

An Approach to Humour in Persian Literature¹

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In the eleven hundred years of literature in Persian, humour has been quite visible and has played important roles in various contexts. It has also been widely varied in style, form and scope. There has been both verbal and fictional satire, lampoon and buffoonery, some of them soft and subtle, others coarse and even obscene, but all of them more or less amusing, though behind many of them are such motives as anger, revenge, blackmail, sarcasm, mockery, social criticism and so on, while some others resemble maxims and aphorisms dressed up as satire. The title of this talk is too ambitious for the time available, so I shall offer an overview of classical humour and modern satire in the early twentieth century.

Generally, there is not much difference between Persian and Western satire beyond the inevitable differences of form, but we find more indelicate jibes and abuses in Persian satire, especially when matters

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of sex and honour are brought into them. Still, even these are quite distinct from simple invective because it is precisely their literary form that shapes them into humour. For example, Mahsati or (Mahasti) Ganjavi, a twelfth century female poet, wrote in a quatrain:

When the judge's wife came with child, he cried

Struck by pain he found it extremely odd

Saying I am old and cannot have an erection

This whore is not Mary, so whence the benediction.²

This quite compares with the style of reporting in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. But theirs are relatively rare in the body of Western satire, whereas they are more common in Persian literature. Some of Rumi's tales in his *Masnavi* almost border on pornography, even though, oddly enough, they too are lessons in mysticism. However, there are also many subtle and delicate satires, verbal as well as fictional, not only in the works of such great classicists as Sa'di and Hafiz but also in modern satirists such as Dehkhoda.

Abolfazl Beyhaqi (995-1077) wrote in his great history a thousand years ago about a man who procured concubines for a prince and received ample rewards for them. A judge told him to remember that pimping is better than judging.³ Naser Khosrow (1004-1088), who also flourished in the eleventh century, was a very serious and highly religious man who, in his polemics against his religious enemies called them, ass, cow and so on. He wrote in a humorous aphorism:

نشنیده ای که زیر چناری کدو بنی

بر رست و بردوید بر او بر به روز بیست

پرسید از چنار که تو چند ساله ای

²*Divan-e Mahasti Ganjavi*, ed. Taheri Shahab (Tehran: Tahuri, 1957), 28.

³*Abolfazl Beyhaqi*, ed. Ali Akbar Fayyaz (Tehran: N.P, 1995), 458.

گفتا چنار سال مرا بیشتر ز سی ست
خندید پس بر او که من از تو به بیست روز
بر تر شدم بگوی که این کاهلی ز چیست
او را چنار گفت که امروزه ای کدو
با تو مرا هنوز نه هنگام داوری ست
فردا که بر من و تو وزد بعد مهرگان
آنکه شود پدید که نامرد و مرد کیست

Have you heard that once a marrow grew
Under a maple tree and bore fruit in a day or two?
It asked the tree's age which it said
Was more than thirty years
The marrow laughed and said how come
That by me in a few days you have been overcome
The tree said today o marrow
It is too early to compare me and you
For when the October wind begins to blow
It'll be seen which one of us is to bellow⁴

Not long afterwards, the nobleman Keykavus ibn Eskandar (1021-1087) wrote in his *Qabusnameh*, the book intended for the education of his son, that a dress-maker whose shop was near the cemetery used to throw a pebble into a vase each time they buried a dead person, and counted the pebbles every month. After his death a man showed up

⁴*Divan-e Naser Khosrow*, ed. Seyyed Hasan Taqizadeh, re.ed., Mehdi Soheili (Isfahan: Enteshar-e Ketabforushi-ye Ta'id, 1956), 616.

looking for him and was told that the tailor too had fallen into the vase.⁵

In another anecdote, he says that a sheep owner used to dilute milk with water and sell it. One night his shepherd was sleeping on high ground when a flood came and swept the sheep away. Next day the shepherd told the sheep owner: last night the waters that you used to put in the milk gathered together and took the sheep away.⁶ He also tells the tale of a hundred-year-old man who was bent and leaning on a walking-stick. A young man asked him in mockery how much he would sell his little bow. He told him, if you wait long enough, life would give it to you free of charge, although you are not worthy of it.⁷ Keykavus emphatically advises his son not to resort to obscene words when he jokes, but, as mentioned, that advice is not observed by a number of Persian poets and satirists.

Anvari Abivardi (d. 1189), that twelfth century great but not very ethical poet, wrote in a long *qasideh* that emptying cesspits is better than writing poetry because that is a useful occupation whereas there is no use in writing poetry.⁸ He wrote once, addressing himself, that he would not be immune from danger as long as he is in danger of writing poems. Although he did write panegyrics, he was not successful in earning a good living, so he resorted to lampoon and blackmail to milk the rich. Once he addressed a short stanza to one such:

انوری نام هجو می نبرد
چون ترا چشم بر عطا ست هنوز
کیر خر نام می برد لیکن
می نگوید که در کجاست هنوز

Anvari will not talk of lampoon

⁵Keykavus ibn Eskandar, *Qabusnameh*, ed. Amin Abdolmajid Badavi (Tehran: Ibn Sina, 1956), 134.

⁶Keykavus ibn Eskandar, *Qabusnameh*, 136.

⁷Keykavus ibn Eskandar, *Qabusnameh*, 134.

⁸*Divan-e Anvari*, ed. Modarres Razavi (Tehran: Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab, 1968), 471-473.

