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Revisiting the Question of Literary Patronage under the Early Safavids

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Abstract

This article reviews an old debate in Persian literary history, surrounding the judgment of early modern poetry and, in particular, the legacy of the Safavid dynasty, and argues that a few of the questions over which scholars once disagreed have not been resolved to the extent that might be suspected. The general narrative that prevailed for most of the twentieth century, in which Persian lyric poetry of the early modern era was criticized as decadent and the Safavids were denounced for having abandoned their traditional duty to promote arts and letters, is now rightly considered obsolete. As the field has developed a more mature approach to these issues, however, the question of patronage at the Safavid court has been set aside more than it has been settled. We still have not reached a comprehensive understanding of the transformations that took place in Persian literary culture from the tenth/sixteenth century onward. The migration of scores of Iranian poets to Mughal India is recognized as a key development, but the impact of the contemporary situation in Safavid lands—including, perhaps, a relative lack of patronage—merits reconsideration.

Keywords: Persian literature, Iranian history, Safavid dynasty, court patronage

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to argue that a certain debate in the field of Persian literary studies—namely, the problem of how we should evaluate the poetry of the early modern era, and the relevance thereto (if any) of the Safavid dynasty and its patronage—may be worth revisiting, provided it can be done carefully. The general contours of this debate as it evolved through the twentieth century are well known to Persianists. In simple terms, there was a view that prevailed during the time of E. G. Browne—and of his friends and colleagues in Iran, still under the influence of the neoclassical *bāzgašt* (“return”) movement—that Persian poetry of the Safavid-Mughal period, which has often been labeled the “Indian style” (*sabk-i Hindī*), represents an unfortunate stage in the development of a proud literary tradition;² and that these changes in poetic culture were influenced by the large-scale political and economic shifts that swept across the Near East and Asia in the tenth/sixteenth century.³ In particular, the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Iran and its championing of Twelver Shi‘ism as the defining cause through which to differentiate itself—perhaps at the expense of patronage for some forms of traditional Persianate culture—was viewed by Browne and others in largely negative terms. Also at the dawn of the early modern period, there was a new and wealthy dynasty on the Indian subcontinent whose rulers were keen to attract literary, artistic, and scholarly talent from Iran. The confluence of these factors led to a dynamic whereby Mughal India

² The term *sabk-i Hindī* was applied to early modern Persian literature retrospectively, in the twentieth century, and it has become a controversial designation, since it is anachronistic and often used pejoratively. In fact, the label was first popularized by “Malik al-Šu‘arā” Muḥammad Taqī Bahār (d. 1951), in a work focusing on the development of Persian *prose*. See his *Sabk-šināsī*. Authors of the Safavid-Mughal era described the poetic style prevalent during their time in various other ways, with one of the more common terms being “fresh speech” (*tāza-gū‘ī*).

³ It should be noted that Browne was far from the most unsympathetic scholar of his day in describing the poetry itself of the Safavid-Mughal period. His harshest words on this topic, as we will see, are reserved for Safavid rulers.

became (arguably) the dominant site for the production and exchange of Persian lyric poetry, and the prevailing style of that poetry moved in a direction that would later be lambasted as decadent. For a scholar like E. G. Browne, who devoted much of his career to the authorship of a *Literary History of Persia*, under a framework that used political dynasties to periodize the development of the poetic tradition, the Safavids were, for the most part, worthy of rebuke.

Nearly everything about this approach has gradually been abandoned, as the fields of Persian and Iranian studies have matured. The poetry of the early modern era is now appreciated and studied intensively on its own terms. The idea that the Safavids failed to uphold a traditional duty to foster circles of court poets has been challenged specifically in some cases, and criticized more fundamentally as an invalid frame of analysis. In fact, most Persianists today appear to be skeptical of the entire dynasty-by-dynasty approach to literary history. This paper is intended to propose that there are a few aspects of the old debate surrounding the Safavids' legacy as cultural and artistic patrons that merit fresh analysis, while setting aside the clearly problematic claims that were made in earlier generations. Rather than attempting to persuade the reader of the correctness of a certain contrarian perspective on the Safavid period, however, the idea here is simply to advocate a reopening of the conversation.

The material that follows is organized into three main sections. First, it will be helpful, if not indispensable, to provide a concise review of the way in which the field has grappled with the problem of evaluating early modern Persian poetry and the importance of Safavid and Mughal patronage (or lack thereof). This will be done by presenting a series of quotes from works by major scholars, which have served as touchstones for specialists on classical Persian literature and Safavid history. The authors included in this brief review are E. G. Browne, Jan Rypka (who also transmits some of the ideas of Vladimir Minorsky), Ehsan Yarshater, and Roger Savory. After showing the transformation of the debate from Browne (in the 1920s) to Savory (in the

1980s), we will use the *Encyclopædia Iranica* entry on Shah Ṭahmāsb, by Colin Mitchell, as a general representation of the current state of the field. It should be emphasized that the goal is not to assemble a comprehensive review of the literature—which would require far too much space and might not add value—but rather, to touch on the commentary of a number of the most influential scholars of recent generations, to arrive at a usable, substantially correct understanding of the development of the field vis-à-vis this problem.

The next section is devoted to showing that several different issues and kinds of judgment were tangled together in the debate over the quality of early modern Persian poetry and the assessment of the Safavids *qua* cultural patrons. There was, of course, criticism of the *style* of *gazals* that became popular during this period, especially in the Indian context. There was the idea that Safavid rulers turned away from traditional literary patronage and devoted more of their resources to the establishment of a Twelver Shi'i clerical class, the renovation of shrine complexes, etc.—with the reign of Ṭahmāsb I (r. 930/1524–984/1576) viewed as a key moment in this reorientation. And there was the factor of rising Mughal patronage, and the migration of a large number of Iranian poets to the subcontinent, which has caused difficulties for literary history carried out in a national framework. The generally negative judgment leveled by E. G. Browne and likeminded scholars, against the “Indian style” and the Safavid dynasty’s alleged abdication of its duty to support poets, may now be difficult for Persianists to stomach. But has the question of patronage ever been debated in isolation from quasi-moral criticism of the Safavids? This is the point on which the current paper argues that an opening may be warranted. Special emphasis is placed on the fact that there are ways of explaining a deficit of patronage for poets in early Safavid Iran—to correspond with the *surplus* of patronage in Mughal India—that do not depend on any willful neglect on the part of Safavid rulers. Of course, we may also consider the indications that we have in our sources that Shah Ṭahmāsb

grew less inclined to support non-religious poetry in the second half of his reign. But this is not the only, and probably not the primary factor.

After this attempt to untangle the problem, the final section of the paper will demonstrate that the current position of the field, in which attention is not consistently paid to the nuances of patronage circles in Safavid Iran, engenders some confusion—that we could benefit from greater care. This will be shown by looking again at the *Iranica* article by Mitchell and using it as a kind of jumping-off point. In an accurate reflection of the prevailing sentiment in the field (as befits an encyclopædia entry), Mitchell characterizes Shah Ṭahmāsb as a celebrated patron of the arts and promoter of *adab* and cultural life, mentioning several examples of painters, calligraphers, and poets associated with his reign. Upon closer inspection of those individuals' careers, however, one gets the impression that labeling them as beneficiaries of Ṭahmāsb's patronage sometimes conceals more than it reveals. A particularly important issue that emerges is the role of regional courts in supporting the arts in tenth-/sixteenth-century Iran—to an extent that there is a risk of exaggerating the munificence of the Safavid rulers themselves. In line with the general aim of this paper, the question of regionalism is put forth as one area in which a return to critical discussion of patronage might be fruitful.

