

Introduction

The texts presented here come from a little studied area of Persian literature consisting of poems that reflect critical attitudes (ranging from gentle irony to elaborate condemnation and even crude verbal aggression) towards people, situations, aspects and products of social, political and cultural reality.

Our study deals with this kind of poetry from its origins (10th century) up to the Timurid period (15th century) and ends with the age of Jâmi (d. 1492), traditionally considered the last great classical Persian poet. Despite this relatively limited time scale, the field of inquiry is very rich. It embraces a broad range of literary genres that may be considered members of a single great typological family. These genres include invective, cursing, lampoon, satire, diatribe, mockery, facetiae, social criticism, burlesque, parody and the like. Some of them are so close in terms of intent, motivation, expression and content that they often overlap. Thus, it might be the case that a poem can be classified under more than one of these genres.

This raises a number of problems for anyone wishing to use the above labels in classifying the poems. Nonetheless, we believe that an approach based on these genres is useful in understanding and distinguishing the compositions we are dealing with. This approach can by itself give a useful idea of the structure of the entire corpus of the poetry in question.

A division according to the categories used in the Arabo-Persian tradition would not be so enlightening. According to that tradition, the texts referred to here are generally associated with two categories: *hajv/hejâ*¹ ('satire', 'mockery', 'verbal aggression') and *hazl* ('witticism', 'facetiae', 'bawdy poetry'). These two categories are so loose and wide-ranging that they are unsuitable for making a preliminary grouping of poems for the purposes of an overall classification and comprehension of the literary texts in question.

Some basic discussion of the structure and development of *hajv* and *hazl* in the Arabo-Persian tradition is, however, useful. Only in this way can we

understand the original mechanisms and logic in our texts, making their links with the relevant Western literary genres clearer, and thus reducing the feeling that such genres are in some way being imposed from the outside.

The specific technical notions of *hajv* and *hazl* both came to the Persian world from Arabo-Islamic culture and preserved the original basic prerogatives of the respective models.² Like other literary phenomena adopted from the Arabo-Islamic tradition, once in the Persian context the *hajv* and *hazl* concepts assumed more of a functional and textual importance than a theoretical value, and critical reflection on the subject is rather rudimentary compared to the Arabic antecedents.³

The Genre of *Hajv* ('Satire', 'Mockery', 'Verbal Aggression')

The first *hajv* came into being in the pre-Islamic Arabic world as a kind of verbal weapon, with magic and defamatory power, used in tribal conflicts. Through *hajv*, the poet attacked, insulted and cursed his clan's enemies in order to humiliate them and undermine their position. With the advent of Islam, *hajv* continued to be practised in political and religious contexts but gradually began to lose some of its more militant force and was increasingly transformed from what was technically a political instrument into a complex literary phenomenon. It lost none of its offensive characteristics and became the main instrument for expressing criticism, censure and condemnation. At the same time *hajv* acquired a vast range of contents and accents (moralistic along with, for example, obscene and witty tones), which provided a more elaborate literary theme or genre (*gharaz*) compared to the other, more homogeneous, traditional themes or genres in classical Arabic poetry such as *marsiyye* (elegy), *madih* (panegyric),⁴ *nasib*/ghazal (lyric) and *fakhr* (self-praise). It was not unusual, however, for Arab theorists to describe *hajv* reductively as simply the opposite of *madih*.

Having entered the Persian literary world, *hajv* preserved its own dignity and importance on a par with other poetic genres, as Key Kâ'us (d. 1098) points out:

Whatever form your poetry has, *madh*, ghazal, *hejâ*, *marsiyye* or *zohd* (poetry of abstinence), write it in the most appropriate way possible and never express anything in a manner that may be considered imperfect.⁵

In Persian, *hajv* preserved most of the functional features connoting it in the Arabic world. It is thus primarily seen as a powerful verbal weapon capable of dishonouring and ruining the *mahju* (victim of satire). This conviction was present in various ancient texts. The author of the *Târikh-e Beyhaqi* (11th century), for example, describing the power struggle after the death of the caliph Hârûn ar-Rashid,⁶ says of the Grand Vizier Fazl ebn-e Rabi':