Since he still hopes for a donation
He does mention donkey's prick
But does not yet mention its location⁹

In another piece he complained of the meanness of the prince:

گر اندک صلتی بخشد امیرت
از او بستان کز او بسیار باشد
عطای او بود چون ختنه کردن
که اندر عمر خود یک بار باشد

If the prince gives you a little reward
Take it from him for it is too much.
His gift is like circumcision
In a lifetime it happens only once.¹⁰

Reflecting on his own lack of fortune, he wrote once:

هر بلایی کز آسمان آید
گر چه بر دیگری روا باشد
نرسیده به خاک می پرسد
خانه انوری کجا باشد

⁹Homa Katouzian, "Satire in Persian Literature, 1900-1940," in *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century, From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*, ed. Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 163.

¹⁰Mehdi Hamidi, *Behesht-e Sokhan* (Tehran: Pazhang, 1987), 439.

Whatever ill descends from the heavens

Even if intended for someone else,

Before reaching the earth it asks

Where's Anvari's residence?¹¹

It is perhaps not surprising because, apart from lampooning for money, he scandalised anyone he disliked. Addressing a man, for example, he wondered why every woman he married slept around with others, ending by the question: Do you want whorish wives to praise / Or it just happens to be the case?¹² He overreached himself in ribaldry when he wrote in a stanza:

اگر سهلان رستم نذر کرده ست
که هر کس را که من گایم بگاید
بگادن چون تواند خواهرش را
و یا مادر , که قتلش واجب آید
وگر گآید مر ایشان را و گوید
که در سوگند تا ویلی نباید
بگادن چون تواند خویشان را
مگر بر علم ما چیزی فزاید

If Sahlan son of Rostam has vowed

To fuck anyone that I fuck

How can he fuck his mother and sister?

¹¹*Divan-e Anvari, Ba Moqaddameh va Tashih va Moqabeleh-ye Hasht Noskkeh*, ed. Sa'id Nafisi (Tehran: Mo'asseseh-ye Matbu'ati-ye Piruz, 1959), 379.

¹²Hamidi, *Behesht-e Sokhan*, 438.

Since he would surely be executed.

But if he does it nevertheless

Saying that an oath should not be broken.

How can he possibly fuck himself?

Perhaps he'll teach us a lesson.¹³

He was very unhappy with his wife and wrote such obscene verses about her which are almost unprintable. He wrote about marriage that: To get married in this era / Is naught but pure pimping (کاندر این روزگار زن) کردن / بجز از محض قلتبانی نیست¹⁴). However, sometimes he also wrote humorous poems without targeting himself or others, but still using foul language. For example, he tells the tale of a group of ladies who had gone out to the countryside. A he-donkey happened to be mating with a she-donkey “with a two-foot long ebony” (یک گز و نیم آبنوس) ‘while farting and braying with much excitement’ (گوز می افکند و میزد عر عر). The leader of the ladies said to the others: ‘If copulation is what this donkey is doing / Our husbands surely shit on our pussies’ (گر جماع این) (ان).¹⁵ (است که این خر می کند بر کس ما می ریند این شوهران).

It is not just Anvari, but many a twelfth-century poet has tried his hands at ribaldry. Sana’i Ghazanavi (b. 1150) – to become a mystic later in life - tells the tale of a woman in labour that sends someone to ask for a remedy from a holy man which would relieve her pain. The messenger comes across a eunuch on the way who tells her to tell the woman that pain cannot be avoided: “You have enjoyed the sweetness of fucking / So put up with the pain of squatting” (چون) (چشیدی حلاوت گادن / بکش اکنون مشقت زادن).¹⁶

Yet, in a more subtle anecdote, he says that an old woman had a

¹³Hamidi, *Behesht-e Sokhan*, 439.

¹⁴Hamidi, *Behesht-e Sokhan*, 437.

¹⁵Ali Asghar Halabi, *Tanz o Shukh Tab'i dar Iran va Jahan-e Eslami* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Behbahani, 1998), 491.

¹⁶Sana’i Ghazanavi, *Hadiqa al-Haqiqa*, ed. Modarres Razavi (Tehran: N.P., 1951), 387.

pretty daughter called Mahsati as well as three cows. One day the girl became seriously ill, making the mother extremely unhappy. Meanwhile, one of her cows put her head into a pan but could not take it out. She emerged from the kitchen with her head in the pan. The mother thought it was the Angle of Death and shouted: "I aren't Mahsati, Angle of Death / I am only a poor old woman; If it's Mahsati you have come to claim / There she is for you to take'; It is she who is ill, not me / Don't with her confuse me".

ملک الموت من نه مهستی ام
من یکی پیرزال محنتی ام
گر تو را مهستی همی باید
اینک او را ببر که می شاید¹⁷

Khaqani (1126-1198), the great twelfth century poet was so proud that he did not regard any other living poet worthy of the name. This got him into highly scathing exchanges, among others, with his teacher and father-in-law Abol'ala Ganjavi and his own pupil Mojir al-Din Bilaqani, both of them poets of different standing, though much less talented than him. He wrote other lampoons and abuse about all and sundry, even including the lesbians of Baghdad: This is drumming, not fucking / resulting in a world-full of noise.¹⁸ He wrote about a Lord As'ad:

خواجه اسعد چو می خورد پیوست
طرفه شکلی شود چو گردد مست
پارسا روی هست , اما نیست
قلتبان شکل نیست , اما هست

¹⁷Hamidi, *Behesht-e Sokhan*, 329.

¹⁸*Divan-e Khaqani Shirvani*, ed. Zia Al-Din Sajjadi (Tehran, Zavvar: 1959), 808-809.