1) The Rise and Fall of a Classic Debate

A basic summary of the problem surrounding early modern Persian poetry and Safavid patronage has been provided above, and the quotes below speak strongly for themselves, so there will be little need here for intervention or contextualization. We will begin with excerpts from a famous passage in the fourth (and final) volume of E. G. Browne's *Literary History of Persia*, which was published in 1924. Browne's critical position was not entirely original—indeed, he was heavily influenced by the viewpoint of Iranian scholars of his time, some of

whom were his friends—but his assessment of the Safavid period in Persian poetry has been disproportionately influential, among both supporters and detractors.

The passage begins as follows:

One of the most curious and, at first sight, inexplicable phenomena of the Şafawí period is the extraordinary dearth of notable poets in Persia during the two centuries of its duration. Architecture, miniature-painting and other arts flourished exceedingly ... Yet, though poets innumerable are mentioned in the *Tuḥfa-i-Sámí* and other contemporary biographies and histories, there is hardly one (if we exclude Jámí, Hátífí, Hilálí and other poets of Khurásán, who were really the survivors of the school of Herát) worthy to be placed in the first class ... There was in Persia, so far as I have been able to ascertain, hardly one [poet] of conspicuous merit or originality. I say 'in Persia' advisedly, for a brilliant group of poets *from* Persia, of whom 'Urfí of Shíráz ... and Şá'ib of Işfahán ... are perhaps the most notable, adorned the court of the 'Great Moghuls' in India ... This shows that it was not so much lack of talent as lack of patronage which makes the list of distinctively Şafawí poets so meagre.⁴

A couple of pages later, Browne quotes a letter from one of his Iranian colleagues, Mírzá Muḥammad Ḥān of Qazwīn, offering further thoughts on this problem:

There is at any rate no doubt that during the Şafawí period literature and poetry in Persia had sunk to a very low ebb, and that not one single poet of the first rank can be reckoned as representing this epoch. The chief reason for this ... seems to have been

⁴ Browne, *Literary History*, vol. 4, pp. 24–25.

that these kings, by reason of their political aims and strong antagonism to the Ottoman Empire, devoted the greater part of their energies to the propagation of the Shí'a doctrine ...⁵

The following statement also comes from Qazwīnī's letter (from which Browne quotes at length):

In regard to the Sufis particularly, [the Safavids] employed every kind of severity and vexation ... The close connection between poetry and *Belles Lettres*, on the one hand, and Sufism and Mysticism on the other, at any rate in Persia, is obvious, so that the extinction of one necessarily involves the extinction and destruction of the other.⁶

The main idea should already be clear, but it is worth excerpting one later statement made by Browne, in comparing the Safavids to the Mughals. He concludes as follows:

India, at all events, thanks to the generous patronage of Humáyún, Akbar, and their successors down to that gloomy zealot Awrangzīb, and of their great nobles, such as Bayram Khán-Khánán ... continued during the greater part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to attract a great number of the most talented Persian poets, who found there an appreciation which was withheld from them in their own country.⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

In the first few decades after Browne completed his *Literary History*, there was, it seems, no major attempt to contradict his characterization of poetry in Safavid Iran. The critical reception of early modern lyric style (i.e. the evolution of the *ġazal*) was one thing; Browne himself took care not to deny the merit of *all* poets of the period, and he singled out Šā'ib Tabrīzī (d. c. 1087/1676) as one of his longtime favorites.⁸ Some Persianists articulated views on Safavid-Mughal poetry that were more positive in general; Alessandro Bausani's *Storia della letteratura persiana* (1960) serves as an interesting example.⁹ (Of course, even that came more than three decades after Browne's death.) But on the issue of *Iranian* poetry and Safavid patronage, the position taken by Browne was more uncompromising to begin with, and dissent was slower to materialize.

For a sense of where the field of Persian literary studies stood on this problem as of the 1960s, we can look to the following passage from Jan Rypka's *History of Iranian Literature* (whose English translation was published in 1968), a foundational text in its own right:

The literature of the Safavid period is usually regarded as a literature of decline ... Even when the Timurid supremacy became weaker and weaker and eventually fell to pieces, this did not at all imply that the flow of literature diminished ... [But the Safavids'] 'cultural' interest was concentrated on propaganda and on the consolidation of the state religion.¹⁰

Rypka continues as follows:

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165.

⁹ Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana*. See, for example, pp. 294, 296. Also worth noting here is his article, "Contributo a una definizione dello 'stile indiano.'"

¹⁰ Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, p. 292.

Secular panegyric and lyric poetry is replaced by hymns in honour of the Prophet and ‘Alī, or threnodies on the Imāms, but otherwise there is a palpable lack of interest in the poets, their works and their burial-places.¹¹

In attempting to explain the Safavids’ purported turn away from non-religious poetry, Rypka focuses on a set of factors similar to those identified by Browne—though he places greater emphasis on material and economic concerns, in line with the general approach of his work. He also returns to the idea of a deep connection between Persian poetry and Sufism, drawing on the earlier statements of Browne and Qazwīnī, as well as on a 1955 edited volume chapter by Vladimir Minorsky.¹² In order to save space, we will not quote Minorsky’s comments directly, but they are relayed by Rypka.

He summarizes the argument in the following manner (emphasis added):

The religious orders died out under the pressure of Safavid policy and with them the Šūfī conceptions and speculations ... This animosity toward the extravagances of Šūfism might very well be considered as a beneficent characteristic of the vigorous Safavids, but unfortunately the result was that one evil was substituted for another. *The whole of cultural life was delivered over to obscurantism.*¹³

Finally, Rypka, too, considers the question of the migration of Iranian poets to India. His judgment is almost identical to that of Browne:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 293.

¹² Minorsky, “Iran.”

¹³ Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, p. 294.

How different was the effect of the reputation for munificence of the court at Delhi! It was for this reason that the more important poets betook themselves thither, where better material advantages awaited them and where there was also sometimes a greater liberty of conscience.¹⁴

The next, and probably the most important piece for us to address is an article by Ehsan Yarshater, which was first published in 1974.¹⁵ (The essay was later included in a 1988 edited volume, and that is the version quoted below.) Yarshater seems not to have been especially fond of Persian poetry of the early modern period—at this point in his career, at least—but, as we will see, he was also harshly critical of the prevailing scholarly explanations for *how* and *why* the literary tradition developed in the way that it did. And he had little use for the idea that a lack of support for poetry on the part of Safavid rulers, or the energetic patronage of their Mughal counterparts, was somehow instrumental.

Yarshater launches his analysis with the following questions:

The quality of poetry [of the Safavid period] has been a matter of controversy ... The first question we must face is whether [decline] was, in fact, the case. Did Persian poetry and prose under the Safavids sink into the literary doldrums, as so many critics have judged ...? And if our response should be negative, how are we to account for the decline of literature ...?¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yar-Shater [*sic*], “Safavid Literature.”

¹⁶ Yarshater, “The Indian or Safavid Style,” p. 249.

Rather than disclosing his opinion at once, Yarshater devotes more than half of his essay to a highly illuminating discussion of the aspects of Safavid-Mughal poetry that had been controversial, citing the assessments of scholars and literati from the twelfth/eighteenth century up to his own time. His analysis of the issues shows both methodological rigor and humility; he notes that tastes change over time, and that participants in Persianate literary culture of the early modern period clearly believed in what they were doing and took their work seriously. Yarshater then goes a step further by explaining, in sympathetic terms, some of the ways in which lyric poets of the Safavid-Mughal era strove for originality. (He also develops an interesting idea that the *Timurid* period was more of a low point for the poetic tradition, and that we should appreciate at least the breaking of new ground in the following centuries.) This in itself renders Yarshater's paper a major step forward for the field. But there comes a point for him to issue his personal judgment, and he concludes that, in many ways, "Safavid poetry represents a decline." He adds that it "becomes caught in a web of complex rhetorical devices from which it cannot be extricated"; that "the sheer intellectual exercise required to catch all the meanings and multiple relationships is exhausting"; etc.¹⁷ In perhaps his most damning statement, he observes that "the Safavid period as a whole betokens a general cultural exhaustion, the effect of which becomes evident in all the arts."¹⁸ And so Yarshater's article, after showing a remarkable willingness to meet early modern poetry on its own terms and to give credit in some areas, returns to a position reminiscent of that of Browne and Rypka.