Fazl ordered that Ma'mun be stripped of the title of crown prince and he told the preachers to offend him from the pulpit and commanded the poets to write *hejâ* about him.⁷

Shams-e Qeys (fl. first half of the 13th century), on the other hand, warned against antagonising poets to avoid their taking revenge by impugning people's honour. This recommendation originated from first-hand experience. Having unwittingly offended a poetaster, Shams-e Qeys became a target for the poetaster's *hajv* and so wrote:

Thanks to the advice that I gave him out of courtesy, people will read *hajv* and insults about me from Khorasan to Iraq.⁸

One famous episode is narrated by Nezâmi-ye 'Aruzi (12th century) about Ferdowsi (d. 1019 or 1025) and the *hajv* that he wrote to shame the Ghaznavid sultan Mahmud (r. 998–1030), guilty of having treated him badly.⁹ In this *hajv* Ferdowsi himself stresses the lasting effect of *hajv*:

The poet, if angered, will write *hejâ*,
and that *hejâ* will last till Judgment Day.¹⁰

Many poems underscore this effect of *hajv*. Among the earliest examples is the following poem, which Shams-e Qeys quotes and attributes to Mo'ayyadî (12th century):

Not everyone knows how to put prose into poetry,
poetic skill is a gift from the incomparable Protector.

So if a poet likes to boast, do not be surprised:
he was lucky to receive this privilege from God!

His *madih* lifts people up to the Great Bear,
with his *hejâ* he covers heads with ashes.

A thought may also go well in prose, but it improves
if a poet turns it into verse with fine expressions.

Poetry makes the cheerful happy on feast days,
and fills soldiers with pride on the eve of battle.

But if a poet leaves his brand on a person,
the person will never be able to get rid of it.

Try therefore, as far as you can, to keep poets satisfied,
if you are wise and intelligent, you won't annoy them.¹¹

A similar but more elaborate comment is provided by Rumi (d. 1273):

If your panegyrist makes *hajv* on you in public,
your heart will smart for days from the scathing.

Although you know that he said all those words
disappointed at having lost the hopes he had in you,

their effect will linger deep inside.
Something similar is felt with *madih*,

because its effect will also last for some time.
But you become proud and your soul is deceived,

without you realizing it, because the *madh* is sweet,
whereas with *hajv* you feel the bitter pain of accusation:

it is as bitter as a decoction or pill you have to swallow,
leaving you upset and suffering for days and days on end.

This is not so when you taste sweet halva: the flavour lingers,
but only for a while, as its effect is transitory and vanishes.¹²

Significantly, *hajv* is often described in Persian poetry as a real weapon (a spear, for example, or a sword) or as a kind of makeshift (a penis or a laxative) for the purpose, in both cases, of meting out an exemplary punishment. Here are two lines by Shatranji (12th century), alluding to the two functions:

Your deceitful promises grow fast and thick,
O hypocrite dog, and, through this behaviour,

I fear you want me to stick some lines of *hejâ* up your wife's arse,
just as spears are run through pagan heads, ready to be paraded.¹³

And, indeed, as if it were a weapon, the use of *hajv* is sometimes threatened as the last resort. Here is an example from Anvari (d. c. 1186):

I've addressed you *madh* as immaculate as a virgin cunt,
I've burst through the arse of my mind with great passion,
but now if you don't fuck me with the cock of a gift,
I'll squeeze the balls of *hajv* against you from behind.¹⁴

Kamâl od-Din (d. 1237) makes a very significant remark on this point. He suggests that skill in writing *hajv* must be an integral part of the repertoire of any poet:

Although writing *hejâ* is not agreeable,
God forbid a poet to be unpractised in it.

The poet who knows nothing of *hejâ*,
is like a lion with no claws or teeth.