When Lord As'ad goes on drinking

His appearance looks ironical – drunk

He *is* pious looking but he is not one

He is not looking like a pimp, but he *is* one.¹⁹

Khaqani's contemporary, Suzani Samarqandi (1072-1166) is perhaps the most notorious classic in harsh lampooning and ribaldry. His *Divan* is packed with harsh lampoons many of which are low in artistic touch. He too was at odds with his contemporary poets and used to attack them in poems which he wrote in the same metres and rhymes as theirs. One of his targets was the great poet Nezami Ganjavi for whom he wrote an elegy before his death:

نظامی ار چه نمرده ست , مرده انگارم
به نظم مرثیتش حق طبع بگزارم
چه گر بمیرد و آنگاه مرثیت گویم
چو نشنود که چه گویم چه سود گفتارم
لطیف مرثیتی پیش او فرو گویم
چنانکه در دل او آرزوی مرگ آرم...
بمیرد آن سگ زن روسپی به مرگ سگان
اگر چه گوید با شیر نر به پیکارم...

Nezami is not dead but I assume he is

And write his elegy in verse

For if I do so after he dies

What's the use when he hears it not?

¹⁹Sajjadi, *Divan-e Khaqani Shirvani*, 847.

I'll write him such a delicate elegy
That would induce him to have death-wish...
Let that dog of a wife-whore die like dogs,
Even though he says he will fight me like a lion...²⁰

Both Rumi and Sa'di, two of the all-time great classics flourished in the thirteenth century. They were both humorous in different ways, though, as mentioned, Rumi has a number of virtually pornographic tales. One of the better known is the story of the lady without a male partner who discovered that her slave girl lets the donkey in the stable have sex with her, not suspecting that she uses a pumpkin as a buffer. She tried to imitate the girl without the use of the pumpkin and died as a result: 'It was a most disreputable death, my friend / Have you ever seen someone martyred by a donkey's prick?', (مرد / مرگی با فضیحت ای پدر / تو شهیدی دیده ای از کیر خر ؟²¹) Rumi also tells the story of two men, one of them good looking with a small beard, the other, ugly, whose beard had not yet grown. They once stay the night in a *khaneqah*, and in the middle of the night the beardless youth erects a barrier around himself with bricks. A resident man comes along with ill intentions. The pretty male had a small beard and so was out of bounds. He asks the beard-less youth why he had done that. He said, to protect myself from geezers like you, since: A few hairs on the chin are more protective / than thirty bricks around one's ass (بر زرخ سه چار مو بهر نمون / بهتر از سی خشت گرداگرد کون)²².

However, much that Rumi wrote in his *Masnavi*, let alone *Divan-e Shams*, was far from harsh and indelicate. He tells the tale of a man whom a group of dervishes invite to eat with them. At the dinner spread he joyfully repeats with them the zekr (evocation) 'the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone' (خر برفت و)

²⁰*Divan-e Hakim Suzani Samarqandi*, ed. Naser al-Din Shah-Hosseini (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1959), 62.

²¹*Ketab-e Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson, Book Five (Tehran: N.P., N.D.), 86-87.

²²Nicholson, *Ketab-e Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, Book 6, 493-495.

(خر برفت و خر برف), unaware that they had secretly sold his donkey to throw the feast. The camel's knees are rough and dirty since she sits on them. Rumi says in a piece:

آن یکی پرسید اشتر را که هی
از کجا می ایی ای اقبال پی
گفت از حمام گرم کی تو
گفت خود پیداست از زانوی تو

Someone asked the camel, hey

Whence come you, you lucky one?

From your neighbourhood's bath, he answered

Ah, it's obvious from your knees, he said.²³

Almost everything that Rumi wrote contained a mystical message, though this did not stop them from being humorous as well. The tale is famous of the merchant who had a parrot and, going to India, he asked it what it wanted as a souvenir. The parrot asked him to ask wild parrots how it could return to them. On return, the merchant said that when he put the question to the Indian parrots one of them dropped dead. Whereupon his own parrot dropped dead and he threw it out of its cage. The parrot flew up and was free.

Sa'di (c1210-1292) was the greatest Persian satirist of the thirteenth century. His satire is usually subtle and amusing, and contains a maxim or is instructive in other ways. In some of his works he resembles Rabelais who flourished more than two centuries after him, and sometimes Voltaire, who came centuries later, although no work of Sa'di's is blasphemous. No wonder that Voltaire said if Sa'di is from Persia then Persians must be a highly civilised people. He wrote in a short stanza:

²³Homa Katouzian, *Tanz o Tanzineh-ye Hedayat* (Tehran: Pardis-e Danesh, 2016), 90.

مردکی بود غرقه در جیحون
به سمرقند بود پندارم
بانگ می کرد و زار می نالید
که دریغا کلاه و دستارم

A little man was drowning in the River Oxus

- It was in Samarqand, I think –

Clamouring and complaining desperately

Woe for my hat and headdress!²⁴

Sa'di's *Golestan*, a gem of a prose book that also includes the occasional verse, is packed with verbal and fictional satires of various kinds. A minister told a great Sufi that he served the sultan day and night, hoping for his reward while fearing his wrath. The Sufi told him that if he worshipped God as much as he worshipped the sultan, he would be one of the most pious.²⁵

He tells the story of an imposter who dressed up his hair in the style of the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad and arrived in a town saying he was returning from Hajj and presented a qasideh to the king who gave him ample reward and treated him with great respect. However, one of the courtiers said that at the time of Hajj he had seen the man in Basra, so he was not a Hajji. Another one said that his father was Christian, how could he be a descendent of the Prophet. And they found his qasideh in Anvari's *Divan*. The king ordered him to be flogged and driven out of town. He told the king "I'll tell you one more thing and if it is not right I would deserve any punishment that you would mete out on me". The king agreed, and he said in verse:

²⁴Katouzian, *Satire*, 162.

²⁵Homa Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di* (Tehran, Nashr-e Markaz, 2009), 25.

غریبی گرت ماست پیش آورد
دو پیمانہ آب است و یک چمچہ دوغ
اگر راست می خواهی از من شنو
جهانیدہ بسیار گوید دروغ

If a stranger brings you yoghurt

It'll be diluted and full of water; Ask me if you want to

know the truth

An experienced traveller tells all sorts of untruths.