Where Yarshater strongly and fundamentally disagrees with earlier scholars is on the question of the *causes* of decline. In the final section of his essay, he dismisses various theories that have been put forth, beginning as follows (emphasis added):

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 273.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

Several explanations have been offered to account for this phenomenon [of literary decline] ... One is that the Safavid court was not as interested in poetry as were the former Persian courts. Their preoccupations with the promotion of Shi'ism prevented the Safavid kings from heeding poetry, and, the argument goes, since the advance of poetry in Persia has always been largely dependent upon court patronage, poetry suffered. This view, which is based on a *persistent fallacy common to almost all histories of Persian literature*, is closely connected to the customary but superficial periodization of Persian literature according to dynastic events. As such, it hardly sheds any light on the subject.¹⁹

Yarshater goes on to explain that “the Safavid kings were not as insensitive to poetry as some critics have made them appear,” and he cites several examples of members of the royal family who are reported to have been actively interested in the arts. His rebuttal of Browne *et al.* on this point is qualified; he acknowledges that the Safavids “were perhaps not inordinate patrons of poetry,” while stressing that “they cannot be made the scapegoat for any decline in literature.”²⁰ Yarshater’s more important critique is of the convention of adopting a dynastic periodization, with its underlying assumptions. This issue is worthy of substantial discussion on its own—most researchers currently active in the field would probably endorse Yarshater’s view—but, for the purposes of this paper, we may as well move forward.

A few pages later, Yarshater addresses the issue of Safavid anti-Sufism, and he renders the following judgment:

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 279–280.

[Another] explanation is basically a religious one. It holds the religious policy of the Safavids and the attendant weakening of Sufism responsible for the decline of literature. This view is put forth in its clearest form by Mohammad Qazvini in a letter to E. G. Browne.²¹

Yarshater then quotes from Browne/Qazwīnī, and also from the works of Minorsky and Rypka (including the passages reviewed above). His conclusion regarding the “religious explanation” is as follows:

Such theories are hardly tenable. They may explain the increase in the volume of religious poetry, but not the character of the period’s literature. Mystic orders suffered in Safavid Persia, but not for long. Shi’ite orders soon began to blossom, as shown by their comfortable existence in the Qajar period. In any event, official religious sanction has never been a necessary condition for the expansion of mysticism.²²

After dismissing these and a couple of other hypotheses, Yarshater offers the following peculiar theory:

This survey apparently leaves us with no explanation for the decline of the classical tradition at the end of the Safavid period. It seems to me, however, that in all the accounts presented so far, a simple explanation has been left out. We have been offered every possible reason for the weakening state of an octogenarian without

²¹ Ibid., p. 282.

²² Ibid., pp. 283–284.

mentioning his age. Persian poetry does no more than follow a general pattern of development common to all arts.²³

In more ways than one, this groundbreaking paper by Yarshater points toward nuanced approaches to the issues surrounding Safavid-Mughal poetry, and problematizes the ideas that had dominated the field for most of the twentieth century—only to arrive at underwhelming conclusions. It is especially frustrating that Yarshater settles on the explanation that Persian literature entered a decline in the early modern era because the tradition was nearing the end of its natural lifecycle. This frame of analysis leads nowhere, even if one agrees with it.

But it appears that a kind of dam was broken. The period around the second half of the 1970s, into the '80s, heralded a deep shift in the ways in which scholars approached later classical Persian literature and Safavid history, of a sort that had not been seen since the career of Browne (if not earlier). One of the best-known and most influential historical surveys of the period, Roger Savory's *Iran under the Safavids* (1980), incorporates Yarshater's criticism in a chapter devoted to literature and intellectual life.

Savory, like many others, begins by taking stock of the perspective articulated by Browne, and the slow progress of change in the field:

Browne's generalisations on poetry under the Safavids were sweeping enough, but [his friend] Mīrzā Muḥammad Khān Qazvīnī extended them to a blanket condemnation of the entire Safavid period as a cultural desert ... It is a curious and, at

²³ Ibid., p. 286.

first sight, inexplicable phenomenon, as Browne might have said, that these views were accepted uncritically for several decades after Browne's death.²⁴

He continues as follows:

It was not until Ehsan Yar-Shater's seminal paper ... was published in 1974 that the harsh views expressed by Browne, Mīrzā Muḥammad Khān Qazvīnī, Rypka, and others were subjected to any critical analysis at all.²⁵

For the most part, Savory's treatment of the issues of early modern Persian poetry and the relevance of Safavid royal patronage is similar to Yarshater's, but he does differentiate his argument in a few respects. He seems to accord somewhat more importance to the economic imbalance that spurred the migration of Iranian poets to India:

[One reason cited] for the lack of great poetry in Safavid Iran, namely, that the best poets had been attracted to the Mogul court by the greater financial rewards to be obtained there, has considerable validity. Under the Great Moguls, Delhi was unquestionably the Mecca of poets.²⁶

Savory also goes a bit further than Yarshater in questioning whether it makes sense, in the first place, to posit a lack of patronage on the part of the Safavids (emphasis added):

²⁴ Savory, *Iran*, pp. 204–205.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

When full allowance has been made for the fact that the grass for poets appeared greener on the Mogul side of the hill, it must be firmly stated that the view expounded by Qazvīnī and many others, namely, that the Safavid shahs did not encourage poets, *is a fallacy*.²⁷

By the early 1980s, then, high-profile works of scholarship in both Persian literary history and general Safavid history were expressing substantial disagreement with the viewpoint, and even the analytical framework, that had been prevalent for as long as anyone could remember. The one part of the story that was yet to change dramatically among Persianists—and which will not be covered in detail in this paper, lest it double in length—was the appraisal of early modern lyric poetry itself. The 1980s brought the beginning (or the meaningful beginning) of a shift toward appreciating the vibrancy and inventiveness of the Safavid-Mughal *ġazal*, with the work of Muḥammad Riḍā Šafī‘ī Kadkanī having been particularly influential.²⁸ The project of studying the enormous body of early modern Persian literature is now central to the careers of a number of established scholars, including Paul Losensky (whose work is of field-shaping importance), Sunil Sharma, and Prashant Keshavmurthy.²⁹ And there are younger researchers, such as Jane Mikkelson, who carry out strikingly advanced analyses of poetry of the “Indian style.”³⁰ (It can be said that part of what specialists have done in recent decades has been to build upon the approach taken by Yarshater in the first half of his essay—but without giving up in frustration.)

²⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

²⁸ See, for example, Šafī‘ī Kadkanī, “Persian Literature,” pp. 145ff.

²⁹ See, for example, Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*; and Keshavmurthy, *Persian Authorship*. A recent monograph by Sharma is cited below.

³⁰ See Mikkelson, “Of Parrots and Crows.”

Before moving ahead to attempt to sort through the issues bound up in this debate, it may be helpful to look at a more a more recent article, which serves as a reflection of the current state of the field vis-à-vis the cultural history of the early Safavid period: the *Encyclopædia Iranica* entry on Shah Ṭahmāsb I, by Colin Mitchell (published in 2009). (As was noted above, and will be discussed further below, the reign of Ṭahmāsb is a key moment for the alleged shift of the Safavid dynasty away from traditional expectations of patronage and toward a greater focus on developing religious institutions.) Mitchell, unhindered by the negative judgments made by Browne, Rypka *et al.*, provides a glowing assessment of Shah Ṭahmāsb *qua* patron:

If Shah ʿAbbās is credited with establishing the Safavid dynasty as one of the principal architectural patrons known to Perso-Islamic history, and Shah Esmāʿil is recognized for his formal introduction of Twelver Shiʿism to Persia, Shah Ṭahmāsp must be acknowledged for his patronage and revival of Persian *adab* and cultural life. It is in no small part on account of Ṭahmāsp’s patronage of artists, miniaturists, calligraphers, historians, poets ... that the Safavid dynasty was able to emerge as an imperial entity of any significance.³¹

This may appear to be a sharp departure from earlier scholarship, but in reality, Mitchell’s comments reflect a continuation of the shift in opinion that was inaugurated by Yarshater, Savory, Šafīʿī Kadkanī, Aḥmad Gulčīn-i Maʿānī, and others of their generation.³² In order to substantiate the idea that Ṭahmāsb’s reign was a time of court-sponsored cultural

³¹ Mitchell, “Ṭahmāsp I.”

