years since the Revolution, outnumbering men by three to two in the 2012 entrance exams, and at one point the government became so concerned that women were becoming a major part of the country’s educated élite that many university courses were declared to be open to male students only. It seemed that a century of women’s activism, from the first stirrings of political consciousness expressed in the verse of such poets as Shahin Farahani, Jannat, Kasma’i, and Nimtaj, from the late nineteenth century until the present, would go for naught.

Many partially or completely secularized families emigrated, with the result that there is a large diaspora of educated Iranians in most countries of the Western world. When families as a whole did not emigrate, their educated

daughters often did. But many professional women, torn between patriotism and irritation at the structures imposed by the theocratic government, stayed in Iran; some, like the lawyer Shirin Ebadi, who was awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, have worked openly and tirelessly to promote the rights of women, while others have formed a kind of unofficial semi-underground intellectual opposition. One result of a large number of educated women feeling that their freedom was unnecessarily curtailed and their intellectual gifts largely discounted has been a veritable explosion of women's writing in both prose and verse. Many and perhaps most of the best-known Iranian novelists to have emerged in the forty years since the Revolution are women, and in the same period very large numbers of women have published books of poetry. Much of it is not even implicitly in opposition to the values of the Islamic Revolution, but some of it is, and the more outspoken poets have either fled the country after clashing with the authorities, or done so as a precautionary measure.

It is the outspoken poets of course who have become best known, if often only among their fellow exiles, but there have been important women poets who have been supportive of the Revolution; the most significant of these is Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936–2008), favored by Ayatollah Khomeini and highly praised by his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. To a Western observer she can seem a paradoxical figure: unlike many poets who have supported the Revolution, she wrote in free verse rather than in the “classical” metrical system of pre-modern Persian verse; she gained an MA in creative writing and cinematography from the University of Iowa, but her poetry rarely seems deracinated in the way that verse by other Iranian poets who studied in the West can sometimes

appear to be;* her Islamic faith was central to her sense of herself, and as well as poetry she wrote extensively on the Qor'an, but unlike many Moslem traditionalists she was also someone whose poetry insists on the central validity and importance of women's experience, and their parity with men.

Saffarzadeh's poetry is in the main direct and clearly comprehensible, and this is in sharp contrast to the poetry of some Iranian women writers who find themselves at odds with the values and practices of the Revolution, whose poetry is often cryptic, surreal, and oblique in ways that can recall the poetry of some Eastern European poets before the fall of the Soviet Union, and presumably for the same reasons. Such poems convey a sense of pervasive illogicality, dystopia, and anxiety because this is seen as the soul's almost inevitable condition in such surroundings, and also because a more unambiguous statement of discontent might well provoke censorship and state retaliation. The practice has created a distinctive and recognizable poetic dialect, one that has become widely admired and adopted in dissident and consciously avant-garde circles, some members of which see obscurity as a badge of honor and the relative clarity of much of Saffarzadeh's poetry as indicating, at best, both political and aesthetic naivety.

*She studied in Iowa while Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was shah of Iran, at a time when he was largely seen by self-consciously progressive intellectuals in Iran as a Western puppet. She later said in an interview that while she was in Iowa she felt closest to the leftist South American poets studying there, poets who in many cases, like Saffarzadeh herself, saw the United States as at least partially responsible for political repression in their home countries, and this may well have had some effect on her future political allegiances.