The king laughed and let him go.²⁶

A religiously devout man was guest of a king and at dinner he ate less than usual. And when they stood to prayers he prayed longer than he was used to. Returning home, he asked for food. His son asked him why and he said he had not eaten much at the court to impress the king. The son told him to repeat his prayers as well because his prayers at the court would not be answered.²⁷

A king asked an ascetic "Do you ever remember me?" He said yes, when I forget God.²⁸

They said an ascetic ate a lot of food every night and then prayed until dawn. A wise man said it would be much better if he ate lightly and slept through.²⁹

A king faced a difficulty. He vowed that if it was resolved he would give so much alms to the ascetics. When his prayers were answered he asked a trusted servant to distribute the alms among the ascetics.

²⁶Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 25-26.

²⁷Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 30.

²⁸Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 32.

²⁹Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 33.

Next day the servant returned and said he could not find one. Surprised, the king said to his knowledge there were four-hundred ascetics in his land. The servant said Sire those who are ascetic refuse the alm, and those who accept it are not ascetic.³⁰ Someone told his guru that he was tired of having so many visitors. He said give a loan to those of them who are poor and ask for a loan from those who are rich. You would then not be bothered by any of them.³¹

Someone got an eye-ache and went to a vet. The vet put in his eye what he would for beasts and he got blind. The case went before the judge. The judge said there is no compensation, since if he was not an ass he wouldn't seek treatment from a vet.³²

Someone's young good-looking wife died and his mother-in-law stayed at home on account of the dowry. The man found her presence unpleasant, but he could see no way out of it. One day a group of friends came to see him. One of them asked how he was in the absence of his beloved. He said seeing my mother-in-law is worse than missing my wife.³³

The relatively long tale of the Hamedan judge and the pretty farrier boy could have made a scandal in the twenty-first century. The judge fell madly in love with the youth and tried every trick to seduce him and eventually succeeded. One night they got together and on the same night the police chief was informed. The judge was at the height of ecstasy when one of his retainers brought him the news that the prince was on the way. The judge did not heed the warning. The prince showed up and this was the scene he saw:

شمع را دید ایستاده , شاهد نشسته , می ریخته , قدح شکسته , قاضی در خواب
مستی بی خبر از ملک هستی.

The candle standing, the youth sitting, the wine spilled on the

³⁰Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 35.

³¹Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 36.

³²Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 62.

³³Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 50.

floor and the judge drunken and sleep, unaware of all that there was.

The prince gently told him to wake up since the sun was rising. The judge got the message and said: Where did it rise from? He said from the east. The judge said thank God it is still possible to repent [since according to a hadith, as long as the sun rises from the east it is possible to repent]. His canny response was ineffective since the prince thought a man of his standing must be punished for others to take a lesson from it, and so ordered that he be thrown down the castle. The judge said I have been a servant of your dynasty, why don't you throw someone else so *I* would take a lesson. The prince laughed and forgave him.³⁴

Sa'di also tells the tale of a fox who was running away. They asked it why, it said they were catching camels. They said but you are not a camel. It said if an enemy said I was, it would be all over before he was proven wrong. In several anecdotes, Sa'di is critical of the marriage of old men with young women. In the shortest one of them he says that they asked an old man why he did not marry. He said "I don't enjoy the company of old women." They said but you are wealthy and can marry a young one. He said, "Being old, I don't have any joy with old women. How can a young woman have affection for me?"³⁵ In a lengthier anecdote he says that an old man married a young woman, trying to amuse her every night to make her happy. One night he told her that luck was with her in marrying him, not an arrogant and ill-tempered young man. The woman sighed and said what you have told me so far is not as good as what I heard from my midwife who said it would be better for an arrow to sit at the side of a young woman than an old man. So there was no hope of agreement and they separated. The woman then got married to a poor and aggressive young man and constantly thanked God that she had escaped from that hideous torture and reached this state of bliss.³⁶

³⁴Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 55-56.

³⁵Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 58.

³⁶Katouzian, *Golchin-e Sa'di*, 57.

The great fourteenth-century poet, Hafiz (1325-1389), lived for five years under the religious tyranny of a ruler who had defeated in battle his favourite prince and imposed the strictest possible Islamic rule. In his ghazals, we find jibes and subtle humour reflecting his acute unhappiness in those circumstances. He used to call the ruler, Amir Mobarez, “the chief religious police” or mohtaseb, each time he wanted to say something critical about him. For example, he says in a ghazal: Do not ever drink with the city’s mohtaseb / because he will drink your wine and throw stones at its cup.³⁷ And in another: “We drink, we are licentious, we love pretty youths / who is there in town unlike us; Do not mention to mohtaseb my vices / Because he is drinking constantly like us.”³⁸

میخواره و سرگشته و رندیم و نظر باز
وان کس که در این شهر چو ما نیست کدام است
با محتسبم عیب نگو یید که او نیز
پیوسته چو ما در طلب عیش مدام است

In yet another ghazal, he writes: Try to learn libertinism from mohteseb / Since he is drunk and no-one suspects it (ای دل طریق).³⁹ (رندی از محتسب بیاموز / مست است و در حق او، کس این گمان ندارد)

Neither does Hafiz leave the divine and the preachers unscathed. For example: The preachers who appear thus at the altar and pulpit / Do the other thing when no-one is looking. (واعظان) کاین جلوه در محراب و منبر می کنند / چون به خلوت می روند آن کار دیگر می کنند⁴⁰ Or: The Lord Imam whose prayers was so long / washed up his gown in the blood of wine (امام خواجه که بودش سر)

³⁷Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz, ed. Adib Borumand, aided by Purandokht Borumand (Tehran: Pazhang, 1988), 329.