³² Among the numerous works by Gulčīn-i Maʿānī that could be mentioned in this connection is his *Farhang-i ašʿār-i Šāʿib*.

efflorescence, Mitchell mentions a number of famous painters, calligraphers, and poets of that period, including the following:

Although many prominent poets left Persia for the Indian subcontinent, two of the best poets of the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp, Vaḥṣi of Bāfq (d. 1583) and Moḥtašam of Kashan (d. 1588), managed to stay in Persia ... Perhaps the greatest of the *ghazal* writers was Jamāl al-Din Moḥammad b. Badr al-Din of Shiraz (d. 1591) who wrote under the *nom de plume* of ‘Orfi.³³

We will return to Mitchell’s article below and discuss it in greater depth. For the moment, what stands out in this overview of an old area of dispute in Persian literary studies and Safavid history is that virtually every part of the perspective held by scholars in the first half of the twentieth century has been reversed. Where once there was condemnation, now we find effusive praise.

2.1) Sorting through Intertwined Problems

If it is not clear already, then let it be emphasized again that we have touched upon scholars’ treatment of a number of potentially separate issues, which have been entangled in a single, complicated debate. This is unfortunate, since some of the theories and interpretations that were common several decades ago probably deserve to be set aside as part of the history of the field, while other lines of inquiry might still be fruitful, if they could be pursued on their own and in a dispassionate manner. Instead, what has taken place is that a kind of macro-narrative

³³ Mitchell, “Ṭahmāsp I.”

of the Safavid period as it pertains to the development of the Persian poetic tradition was forced to stand or fall in its entirety—and fell. There is at least a bit of collateral damage.

The clearest example of an idea that *should* be left in the past is the hypothesis that there were no great poets in the Safavid period. Even the attempt to specify that there were no great poets *in Iran* during that time cannot improve such an astonishingly incorrect judgment. And one would now have a difficult time finding a serious historian of Persian literature who has any interest in debating the proposition directly. This is as it should be. The work of Ṣāʿib Tabrīzī alone has become so highly regarded that if he were the only master poet that could be identified from the Safavid era—and he is not—it would be more than enough. Ṣāʿib left behind a corpus of around seven thousand *ġazals*, many of which are, individually, treasures of the classical tradition, with the whole collection standing as the most important milestone in the evolution of the Persian lyric since the death of Ḥāfiẓ (c. 792/1390). And the great majority of that poetry was composed in Safavid Iṣfahān. Ṣāʿib spent six or seven years working for the Mughal governor of Kabul as a young man, but he stayed for the rest of his long life in his home city in Iran, where his family wealth obviated the need for him to seek royal support.³⁴ (This makes Ṣāʿib an even more useful example: not only was he an undeniably great poet, but his career reflects the decreasing relevance of courtly patronage circles in the early modern period.) Again, there are other names that could be mentioned to demonstrate the value of the literary activity that took place under the Safavids. Ṣāʿib is simply the most prominent. It is perplexing that E. G. Browne, who describes himself as an admirer of Ṣāʿib, mischaracterizes him as a Mughal poet.

In any case, the claim about the lack of eminent poets can be (and has been) discarded out of hand. Similarly fundamental shifts in opinion and approach have taken place with regard to

³⁴ On the biography and legacy of Ṣāʿib, see Losensky, “Ṣāʿeb Tabrizi”; and Beers, “*Tazkirah-i Khayr al-bayān*.”

other ideas debated in the works quoted earlier. There is, for example, the question of how to assess broadly what happened to Persian poetic style during the Safavid-Mughal era. The view of most scholars and critics of the twentieth century was in line with Yarshater's exasperated statement, that early modern verse "becomes caught in a web of complex rhetorical devices from which it cannot be extricated." Again, it is not within the scope of this paper to describe the process by which the "Indian style"—or "fresh speech," or whatever we choose to call it—has recently come to be regarded in more favorable terms. But it is worth noting that the very idea of scholarship as a forum in which to decide whether the poetry of a given period is good or bad, is out of date (to put it mildly). The same can be said of the almost moralistic manner in which historians like Browne and Rypka judged the Safavid kings for their supposed commitment to religious, rather than cultural patronage. If we are to reexamine the question of whether Shah Ṭahmāsb, for example, had second thoughts about fostering court poets in the later decades of his reign, it will need to be done from what we now consider a more academic perspective.

Yet another area in which the field seems to have changed irrevocably is the view of periodization. Most of the older histories of Persian literature use an organizational scheme that depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on the periodization of the *political* history of the Persianate world. To be clear, this practice has not been abandoned. Labeling stages of the Persian poetic tradition according to, e.g. the Mongol, Timurid, and Safavid-Mughal periods is convenient and can be understood by a wide readership. And there are cases in which it is valid to suggest a connection between the political situation and cultural developments. But there are also contexts in which a dynastic periodization of literary history does more to obscure the subject than to clarify it. The important shift with regard to this problem is that scholars are now expected to understand that categories like "Safavid-Mughal poetry" are, in

the words of Yarshater, “customary but superficial.” The problem with the traditional approach to organizing a survey of classical literature is that it was taken too seriously and allowed to drive the analysis. Browne’s search for “great Safavid poets” became a liability.

We could continue to discuss dated interpretations that are no longer seen as worthy of engagement—such as the Sufism-related explanation for the alleged decline of culture under the Safavids, which is a theory that never began to be substantiated with direct evidence. But it should be plain by this point that the perspective of Browne, Rypka *et al.* is considered incorrect and methodologically invalid in so many ways that it is easy to dismiss in its entirety. Lost in the tangle of the field’s maturation vis-à-vis this debate is the unresolved problem of patronage. Is there any merit to the claim—taken by itself—that there was a deficit of courtly support for poets in Safavid Iran, most acutely in the second half of the tenth/sixteenth century? This question may have been left behind, but it has not been answered conclusively.

In fairness, there is a range of possible reasons for the lack of attention that has recently been paid to the issue of royal patronage. First, we no longer see as many broad surveys of literary history, and it is works of that type that would be most likely to take stock of a dynasty and the poetic activity associated with it. The current trend is toward more thematic and focused studies—which is fortunate, given the number of important authors, texts, genres, etc. that have seen little investigation thus far. We need targeted research in those areas more than we need an update to Rypka. Second, it is unclear who would be interested in carrying out analysis of cultural patronage under the Safavids. Specialists in Persian poetry would, of course, rather focus on the poetry that has survived and the circumstances under which it was composed. Historians of other stripes would be more interested in tracing social developments or the arcs of intellectual traditions. It is difficult to avoid the impression that scrutinizing the degree to

which different rulers devoted their resources to supporting artists and poets, while it may not be illegitimate, is nevertheless considered old-fashioned.³⁵

A third, and related, point is that it is generally easier to study events that took place, or actions that were carried out, as opposed to those that did not come to pass. It is one thing for us to analyze the phenomenon of the migration of Iranian poets to Mughal India during the reigns of Akbar (r. 963/1556–1014/1605), Jahāngīr (r. 1014/1605–1037/1627), and Šāh Jahān (r. 1037/1628–1068/1658).³⁶ We know the names of many of those poets and have their *dīwāns*, along with discussion of their biographies in literary anthologies (*taḍkiras*).³⁷ And there is a good deal that can be learned affirmatively about the patronage that was offered by the Mughal emperors and their governors and other officials. Indeed, it is worth noting that the one factor in the development of early modern Persian poetry that was agreed upon unanimously among the scholars reviewed above, and has not been challenged in more recent decades, is the wealth and munificence of the Mughals. It is uncontroversial to acknowledge the material motivations that drove Iranian poets to India. (How could it be denied, given that several hundred individuals are known to have taken part in this gradual migration?) But it has been something quite different to suggest that the Mughal surplus in patronage was matched, even to a milder degree, by a Safavid deficit.

