

Introduction

- In Persian, I enjoy reading modern and contemporary poetry, particularly of the 1960s and '70s, but have also studied some poetry like the one set in *Bar Xizam*, which was written **towards the end of the period known as the Islamic Golden Age**, coinciding roughly with the European Medieval Period.
 - Present-day Iran was taken by the Arab conquests of the 7th century; Islam and Arabic culture has intermingled with Persian culture ever since.
- Much of the information here has been drawn from Dick Davis's *Faces of Love*.

Poetry in Iranian culture

- Poetry plays a large role, not just in artistic circles, but **as a part of daily life**.
- **Poetry is the main form of Persian literary art**.
- Poetry is taught extensively and many students are expected to know poems by heart.
 - Classical Persian is relatively intelligible even by uneducated Modern Persian speakers.
 - Quotations from poetry (especially *Hafez*, his contemporaries, and precursors) are **used in everyday speech** in the way we use idioms in English.
 - *Moshā'ereh*: a form of poetry-based competition.
- **Hāfez is seen as perhaps the most important poet** of all, and his work holds a particularly important place in our culture.
 - *Fāl-e Hāfez*: *Hāfez* fortune telling – is a recreational activity whereby **a ghazal is selected at random** from the *Dīvān* and **interpreted** as it may pertain to the reader's life. By *Hāfez*'s tomb in *Shīraz*, this is often done by a canary which has been trained to select a card with the poem along with a popular interpretation.
 - “Bibliomancy”
 - People hold great reverence for his work and, as a very discursive and poetically conscious culture, **discussions about the meanings of his poems** are commonplace.
- The *Dīvān* of *Hafez* has had an impact on a number of western poets, most notably **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**, who then composed his *West-östlicher Divan* in response.
 - The poetry of Goethe, including some sections from the *Divan*, have been set by composers such as F. Schubert, R. Schumann, A. Schoenberg, H. Wolf, and R. Strauss.

Medieval Persian poetry and the *ghazal*

- Persian poetry of the Middle Ages is often **about love** – either **romantic, platonic, or divine**.
- Longer epic poems are used to tell myths and stories.
- The poems usually do not carry titles, so I will just refer to the one in question as *Bar Xizam*.

Content

- The *ghazal* is a type of **lyric praise poem** which came from the Arab world but quickly took hold in Persian culture. Like an **ode**, it addresses **the poet's "beloved"** in exaggerated hyperbolic language.
 - The relation is often one of **infinite superiority**, where the addressee is placed on a **divine or near-divine pedestal** – the addressee can be a lover, a patron, or God.
 - It often **unclear, especially in the work of Hāfez**, which of the three is being addressed.

Form

- It is written in a **highly rigid metrical and rhyme scheme**, which I will briefly outline. The rigidity of this scheme in a poem the length of *Bar Xizam* would be comparable to that of a French *sestina* or Italian sonnet, also known as a *Petrarchan sonnet*, with **multiple rules for repetition, metre, and rhyme**.
- Ghazals are composed of couplets, which number between 5 and 15, and **each couplet ends with the same refrain** (*radif*), usually a word or two. The refrain here is of course *Bar Xizam*.
 - The sole exception is the first couplet, in which both lines end with the refrain.
- The rhyme (*qāfīeh*) scheme is applied upon **the syllables which precede the refrain**, and in *Bar Xizam* takes the form of the sound *Ān*.
- Each line in *Bar Xizam* consists of a **specific pattern of 14 total syllables**, either long or short, divided into four different metrical feet.
 - Poems usually range from lines of 7 to 16 syllables in length, and can be divided into any number of different stress patterns.

Sufism

- An Islamic "mystic" tradition focused on purification through spirituality, **asceticism** (piety achieved through abstinence from worldly pleasure, poverty, simple living)
- Referred to by some scholars as the "inward dimension" of Islam – **personal study and a personal relationship with the divine** are foregrounded.
 - Unification with the divine, or at least approaching it...
- **Associated with several famous Persian poets of the time**, including Hāfez as well as Rūmī, who is among the world's most translated poets

14th Century Shīrāz and Hāfez

Shīrāz

- A **political, commercial, and cultural centre** which had recently undergone a number of regime changes and conquests by Arabs as well as by Turkic Central Asian rulers.
 - Population still relatively small by modern standards, 60k metropolitan and about 200k in surroundings.
- **Multilingual, multicultural, multi-faith.**
- Rulers and influential families occasionally interested in Islamic mysticism (Sufism).
- **Shīrāz's legacy of local poetry was solidified before Hāfez** by his 13th century precursor Sa'adi Shīrāzi, who is also among Iran's most influential poets. One of his poems is inscribed on the United Nations building in New York City.

Hāfez

- Relatively small output (~10 poems per year) which **implies that he revised extensively** and perhaps was involved in another vocation.
- The **density and complexity** of his works was noted and even criticised by his contemporaries
 - His work is full of **dichotomy and contradiction**, expressing the **co-existence of multiple possibilities**.
 - **The divine and the earthly, sarcasm/sincerity, sensuality/piety, local/international, etc.**
- His sobriquet, the word Hāfez, was perhaps a purposeful choice. The word Hāfez (**one who keeps or protects**) often refers to someone who knows the Quran by heart but, in Medieval Iran, was also used to refer to someone with a **deep knowledge of musical practice**.
 - His work is full of references to **singing** (as the verb khāndan in Persian both refers to singing as well as reading/recitation) and **motreb**, who are akin to bards.
 - The interesting dichotomy is between that of the poet and that of the musician: one being a highly valued and respected line of work and the other being quite disreputable at the time.
 - Hafez's poems, among others, are **very often sung** in traditional Persian unmetred song (*Āvāz*). See Shajarian recording ~1:40.
- His work is imbued with a **criticism of hypocrisy** – especially religious hypocrisy – and perhaps even his own association with the Sufi order is not as strong as we thought. He is known for **sarcasm and tongue-in cheek innuendo**.
 - He directly **undermines the idea of a universal/religious truth** as the nature of his poetry is one of **possibility and contradiction** – the **meaning of his poem is often obscured**.
 - Davis argues that Hafez is **assured of divine forgiveness** and doesn't especially feel the need to earn it by any means.
 - He often uses the symbol of a trapped bird who will eventually return to paradise.

- The issue of wine and drinking
 - Drinking alcohol is of course forbidden in Islamic society, but **references to wine and drinking are almost constant** in Hāfez's Ghazals.
 - In 14th century Shiraz, wine was consumed by the upper-classes as a kind of continuation of the ancient Persian culture they felt they had inherited, and conquests by Central Asian tribes also brought a taste for alcohol into the city.
 - **Modern Islamic readings of Sufi poetry see alcohol as a symbol**, i.e. the consumption of wine as a placeholder for religious practice, intoxication for complete spiritual immersion, and the wine-shop as a Sufi meeting place.
 - Again, **Davis argues that Hāfez was probably actually talking about real drinking** to a great extent, and this is supported by his poems mentioning the closure and re-opening of many local wine shops, which reflects the history of political changes in Shiraz during his lifetime, between more and less accepting of alcohol. (Davis p. 47)

Translation of the interpretation of the poem from my copy of the *Divān* (this is an interpretation which is meant to be read as a fortune, not as an explanation of the poem's meaning):

You are waiting for spiritual or physical growth in your life, which has been very difficult. Hopefully you will arrive at an excellent result – in the process you may unfortunately receive some difficult news and even lose friends – but know that you will free yourself from the suffering of this world. You are a kind person of pure heart; be careful that those to whom you give your friendship return it in kind.