³⁸Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 47.

³⁹Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 279.

⁴⁰Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 422.

41. نماز دراز / به خون دختر رز خرقه را قصارت کرد
wrote: Although I am drunk, libertine and sinful / Thank God
my fellow citizens are all sinless (من ار چه عاشقم و رند و مست و نامه)
42. (سیاه / هزار شکر که یاران شهر بی گنهند)

Again: Forty years we suffered and in the end / Our remedy
was in the hands of two-year-old wine (چل سال رنج و غصه کشیدیم)
43. (و عاقبت / تدبیر ما به دست شراب دو ساله بود)
In general, the humour of Hafiz is so subtle that it is difficult to appreciate fully out of the context.

The greatest classical satirist, however, is Obeyd Zakani (c.1300-1370). He compares with Voltaire and Jonathan Swift, to the extent that his satire involves sharp criticism of social injustice, prejudice and irrational beliefs. Contemporary but senior to Hafiz, he was an accomplished poet in his own right, but most of his satire is found in a series of small books such as *Cat and Mouse*, *Ethics of the Gentry*, *Joyous Treatment*, *The Hundred Maxims*, etc. His long poem, *Cat and Mouse*, is a political allegory about the war between the noted religious tyrant of Shiraz who had previously been the prince of Kerman and had defeated and killed the ruler of Shiraz, who was both a favourite of Hafiz and Obeyd. It tells how a cat in Kerman repented in a mosque of catching mice, unaware that a little mouse was hearing him. The mouse rushes to its friends and gives them the good news, and being elated, they bring the cat presents for its life-saving decision. But no sooner do they get close to him that he jumps at them and begins to catch as many as possible: “Five mice he captured-two in each front paw / And one was snapped up in his lion-like jaw” (دو بدین چنگ و دو)
44. The mice declare war and بدان چنگال یک به دندان چو شیر غرانا

⁴¹Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 290.

⁴²Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 426.

⁴³Borumand, *Ghazaliyat-e Hafiz*, 452.

⁴⁴“Cat and Mouse,” trans. Dick Davis, in Hasan Javadi, *Obeyd-e Zakani* (Washington: Mage Publishers, 2008), 129.

capture the cat, but it manages). to break free of its fetters and attacks and wins the war. This is a mockery of Amir Mobarez al-Din – Hafiz’s mohtaseb - portrayed by the cat whose piety is implied to be pure hypocrisy.

It would take a volume to describe and discuss Obey’d satirical booklets. Here let me quote a couple from his *Resaleh-ye Delgosha* or *Joyous Treatment*, some of which are written in Arabic:

For example:

They asked a man why does your son not look like you. He said, ‘If our neighbours leave us alone, my children would look like me’.⁴⁵

A man saw a baby cry and would not stop despite her mother’s gentle touches. The man told her if you don’t stop I’ll give your mother a treatment. The mother said this baby will not believe what you say unless she actually sees it.⁴⁶

And in Persian:

A man asked a preacher what is the name of Satan’s wife. He said ‘Come here and I’ll tell you’. The man went to him and the preacher said into his ear ‘You bloody pimp, how would I know?’ When he returned to his place, others asked him what the answer was. He said: Whoever wants to know should go and ask his reverent himself.⁴⁷

In another anecdote, Talhak (Cf. dalqak) the court jester was asked the meaning of cuckoldry. He said this question should be asked of judges.⁴⁸

⁴⁵*Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, ed. Abbas Eqbal, re-ed., Parviz Atabaki (Tehran: Zavvar, N.D.; date of preface, 1963), 251.

⁴⁶Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 118.

⁴⁷Javadi, *Obeyd-e Zakani*, 112.

⁴⁸Javadi, *Obeyd-e Zakani*; *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, ed. Abbas Eqbal, re-ed., Parviz Atabaki,

In another anecdote we read:

A man went to a doctor of religious law and told him that when he stood to prayers he got an erection; what is the remedy? He told him to think of his dead parents. He said it would not work. He said think of when you die. He said that would not work either. No matter how many advices of this kind the doctor gave, it was useless. He lost his cool and said ‘little man come and push it up my ass’. He said ‘I have come to you to do whatever you advise’.⁴⁹

In yet another coarse anecdote:

They were mating two donkeys in a village, a pretty woman being the owner of the he-donkey. The she-donkey’s owner told the woman how come you want 5 drachmas for the services of your donkey whereas if I want to copulate with a woman she would demand ten drachmas from me? The woman said ‘bring me a prick like this and I would give you fifty drachmas.’⁵⁰

Mowlana Qotb al-Din, a renowned physician, went to visit an important man who was ill. He asked the patient how he was. He replied that he had had fever but it had now broken, although his neck was still hurting. The physician said let’s hope that that too would break soon.⁵¹

A judge fell ill and the physician ordered him to be fed wine through his ass. This they did and he got drunk and began to shout and bellow. They asked his son what he was doing. He said he is shouting through his ass.⁵²

As it can be imagined there are a number of anecdotes in Obeyd’s *Treatise* on marriage and the relationship between husbands and wives, not to mention men and youths. He says in one of them:

289.

⁴⁹Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 278.

⁵⁰Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 286.

⁵¹Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 281.

⁵²Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 287.

A young wife went to the judge and complained, 'I am a young woman and my husband does not serve me right'. The husband said, 'I serve her as much as I can'. She said 'I am not content with less than five times a night'. He said, 'More than three times is not in my power'. The judge said 'What a strange plight I am in. They don't bring a case to me unless I have to contribute something myself. But let it be. I will undertake the other two times myself.'⁵³

Some of the anecdotes regarding men and youths cannot be repeated in polite society. Let us, nevertheless, quote one which more or less can be.