The evidence that can be gathered on the Safavid side is perhaps not resounding. We have only one source that explicitly mentions a ruler's decision to stop participating in the traditional model of cultivating a circle of court poets. This is a passage in the *Tārīḥ-i ʿālam-ārā-yi ʿAbbāsī*—

³⁵ The situation may be changing—or, at least, there are exceptions. While this paper was under review, I became aware of a recent dissertation focusing on panegyric poetry under the Safavid dynasty. See Khoshkhoosani, “Shi‘ism and Kingship.”

³⁶ For an important, relatively new book on this subject, see Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*.

³⁷ Aḥmad Gulčīn-i Maʿānī undertook a heroic effort to collate information on poets who moved to India in this period. See his *Kārwān-i Hind*.

the most famous chronicle of the Safavid period, written by Iskandar Beg Munšī (d. c. 1043/1633–4) at the court of Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 995/1587–1038/1629) and completed in 1038/1629—discussing the poets who were still active in Iran as of the death of Shah Ṭahmāsb in 984/1576.³⁸ According to Iskandar Beg, Ṭahmāsb had surrounded himself with poets in his youth, but, as he got older and tried to live and rule in accordance with qur’anic precepts, his feelings about the arts also changed. He came to hold a generally unfavorable view of poets, on account of their tendency to abuse alcohol. Another concern of Ṭahmāsb—again, according to Iskandar Beg—was that it was not appropriate for hyperbolic praise of royals to be read in court in the form of *qaṣīdas*. And so he told one of the prominent poets of the day, Muḥtašam Kāšānī (d. 996/1588), that he would better compose eulogies of the Shi‘i Imams if he wished to be rewarded. Muḥtašam did just that, producing a seven-stanza poem in praise of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. (He followed this with a longer work—a twelve-stanza elegy, or *martīya*, on the events of Ashura—which remains famous and widely recited in Iran.) Shah Ṭahmāsb is reported to have made a generous gift to Muḥtašam after this shift in focus, thereby spurring numerous other poets to compose works on similar religious themes. Again, this is the only explicit evidence that has been cited to show that patronage of poets was restricted at the Safavid court, at least for a time.

There is, however, a larger volume of circumstantial evidence. Ṭahmāsb’s supposed puritanical turn was not limited to his involvement in literary culture. The *Tārīḫ-i ‘ālam-ārā* also reports that calligraphers, painters, and musicians (*muṭribān*) were dismissed from court service at a

³⁸ The passage in question is quoted in Savory, *Iran*, pp. 206–207. Savory also published a complete translation of the *‘Ālam-ārā*, under the title *History of Shah ‘Abbas the Great*. There, the relevant anecdote occurs on pp. 274–275. It may be worth noting that this translation is based on a combination of Īrağ Afšār’s edition of the *‘Ālam-ārā* and several manuscript copies of the text, which are used to fill *lacunae*. There is, therefore, sometimes a preference to cite the translation over the printed Persian.

certain point.³⁹ These events *seem* to have taken place around the late 1550s, in the aftermath of the Treaty of Amasya (962/1555), which ended a war between the Safavids and the Ottomans.⁴⁰ Ṭahmāsb was forced to recognize territorial concessions—surely a bitter pill to swallow—but he would not need to go to war again for the remainder of his reign. The post-Amasya years were characterized by a focus on domestic reforms, including the formal inauguration of the new capital at Qazwīn. At the same time, Shah Ṭahmāsb is said to have experienced his second “repentance” (*tawba*), whereby he made a greater effort to enforce Islamic law. He even went so far as to declare, in 972/1565, that a certain category of taxes on urban commercial activity, known as the *tamḡās*, should no longer be collected, as they are not prescribed in the Qur’an.⁴¹ (Giving up these revenue sources cannot have been a laughing matter for the Safavid government, which experienced fiscal distress in the best of times.) Iskandar Beg is not the only source for all of these developments. The dismissal of calligraphers, for example, is mentioned in the *Gulistān-i hunar* (completed c. 1015/1606–7) of Qāḍī Aḥmad Qumī (d. after 1015/1606–7). (We will return to this point below.) It is not clear just how gradual Ṭahmāsb’s change of heart regarding artistic and literary patronage may have been; there are indications that he stopped supporting the production of illustrated manuscripts by the end of the 1540s. But the general picture of the second half of his reign, which saw (among many other things) a shift in the treatment of poets, musicians, and their ilk, is fairly well established.⁴²

³⁹ Iskandar Beg Munšī, *History of Shah ‘Abbas*, trans. Savory, pp. 280–281.

⁴⁰ See Allouche, “Amasya, Treaty of.”

⁴¹ On this decision by Shah Ṭahmāsb, see Fagner, “Affairs.” A detailed etymological study of the word *tamḡā* is given in Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente*, vol. 2, pp. 554–565.

⁴² For an exhaustive, thousand-page account of (seemingly) everything that took place during Ṭahmāsb’s period of rule, see Pārsādūst, *Šāh Ṭahmāsb-i Awwal*.

One might ask why it should matter that a single Safavid monarch spent between twenty and thirty of his years on the throne showing relatively less consideration to poets. After all, this is a dynasty that ruled for more than two centuries, and what we find in the works of Browne and his followers is a harsh judgment of the entire period. We will address this issue in the next section. For now, the short answer is that Shah Ṭahmāsb's turn away from the traditional model of supporting court poets came at an unusually bad time, in two senses. In Iran, a fair portion of the tenth/sixteenth century was characterized by war against the Uzbeks and the Ottomans, as well as periods of conflict and disarray among the constituent tribes of the Safavid movement. The death of Ṭahmāsb in 984/1576 was followed not by the rise of a new king who could establish a durable court culture of his own, but rather by civil war, palace machinations, and effective interregnum, which would not be remedied until Shah 'Abbās' consolidation of authority in the 1590s. In India, at the same time, the Mughals were reaching the height of their power and wealth under Akbar, who, along with his vassals and officials, was more than willing to provide a new home to Iranian poets. Thus it is possible to analyze a set of factors—including, but by no means limited to, a change in patronage practices on the part of the Safavids—that contributed to a major transformation in Persian literary history. This is still at the level of a hypothesis (albeit not a far-fetched one). The main point to be made here is in relation to the development of the field, as it has gradually moved away from a problematic narrative of the early modern period. While the shifts in scholarly opinion have been positive and productive, and we now have a profoundly better understanding of topics such as the emergence of the Safavid-Mughal *ğazal*, there seem to be a few areas in which the arguments made in older generations are worth revisiting. The debate outlined above is sufficiently complicated, involving multiple layers of judgment, that rejecting the view that was once dominant carries some risk of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

2.2) The Impact of Material Factors in Safavid History

One aspect of early Safavid history that is mentioned with surprisingly little frequency is just how much of the tenth/sixteenth century in Iran was taken up by political conflicts of a level of severity that could have hampered efforts toward sustained cultural patronage, at least at the central court. There are two periods worth highlighting for their particularly chaotic nature. First is the span of ten to twelve years following the death of Shah Ismā‘īl (r. 907/1501–930/1524) and the accession of Shah Ṭahmāsb in 930/1524. At the time, Ṭahmāsb was only ten years old, and the first phase of his “reign” (such as it was) was characterized by, on the one hand, vicious power struggles among different factions of the Qizilbāš; and, on the other hand, repeated invasions of Ḥurāsān by the Abū l-Ḥayrid Uzbeks and threats from the Ottomans in the west and northwest.⁴³ It would take until the mid-1530s before Ṭahmāsb was mature enough, or held power securely enough, or had enough time between wars, to develop a distinctive court environment—apart from the itinerant lifestyle on campaign—according to his preferences and priorities. (Ṭahmāsb is reported to have socialized with poets, if not to have carried out a great deal of active patronage, during the early years. We will return to this point below.)

A later period of perhaps even more dramatic disarray came after the death of Ṭahmāsb in 984/1576. He was initially succeeded by his son, Ismā‘īl Mīrzā, whose famously violent reign lasted just over one year (984/1576–985/1577), before his own death under hazy circumstances. Shah Ismā‘īl II was then succeeded by his partially blind brother, Sulṭān Muḥammad “Ḥudābanda” (r. 985/1578–995/1587)—whose physical impairment was probably the reason that he stayed alive, while nearly all other Safavid princes had been put to death.

⁴³ On the Safavids’ “first civil war,” see Newman, *Safavid Iran*, ch. 2. On the conflicts with neighboring powers, see Dickson, “Shāh Ṭahmāsb and the Úzbeks.”

Sulṭān Muḥammad's reign technically lasted almost a decade, until late 995/1587, but these years were characterized by central court weakness, palace intrigue, and tribal factions' claiming substantial autonomy and jockeying for power.⁴⁴ It was during the 1580s that, in the world of poetry, at least, the exodus from Iran to India seems to have reached a fever pitch.⁴⁵

A new period would dawn toward the end of 995/1587, when the young ʿAbbās Mīrzā and his Qizilbāš supporters began to take power decisively. But it is important to point out that Shah ʿAbbās, whom we remember as the greatest of all Safavid monarchs, was still in his teens when he assumed the throne. He was under the domination of his Ustājilū backers, and reestablishing central court control over the various provinces that were then only nominally part of Safavid territory would take some time. The first discernible activities of Shah ʿAbbās *qua* patron—whether we mean his building projects in Iṣfahān, or his support for arts and letters—did not occur until the mid-1590s.⁴⁶ So we have a period of up to twenty years, starting with the death of Shah Ṭahmāsb, during which the political situation in the Safavid realm was sufficiently volatile that maintaining substantial patronage circles may not have been feasible.⁴⁷ Of course, the problem was worse in the late tenth/sixteenth century than it had been at the beginning, since this period coincided with the reign of Akbar in India. When looking at the literary migration from Iran, we should remember not only the greater wealth that was available to the Mughals for cultural patronage—this being the part of the story that is universally

⁴⁴ On this period, see Newman, *Safavid Iran*, ch. 3.

⁴⁵ There may be enough data preserved in *taḍkiras* covering this period, such as the *ʿArafāt al-ʿāšiqīn* (1024/1615) of Taqī al-Dīn Awḥādī Balyānī (d. after 1042/1632–3) and the *Ḥayr al-bayān* (1036/1627) of Malik Šāh Ḥusayn Sīstānī, to determine with confidence which years saw the most frequent departures of poets from Iran. With more sources having become available in more tractable formats, this would be a project worth pursuing.

⁴⁶ With regard to court-sponsored histories, the earliest of ʿAbbās' reign—the *Naqāwat al-ātār* of Afūštaʿī Naṭanzī (d. after 1007/1598–9) and the *Futūḥāt-i humāyūn* (1007/1598–9) of Siyāqī Niẓām—date to the *end* of the 1590s.

⁴⁷ There was a brief effort by Shah Ismāʿīl II to sponsor the production of illustrated manuscripts. Of course, he survived less than eighteen months on the throne. Interest on the part of a ruler was not always sufficient.

accepted—but also the way in which positive economic incentives could be amplified by bouts of instability on the Safavid side.

For our purposes, the significance of these periods—the decade or so after the death of Shah Ismā‘īl, and the first fifteen years (at least) after the death of Shah Ṭahmāsb—is threefold. First, if we are willing to consider the latter stretch of time as a kind of aftermath of the “Ṭahmāsb era,” then it becomes clear that his reign looms over not just half, but in fact a majority of the Safavid tenth/sixteenth century. Accordingly, the idea that Ṭahmāsb made a personal decision to move away from patronage of secular poetry and the visual arts is not as trivial as it might seem. Second, it is crucial that we bear in mind the general political and economic situation in both Safavid Iran and Mughal India at the time that scores of poets were relocating from the one to the other. The 1580s was such a punishing decade for the Safavids, with Muḥammad Ḥudābanda’s weakness compounded by invasions on both the Ottoman and Uzbek fronts, that the departure of figures like ‘Urfī Šīrāzī (d. 999/1591) for India should be no surprise. Third, and perhaps most importantly, taking into account these periods of turmoil in the tenth/sixteenth century gives us one more way of discussing the vicissitudes of court patronage of the arts without adopting the kind of judgmental perspective found in older works of scholarship. Browne refers to the “withholding” of support for poets under the Safavids. One could point out that payment of the army was also “withheld” on multiple occasions, including during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās—but no one would accuse these rulers of a lack of interest in military affairs.⁴⁸ The reality is that Safavid history is, in many respects, a bleak subject.

⁴⁸ On at least one occasion, Shah ‘Abbās’ administration (considered the strongest in the Safavid period) was reduced to “paying” the army in fiat currency printed on strips of leather. See Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*, pp. 115–116.

In this area, as in the remainder of the paper, we have considered only a limited set of examples, and there is ample room for further research. Beyond the first and second “civil war” periods, and the seeming austerity of the later decades of Shah Ṭahmāsb’s reign, we could look, for instance, at court patronage under Shah Ismā‘īl. It might be worth scrutinizing the extent to which he distinguished himself as an active supporter of literature and the arts. The most famous poets and painters associated with his reign were, after all, largely products of Timurid Ḥurāsān—or, in a few cases, of the Āqquyūnlū west—and they often did not work in proximity to the new court. Does this matter? It may not; some would argue that focusing on the decreasing importance of royal patronage itself in the Safavid-Mughal era is more valid. In any case, this represents another observation made by E. G. Browne—he specifically refers to the poets Hilālī (d. 936/1529) and Hātifī (d. 927/1521) as “survivors of the school of Herāt”—which has been neither upheld nor refuted in scholarship in the last few decades.

3) Debatable Examples of Safavid Cultural Patronage

The final major topic for us to address is the *cost* of neglecting to investigate the nuances of patronage networks. In recent scholarly commentary on the cultural legacy of the Safavid dynasty, not only is there a tendency to present the situation as though there was never any problem—that we have fully abandoned the judgmental approach of some researchers from earlier generations—but it also ends up being the case that some of the examples cited of support for the arts at the Safavid court are not entirely appropriate to the contexts in which they are invoked. To demonstrate this problem, we will use Colin Mitchell’s *Encyclopædia Iranica* article on Shah Ṭahmāsb as a point of departure. There is not anything unusual about Mitchell’s perspective on this issue—broadly similar commentary can be found, for example, in the books of Savory and Newman, and, by extension, in Yarshater’s classic essay—but

Mitchell's piece was published more recently (around a decade ago), and it is concise, in the manner of an encyclopædia article.