A Christian boy converted to Islam. The police chief ordered him to be circumcised. At night fall he sodomised the boy. Next day his father asked him how he had found the Muslims. The boy said they are a strange lot, when someone converts to their religion, in the morning they cut off his prick and at night they tear up his ass.⁵⁴

As mentioned, there is much more to *Obeyd* than has been presented here. But his was the peak of both coarse and subtle classical humour.

Passing over the neo-classical period in which much of the satire in poetry, such as in Yaghma Jandaqi and Qa'ani Shirazi, was coarse though still humorous, we arrive in the twentieth century which among so many other literary and cultural developments saw the popularity of humour both at the literary and journalistic level. The century opened with the movement against arbitrary rule (*estebdad*) and for the establishment of a constitution, subsequently known as the Constitutional Revolution. Within a short period, young poets and satirists took to the field and published their works in the extensive revolutionary press which had mushroomed up both in the capital and the provinces. The focus was on the aims of the revolution and especially the central objective of ending the shah's arbitrary powers.

⁵³Javadi, *Obeyd-e Zakani*, 93.

⁵⁴Eqbal, *Kolliyat-e Obeyd-e Zakani*, 279.

The old shah (Mozaffareddin) gave up resistance relatively easily, but he died soon, and when his son and successor (Mohammad Ali) mounted the throne it took two years of struggle between 1908 and 1909 before he would be overthrown.

Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1879-1955) is everybody's darling for his famous '*charand parand*' or charivari column in the newspaper *Sur-e Esrafil*. He displayed unrivalled talent both for his clear, simple and somewhat colloquial prose and for his highly effective political satire. But what he wrote was often scathing and sometimes libelous. He addressed one piece to Adam Smith whom he described as "the father of political economy." He said that Smith had been wrong in identifying nature, labour and capital as the three factors of production, because in that case the shah would have no way of increasing his wealth. The shah does not work, he went on to explain, his nature does not function well ever since he has been taking an opium tablet every night, and he has no capital. Would he then not be able to increase his wealth? He would, Dehkhoda went on to say, by holding a circumcision ceremony for the boy heir-designate, Ahmad Mirza, and collect the *pishkeshes* that courtiers and notables would be obliged to present to him on such an auspicious occasion.⁵⁵

In another piece he wrote a letter, as if addressed by the shah to the Swiss parliament. In it the shah is made to address the Swiss parliament as "his exalted excellency the parliament of Switzerland", ask the parliament to arrest all the Iranian dissidents in "his" realm and have them bastinadoed, and end by saying that the letter is accompanied by a ceremonial robe (*khal'at*) to show the shah's appreciation of his, i.e., the parliament's, services.⁵⁶

Dehkhodâ wrote a few satirical poems as well, but, though sometimes sounding colloquial, they tended to contain archaic words, and in any case were no match for his prose in *charand parand*.

⁵⁵See *Maqâlât-e Dehkhodâ*, ed., Mohammad Dabir-Siyâqi, vol. 1 (Tehran, 1983), 194-195.

⁵⁶Dabir-Siyâqi, *Maqâlât-e Dehkhodâ*, 199-200. For a study of Dehkhoda's life and works see the entry in Encyclopedia Iranica, www.iranica.com/articles/dehkoda.

Seyyed Ashraf (1871-c1934) published the newspaper *Nasim-e Shomal* (Northern Breeze), all the columns of which he virtually filled single-handedly. He was to a considerable extent Dehkhoda's counterpart in writing simple and colloquial poetry in support of constitutionalism as well as constitutionalists. He too was vehement in dealing with the shah, the anti-constitutionalists and critics of constitutionalism, but stopped short of Dehkhoda in his personal attacks. Still, he was scathing enough. He accused Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, a conservative cleric, of putting his faith on sale and destroying the dignity of Muslim people:

دشمن فرقه ابرار منم
 قاتل زمره احرار منم
 شیخ فضل الله سمسار منم
 دین فروشنده به بازار منم
 مال مردار حراج است حراج
 کو خریدار حراج است حراج...

I am the enemy of the freedom party [the sheikh is made to say]

I am the murderer of all freedom-lovers

I am Sheikh Fazlollah the pawn-broker

I am selling religion in the bazaar...

-Dead stuff I must put on sale

Come buyers, sale, sale!⁵⁷

Iraj Mirza (1873-1925) who was not a typically political poet was nevertheless moved by the action of Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri in taking

⁵⁷See Edward G. Browne, *Press and Poetry* (Hyderabad, India: Osmania University, 1914), 213-214. For Browne's English translation of this poem's first five stanzas, see 215-216.

sanctuary against the parliament (Majlis) to write:

حجت الاسلام کتک می زند
بر سر و مغزت دگنگ می زند ...
چک زن سختی بود این پهلوان
ملفتش باش که چک می زند
دستش اگر بر فکلی ها رسد
گوز یکایک به الک می زند ...
حالا در حضرت عبدالعظیم
شیخ در دوز و کلک می زند
ان شاءالله دو روز دگر
خیمه از آنجا به درک می زند

His reverend smacks you
He clubs your head and brain
A big slapper is this champion
Look out or he'll slap you.
If he gets his hands on men with a bowtie
He would beat the fart of each of them by a stick...
Now in the shrine of Abdol'azim
The sheikh is busy scheming
God willing in a couple of days
He would leave there and camp in Hell...⁵⁸

⁵⁸See *Divan-e Kâmel-e Iraj Mirzâ*, ed. Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub, fifth impression (America:

Of the poets who continued - indeed advanced - the writing of harsh political poetry in the period of post-revolutionary conflict and chaos, the highest prize should go to Aref-e Qazvini (c.1281-1933) and Mirzade-ye Eshqi (1893-1924). Much of the humorous effects of their political lampoons are due to the coarseness of the language, although Eshqi's poetry is considerably more mature, and he might even have made a notable poet had he not fallen victim to political assassination at an early age.