As we saw earlier, Mitchell reports that “Shah Ṭahmāsp must be acknowledged for his patronage and revival of Persian *adab* and cultural life,” and that “it is in no small part on account of Ṭahmāsp's patronage of artists, miniaturists, calligraphers, historians, poets ... that the Safavid dynasty was able to emerge as an imperial entity of any significance.” But who are some of the examples mentioned to substantiate this? They are divided, for the most part, into two categories: calligraphers and book artists, and poets. In discussing calligraphers who worked under the patronage of Shah Ṭahmāsb, Mitchell quotes from a chronicler of the period, Būdāq Munšī Qazwīnī (d. after 984/1576–7),⁴⁹ who reports that the king, in his youth, “was inclined toward calligraphy and art, and he brought [together] singular masters who were without comparison.” The names of three prominent calligraphers are then mentioned: ‘Abdī of Nīšāpūr (d. c. late 1540s), Šāh Maḥmūd Zarrīn-qalam (d. 972/1564–5), and Rustam ‘Alī of Harāt (d. 970/1562–3).⁵⁰

We have some biographical data on all three of these figures from various sources. And it is perhaps worth noting that, of the three, ‘Abdī is the only one who seems to have spent most of his career under the direct patronage of Shah Ṭahmāsb. The case of Šāh Maḥmūd Zarrīn-qalam is particularly interesting. In the *Gulistān-i hunar*, an important treatise on calligraphy and painting written by Qāḍī Aḥmad Qumī (d. after 1015/1606–7) around the turn of the eleventh/seventeenth century, there is a biographical notice on Šāh Maḥmūd, according to

⁴⁹ On this author, see Tilmann Trausch, “Budāq Monšī Qazvīnī.” Qazwīnī's chronicle is titled *Jawāhir al-aḥbār*.

⁵⁰ For Rustam ‘Alī, this is the year of death given in the *Gulistān-i hunar* (see below); but there is apparently some disagreement about the date in other sources.

which he spent some time working on manuscript projects at the royal atelier.⁵¹ But, we are told, Ṭahmāsb's interest in supporting those arts waned at a certain point in his reign—perhaps starting as early as the 1540s—and so Šāh Maḥmūd, like a number of other artists at the time, moved to Mašhad. He apparently did no further commissioned work; instead he was given lodging on the upper floor of a *madrasa* near the shrine of Imam Riḍā, and he devoted the last twenty years of his life to worship, composing religious poetry, and personal calligraphy projects.

If we examine the case of the third calligrapher mentioned by Mitchell, Rustam 'Alī, it turns out that he may not have worked under central court patronage at all. He was associated at first with Shah Ṭahmāsb's younger brother, Bahrām Mīrzā (d. 956/1549). Later, in line with the general trend, he established himself in Mašhad during the governorship of Bahrām's son, Ibrāhīm Mīrzā (d. 984/1577)—who was appointed to that post in 962/1555.⁵²

This may be picking nits, but it can be shown already, through the example of these calligraphers, that there is often more to the story, if we look in detail at the careers of cultural figures mentioned in connection with royal patronage in the early Safavid period. In the case of the book arts, we have indications that Shah Ṭahmāsb deliberately distanced himself from supporting further illustrated manuscript projects; and he was, to an extent, rescued by his nephew Ibrāhīm Mīrzā, who gave a new home to several of the best-known calligraphers and painters.

In the same section in Mitchell's article, there is mention of three of the most famous manuscripts that were produced in Iran during Ṭahmāsb's reign. They are the so-called “Houghton *Šāhnāma*”; a *Ḥamsa* of Niẓāmī (d. c. 605/1209)—now held at the British Library—and

⁵¹ An English translation of the *Gulistān-i hunar*, by Vladimir Minorsky, was published under the title *Calligraphers and Painters*. The notice on Šāh Maḥmūd Zarrīn-qalam is found on pp. 135–138.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 147. Rustam 'Alī is said to have been a nephew of the painter Bihzād.

a lavish version of the *Haft awrang* of Jāmī (d. 898/1492)—now at the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution. Two of these three examples should perhaps have caveats attached to them. The “Houghton” or “Shah Ṭahmāsb” *Šāhnāma*, which is arguably the greatest ever illustrated Persian manuscript, was commissioned by Shah Ismā‘īl, and it may have been finished by the mid-1530s.⁵³ The completion date is not known with certainty, but it is worth pointing out again that Ṭahmāsb was quite young, and swept up in a combination of domestic and foreign conflicts, for the first ten to twelve years of his reign; so it is not clear what role he may have had in the patronage of this *Šāhnāma*. (And let us not forget that, in 975/1568, Ṭahmāsb sent the manuscript to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II, r. 974/1566–982/1574, as a coronation gift!) The example of the illustrated *Ḥamsa* is the least ambiguous of the three; this book was produced at the royal atelier between 946/1539 and 949/1543.⁵⁴ When we turn to the *Haft awrang*, however, there is a more consequential note to be made. The manuscript project was carried out *in Mašhad* under the sponsorship of Ibrāhīm Mīrzā; it is dated to the period 963/1556 to 973/1565.⁵⁵

Moving to the realm of poetry, complicating details continue to appear. Mitchell refers to a number of poets as contributing to the cultural efflorescence of Ṭahmāsb’s reign. They are, in no particular order: Fuḍūlī Baġdādī, Ḥayratī Tūnī, Waḥṣī Bāfqī, Muḥtašam Kāšānī, ‘Urfī Šīrāzī, and ‘Abdī Beg “Nawīdī” Šīrāzī.⁵⁶ In the cases of several of these individuals, there is something more that should be said to contextualize the idea that they worked under Shah Ṭahmāsb. Fuḍūlī, for example, is best known as a Turkic poet of Azerbaijan. He began his career in Iraq in the final years of Āqquyūnlū rule. After the Safavid conquest of Baghdad, he wrote one poem

⁵³ See Welch and Dickson (eds.), *The Houghton Shahnameh*.

⁵⁴ See Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts*, Vol. 3, pp. 1072–1073.

⁵⁵ See Simpson, *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s “Haft awrang.”*

⁵⁶ The respective years of death for these poets are given below.

in which he praised Shah Ismāʿīl, and then he spent the better part of his adult life seeking patronage from Safavid local governors. Fuḍūlī remained in that area after it was taken by the Ottomans in 940/1534; he died in 963/1555–6, probably at Karbalāʾ.⁵⁷ The connection between Fuḍūlī and Shah Ṭahmāsb, then, is almost nonexistent.

Ḥayratī, for his part, was something of a boon companion to Ṭahmāsb during the first part of his reign. It may be worth noting that Ḥayratī has not been viewed as one of the most widely influential poets of his day. He seems to have been among the figures who accompanied Shah Ṭahmāsb in the relatively freewheeling early years.⁵⁸

Waḥṣī Bāfqī, on the other hand, is undoubtedly in the top echelon of Persian poets of the tenth/sixteenth century. But he spent his career in Yazd, where he had a comfortable position at the regional court.⁵⁹ Of the forty-one *qaṣīdas* in his *dīwān*, only two are dedicated to Ṭahmāsb—and these poems may date to Waḥṣī's youth, when he made a brief attempt to establish himself in the central Safavid patronage circles, before returning to Yazd. Waḥṣī's legacy perfectly demonstrates the importance of local rulers in supporting the arts in the early Safavid period. He died in 991/1583.

Muḥtašam (d. 996/1588) is perhaps the one true example of a renowned poet whose career was defined by the patronage of Shah Ṭahmāsb. He was in close association not only with the king, but also with his influential sister, Parī Ḥān Ḥānum (d. 985/1578). Even with Muḥtašam, it is interesting to observe that his greatest legacy, by far, is due to the stanzaic elegy that he composed in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ.⁶⁰ This work may, in fact, be the most enduringly famous Persian poem from that century, as it is still recited

⁵⁷ See “Foḏūli, Moḥammad.”

⁵⁸ See Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, pp. 298–299.

⁵⁹ See Beers, “The Biography of Vahshi Bāfqī.”

⁶⁰ See Losensky, “Moḥtašam Kāšāni.”

throughout Iran during the public rituals of the month of Muḥarram. According to an anecdote in the history of Iskandar Beg (which we reviewed above), Muḥtašam composed this elegy at some point in the second half of Ṭahmāsb's reign, after the king indicated that he was no longer interested in receiving traditional panegyric *qaṣīdas*. And the success of Muḥtašam's response to this challenge inaugurated a vogue in poetry dedicated to the Twelve Imams. In some sense, Muḥtašam is the exception that proves the rule of a departure from the old model of literary patronage at the Safavid court—again, not long before Akbar would begin to attract talent to India.