The end of World War I and the conclusion of the 1919 Agreement led to an explosion of nationalist passions both in response to the influenza epidemic, famine and chaos, and to what was firmly (but erroneously) believed to be the design to turn Iran into a British protectorate.⁵⁹ It was of course not just poetry. The newspapers opposed to the 1919 agreement – that is, most of the papers published in Tehran were full of innuendos and sometimes downright libels against the government and its leading figures. Eshqi addressed an obscene poem to Vosuq, the prime minister, saying that Iran was not his daddy's property, was not the rent of his boyhood adventures, and was not the wages of his loose-laced daughter.

ای وثوق الدوله ایران ملک بابا یت نبود

اجرت المثل زمان بچگی هایت نبود

مزد کار دختر هر روز یکجایت نبود...⁶⁰

1986), 12-13.

⁵⁹Almost everyone was convinced that this was the case until 1981 when, for the first time, this author argued against it. See Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (London and New York: Macmillan), 77-78. For a detailed and documented study of the Anglo-Iranian 1919 Agreement, see idem, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), chapters 4-7.

⁶⁰See *Kolliyat-e Mosavvar-e Eshqi*, ed. Ali Akbar Mir-Salimi (Tehran: Mir-Salimi, 1943), 292. For a study of Eshqi's life and works see the entry in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranica.com/articles/esqi-mohammad-reza-mirzada. For further and more recent studies of Eshqi and his works see Mohammad Qa'ed, *Eshqi, Sima-ye Najib-e yek Anarshist, Virast-e Dovvom* (Tehran: Tarh-e Naw, 2001); Solmaz Naraqi, *Mirzadeh-ye Eshqi* (Tehran: Nashr-e Thaleth, 2009).

Aref went overboard and described the entire Iranian people as asses:

...People of this lawless land are asses

By God both common and grand are asses...

He who heads the ministers,

- I swear by the God of both worlds -

Is a bigger ass than them all

In fact he is a stable-full of asses ...⁶¹

And he ended this long poem with verses which could well be the subject of a separate study:

بلشویک است خضر راه نجات

- بر محمد و آله صلوات -

ای لنین ای فرشته رحمت کن

کن قدم رنجه زود و بی زحمت

هین بفرما که خانه خانه توست

تخم چشم من آشیانه توست...

The Bolshevik is the divine guide to salvation

- Blessed be Mohammad and his people -

O' Lenin, O' angel of bliss

Take the trouble if you please

You may nest in the apple of my eye

Please step in, the home is yours...⁶²

⁶¹*Divan-e Aref-e Qazvini*, ed. Abdorrahman Seyf-e Azad (Tehran: Seyf-e Azad, 1948), 298.

⁶²Seyf-e Azad, *Divan-e Aref-e Qazvini*, 300.

The period between the 1921 coup and the fall of the Qajars in 1925 was one of intense power struggle between popular democrats and constitutionalists, on the one hand, and nationalists and modernists, on the other. Towards the end of the period, the body politic was divided between those for and those against a dictatorship led by Reza Khan, but in the first couple of years the situation was a good deal less clear-cut. For example, when Vahid Dastgerdi wrote a poem in praise of Reza Khan and incidentally attacked Eshqi and Aref, Eshqi wrote a long and devastating reply in a qasideh, leaving little to imagination:

ای وحید دستگردی شیخ گندیده دهن
ای که نامیدی همی گند دهانت را سخن
ای شپش خور شیخ یاوه گوی شندر پندری
ای نداده امتیاز شعر با گند دهن
پوستین بر پیکرت چون جلد خرسی کول سگ
هیكلت اندر عبا چون دوش نسناسی کفن
بر سرت عمامه چون آلوده با گچ سنده ای
رو در آینه نگر باور نداری گر ز من
ای سخن هایت همه مانند گوز اندر هوا
ای زبانت در دهان مانند گه اندر لگن...

O Vahid-e Dastgerdi, filthy-mouthed sheikh

Who call the filth of your mouth poetry!

O louse-eating sheikh in torn-off rags

Who mistake poetry for the filth in your mouth!

Your skin coat is like a bear's skin on a dog's shoulder

Your garment looks like a shroud around a baboon
Your turban is like a turd wrapped in plaster
Look in the mirror if you doubt my word
Every word of yours is like a fart in the air
Your tongue in your mouth is like shit in a basin...and so on.⁶³

At about the same time, Eshqi wrote a general condemnation of politics and politicians:

بعد از این بر وتن و بوم و برش باید رید
به چنین مجلس و بر کر و فرش باید رید
به حقیقت در عدل ار در این بام و در است
به چنین عدل و به دیوار و درش باید رید
آنکه بگرفته از او تا کمر ایران گه
به مکافات الا تا کمرش باید رید...

From now on the motherland and its environs must be shat on
Such a parliament and both its high and low members must be shat on.
Truly if the gate of justice is this roof and gate [i.e. the parliament]
Then such justice and its wall and gate must be shat on.
He who has been shitting on Iran up to her waist,
In retribution, up to his waist he must be shat on...⁶⁴

At the close of the fourth parliament in 1923, both Aref and Eshqi

⁶³See Mir-Salimi, *Kolliyat-e Mosavvar*, 407-409.

⁶⁴Mir-Salimi, *Kolliyat-e Mosavvar*, 403.

were still pro-Reza Khan. Aref was to continue his support but Eshqi was to renounce it. When the fourth parliament ended, Eshqi wrote his infamous poem in which he heaped insult and invective on virtually every politician:

این مجلس چارم به خدا ننگ بشر بود
دیدى چه خبر بود
هر کار که کردند ضرر روی ضرر بود
دیدى چه خبر بود
این مجلس چارم خودمانیم ثمر داشت
ولله ضرر داشت
صد شکر که عمرش چو زمانه به گذر بود
دیدى چه خبر بود...
دیگر نکند هو نزند جفت مدرس
در سالن مجلس
بگذشت دگر مدتی ار محشر خر بود
دیدى چه خبر بود...

This fourth parliament was a blot on humanity,

Didn't you see it all?

Whatever they did was loss upon loss,

Didn't you see it all?

Honestly was this fourth parliament of any use?

By God it was all loss

Thank heaven that its life was not to last,
Didn't you see it all?...
No more will Modarres jump and somersault
In the parliament's hall
The jamboree of donkeys is now up,
Didn't you see it all? . . .⁶⁵

Parvin E'tesami was a prominent woman poet with a pessimistic view of life and society, and was extremely sympathetic towards the meek, weak and downtrodden. And she often employed irony, not satire, in defending the weak and castigating the strong. She does however have a piece in the form of a dialogue or debate, in which she satirizes the symbols and agents of religious authority in a very effective way. The morality police (mohtaseb) stops a drunk and grabs his neck. The drunk tells him that what he has grabbed "is a shirt, not a [donkey's] rein (این پیراهن است افسار نیست)."

In the course of the conversation the policeman tells the drunkard he can be held at the mosque before they call the civil police, but he rebuffs that by saying that the mosque is no place for evil-doers. The policeman then says that the house of the judge is nearby so they can go there, but the drunk retorts that the judge himself may be in the tavern. In the end the policeman says that the sober should punish the drunk by whipping them, and the drunk says but no-one here is sober."

Iraj was an outstanding poet and satirist and in no way can justice be done to his work in this brief. He is, among other things, famous for his opposition to face veil. And we may here quote two specimens

⁶⁵Mir-Salimi, *Kolliyat-e Mosavvar*; 396-402.

⁶⁶*Divan-e Parvin E'tesami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, Calif. Mazda Publishers, 1987).

of his long poems on this subject.⁶⁷

Very briefly, the narrator says that as a young man he had once invited a woman into his home on a bogus pretext. He had then asked the woman to show him her face and the woman had severely rebuked him. As a result, he had changed tactics and, instead, made physical passes at the woman. The woman had responded positively, and they had ended up copulating while she was holding fast onto her hejab, refusing to show her face, because, the narrator jibes, chastity was in her face. The poet then concludes that, compared with liberated women, ignorant women wearing the face veil are far less capable of defending their honour.⁶⁸

And once more criticizing hejab, he says in another poem that they once drew the picture of a woman above the gate of a caravanseraï. The clerics, whom he calls ‘the turban masters,’ hear of it and arrive at the scene without delay. They mix dust with water, make a *neqab* for the picture, and thus save the faith—he comments—with a fistful of mud.⁶⁹

Another outstanding poet was Poet-Laureate Bahar who did not often write humorous poems but he has a long piece satirising the efforts to turn Iran into a republican dictatorship, in 1923-24, with a couple of stanzas of which we may end this talk:⁷⁰

چو جمهوری شود آقای دشتی

علمدارش بود شیطان رشتی

⁶⁷For a longish study of Iraj’s work, see Homa Katouzian, “Iraj, the Poet of Love and Humour” in HK, *IRAN, Politics, History and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁸*Divan-e Kamele- Iraj Mirza*, ed. Mohammad Ja’far Mahjub (Washington: Sherkat-e Ketab, 1989), 79-84.

⁶⁹Mahjub, *Divan-e Kamele- Iraj Mirza*, 177-178.

⁷⁰For a longish treatment of Bahar’s humour, see, Katouzian, “Satire in Persian Literature, 1900-1940”; and “Literature and Politics in Iran: 1919-1925.”

تدین آن سفیه کهنه مشدی
نشیند عصرها در توی هشتی
کند کور و کچل ها را خبر دار
ز حلاج و ز رواس و ز سمسار
-دریغ از راه دور و رنج بسیار...

ز عدل الملک بشنو یک حکایت
که آن بالا بلند بی کفایت
میانجی گشته بین بول و غایط
کند گاهی تدین را حمایت
شود گاهی سلیمان را مدد کار
که سازد این دو را با یکدگر یار
- دریغ از راه دور و رنج بسیار...

When there appears a republican in Mr. [Ali] Dashti

His standard bearer being that devil of a Rashti [Mirza Karim Khan]

[Seyyed Mohammad]Tadayyon, that insane old *Mashti*

Sits every night in the entrance hall of his home

Summons the riffraff up to the *hashti*

From cotton-whippers to pawn-brokers

- Alas the long way and great suffering

Listen to a tale about Adl-al-Molk

That that tall and useless bloke
Between shit and piss he tries to mediate
He sometimes to Tadayyon lends support
And at other times becomes Soleyman's assistant
To bring these two together
- Alas the long way and great suffering. . .⁷¹

To conclude this necessarily incomplete talk, ever since the rise of classical literature circa eleven centuries ago, satire was a genre that was used especially in poetry though sometimes in prose as well. In classical era it peaked in the fourteenth century, though it did continue less frequently and less prominently until the twentieth century when it flourished in the constitutional era. In the regime of one-man-rule that followed - and putting aside the occasional "harmless" satirical journals - it necessarily was either unpublished or muted, until the 1940s and early 50s when a number of good satirical magazines emerged in a free atmosphere. But that did not last long, until the revolution of February 1979 changed the nature of many things, including satire.

⁷¹*Divan-e Ash'ar-e Mohammad Taqi Bahar; Malek al-Sho'ara*, ed. Mehrdad Bahar (Tehran: Tus, 1989), I.