The next of the poets mentioned by Mitchell, ʿUrḫī of Shiraz (d. 999/1591), was not born until c. 962/1555. He was, therefore, too young to receive much support from Shah Ṭahmāsb.⁶¹ ʿUrḫī was able to join the main poetry circle in his native Shiraz, as a precocious teenager whose talent was recognized early, but he was more or less compelled to leave for India in 992/1584—during what has previously been described as a key moment in the poets' migration to the Mughal court, coinciding with severe political instability in Safavid lands. It may be a simple miscalculation that ʿUrḫī has been included in this *Iranica* entry as a poet of the age of Ṭahmāsb. Still, this is reflective of a tendency in the field not to focus on the specific circumstances of patronage; rather, it often seems that any poet who was alive during the reign of a given king, may be considered just as if he were a proper court poet of that ruler. (As we saw above, a similar problem arose in the case of Fuḍūlī.)

Finally, there is ʿAbdī Beg of Shiraz (d. 988/1580), who sometimes wrote under the pen name Nawīdī. His influence on the mainstream of early modern Persian poetry seems to have been limited, as he was not noted as a *ġazal* composer, but he was stunningly prolific in other forms. ʿAbdī Beg composed *three complete sets* of response works to the *Ḥamsa* of Niẓāmī (i.e. fifteen

⁶¹ See Losensky, “ʿOrḫī Širāzi.”

substantial narrative poems in total).⁶² And he, perhaps even more than Muḥtašam, was a fixture at Ṭahmāsb's court. But this was not due entirely to his poetry; he was an administrative official, and the author of an important chronicle titled *Takmilat al-aḥbār* (978/1570).⁶³ This is another example of a cultural figure who received a great deal of support under Shah Ṭahmāsb, but not in a way that would seem applicable beyond his personal circumstances.

After all of this, one of the last items discussed by Mitchell under the rubric of Ṭahmāsb as a cultural patron is the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, a biographical anthology of poets (*taḍkira*) written by Sām Mīrzā—a younger half-brother of Ṭahmāsb—around the year 957/1550.⁶⁴ The invocation of the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī*, in fact, is what first drew my interest to the problem of how scholars have assessed the cultural and artistic legacy of the Safavid dynasty. (Much of my dissertation project revolved around Sām Mīrzā and his *taḍkira*.) In Mitchell's article, as in some other overviews of the period, the *Tuḥfa* is mentioned as a noteworthy example of Safavid support for, and participation in, literary activity.⁶⁵ Not only was there patronage, we are told, but one of Ṭahmāsb's own brothers authored a *taḍkira* that stands as a key source on tenth-/sixteenth-century poetry.

A closer look at Sām Mīrzā's life and works reveals this narrative as slightly misleading. Sām spent most of his adult life, from the mid-1530s until his death in 975/1567, either in prison, or at least under the close supervision of Ṭahmāsb's advisers and military officials. In the end,

⁶² See Losensky, "Abdī Shīrāzī"; and idem, "The Palace of Praise."

⁶³ 'Abdī Beg Šīrāzī, *Takmilat al-aḥbār*. It may be worth mentioning that the edition of this chronicle by 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Nawā'ī, listed in the bibliography, is partial, covering only the later sections of the work.

⁶⁴ The most commonly used edition of the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* is that of Rukn al-Dīn Humāyūn Farruḥ. There is a more recent, and in some ways superior, edition by Aḥmad Mudaqqiq Yazdī; but it is almost unknown, even among specialists in early modern Persian literature.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Yarshater, "The Indian or Safavid Style," p. 280; and Savory, *Iran*, p. 208.

after several years of confinement at the fortress of Qahqaha in northwestern Iran, Sām was put to death, along with his two adolescent sons and two other young Safavid princes.⁶⁶ (This was the first genuine purge in the dynasty.) The *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* was authored around 957/1550, during a period of unusual freedom for Sām Mīrzā; he had been granted, at least in name, the governorship of Ardabīl and custodianship of the Safavid family shrine. He took the opportunity to finish his *taḍkira*, as the culmination of a lifetime of avid interest in Persian and Turkic poetry. To mention the *Tuḥfa-yi Sāmī* in a way that suggests it is reflective of Safavid dynastic support for the arts seems off the mark. It might be closer to the truth to state that Sām Mīrzā wrote this work *despite* the policies of the central court. He did so on his own initiative, with little political or economic wherewithal.

Again, it must be emphasized that the goal here is not to critique the *Iranica* entry on Ṭahmāsb as such. Using this article as a source of examples is a matter of convenience, as it is in keeping with the current stance of the field of Safavid history. Furthermore, as has been noted above, the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsb is considered a key juncture in the transformation of the Safavid movement into a more durable, full-fledged polity with distinctive institutions—and with its own style of cultural patronage. The treatment of Ṭahmāsb’s legacy, therefore, will tend to reflect the broader debate over the Safavids’ place in Persian literary history.

Conclusion

This paper was originally conceived as an exploration of the issue of provincial support for the arts in the early Safavid period and its importance relative to central court patronage. Along the way, as should be evident, the scope of the project shifted to cover a number of related problems. It seemed important to address the general confusion around Safavid patronage as it

⁶⁶ The key account of this event is given in Qāḍī Aḥmad Qumī, *Ḥulāṣat al-tawārīḥ*, pp. 550ff.

pertains to the development of Persian poetry; and a more dedicated study of regionalism and localism may be left for a subsequent article. Even so, the latter questions have arisen repeatedly in our discussion here. For the reign of Shah Ismā‘īl I, many of the poets and artists who are retrospectively associated with him essentially fell into his lap as a result of the Safavid conquest of Ḥurāsān in 916/1510. And a number of those individuals stayed in Harāt, while Ismā‘īl was almost always in the western part of his territories. Later, during the rule of Ṭahmāsb, while he did grant direct support to the royal manuscript workshop in his early years, the patronage of his nephew Ibrāhīm Mīrzā at Mašhad in the 1550s and ’60s was perhaps equally important—with several of the leading book artists having relocated there after it became clear that the king was distancing himself from certain forms of cultural activity. In the arena of poetry, one of the most influential *ġazal* composers of the century, Waḥšī Bāfqī, spent his career working for the local rulers of Yazd. And Fuḍūlī, the great Azerbaijani Turkic poet, relied on the support of Qizilbāš governors of Baghdad, and spent the last two decades of his life under Ottoman rule. These examples collectively suggest the centrality of non-central patronage (if you will) in early Safavid Iran. It is one thing for a dynasty to have subsidiary courts that foster their own circles of poets or manuscript ateliers—this was the case for the Timurids, and for their Mughal successors. But it would be something different for patronage at provincial courts to *make up for* an occasional lack of support at the capital.

In the end, why does any of this matter? It may be that the first generations of Safavid rule included stretches of time when the political or fiscal state of affairs was too volatile for there to be sustained royal patronage of the arts; and it may be that Shah Ṭahmāsb, with unfortunate timing, decided to turn away from commissioning illustrated manuscripts or rewarding poets in the traditional manner, focusing his resources and attention instead on architectural projects, the Shi‘i clerical establishment, and other such matters. What difference does it

make? Looking at this mainly from the perspective of literary history, it is fair to say that our efforts to explain the evolution of Persian poetry in the early modern period—and particularly what took place in the late tenth/sixteenth century, when Mughal India rose to dominance—are missing something, in that the question of Safavid patronage has become a kind of third rail. The reasons for this are understandable, in a field that long struggled to move beyond frameworks defined by the sensibilities of early European orientalists and the Iranian *bāzgašt*. But a few of the old questions, or a few carefully chosen facets of the old manner of studying political and literary history in concert, might still be fruitful in our time.

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