If you don't study how to write *hejâ* from the start,
it's as if you had never been to school in this world.¹⁵

Some reports about the inconsolable reactions caused by *hajv* confirm its power to offend, as in the following line by Labibi (fl. first half of the 11th century):

When you eventually sit down and read this *hejâ* with care,
you'll tear out your beard, your wife the hairs from her pubes.¹⁶

All of this involves obvious dangers for the poets. There are thus invitations to use this harmful instrument sparingly, such as Key Kâ'us's warning:

Don't get into the habit of writing *hejâ*, since doughnuts don't always
come out with a hole.¹⁷

On the other hand, some poets vaunted the fact that they never indulged in this instrumental use of poetry. 'Abd ol-Vâse'-e Jabali (d. 1160), for example, asserts:

For me this is a great boast: no one can claim to have seen
an accusation in my prose and a line of *hejâ* in my poetry.¹⁸

But often these are purely rhetorical claims, as in the case of Khâqâni (d. c. 1199), whose output of *hajv* is in fact considerable:

In my poems you will never come across a single line of *hajv*,
just as in the garden of paradise you won't find a single thorn.¹⁹

Such a denial is part of a conventional use of disavowals, characterising especially the more outrageous examples of *hajv* poetry. Obviously, it was not advisable to express official approval of this kind of poetry openly.²⁰

In addition to being a verbal weapon, *hajv* is seen in the Persian world, in line with the Arabic tradition, as the opposite of *madh*. Again, Key Kâ'us is eloquent on the subject:

If you want to write *hejâ* and don't feel up to it, say the exact opposite of
what you would say to the same person in writing *madh*, because *hejâ* is
its opposite, just as ghazal is the opposite of *marsiyye*.²¹

Sometimes the poets themselves also set *hajv* and *madh* as antithetical terms. The difference between the respective effects on the addressee has already been evidenced in the passage attributed to Mo'ayyadi and that by Rumi, but the two phenomena are often opposed in relation to the poet himself. There are many examples, such as this line by Manuchehri (d. c. 1040):

The time has now come to do without *hejâ* and *madih*:
hejâ has harmed me and I've had no benefits from *madih*.²²

At times the antithesis concerns both the personality of the poet and the consequences for the addressee, as Jamâl od-Din (fl. second half of the 12th century) reminds us:

When composing *madh*, I am like the sun spreading light,
when composing *hajv*, I am like the sky destroying men:

my *madh* words convey nectar full of honey,
my pen writing *hajv* is a snake spitting venom.²³

Of modern critics, Bertel's gives one of the clearest descriptions of this antithesis:

The satire (*hajv*) of this period [10th century] takes us into a completely different atmosphere of artistic creation. While in the panegyric and similar forms all the poet's efforts are bent towards an idealization of the person praised and surrounding that person with a halo, satire has the diametrically opposite function: that of breaking the halo and making the defamed person appear in ridiculous or repugnant guises. Accordingly, the vocabulary changes because the poet, in describing filth, slovenliness and physical defects and deformities, naturally has to resort to words unacceptable in high literature. Particularly interesting is the fact that in satires we even occasionally find regional expressions, extraneous to literary language and thus highlighting how near these works are to the spoken language of the time. Nonetheless, these satires must not be considered as realistic works. The poetry that has reached us evokes grotesque caricatures which have nothing to do with realism. Rivals are represented as abominable, repugnant scarecrows in whose beards spiders weave their webs. Exaggeration is taken to extremes and it is impossible to reconstruct any kind of realistic picture from a series of insults. Indeed, in satire there is a parallel idealization of what is found in the panegyric but oriented, so to speak, in the opposite direction: it stresses everything that the panegyric scrupulously passes over in silence.²⁴

Notwithstanding comments and reflections of this kind, Persian *hajv*, like its Arabic antecedent, cannot simply be defined as the negative of the *madh*. It is a very elaborate literary phenomenon that includes not only satire (the term most widely used today to provide a translation) but, in different ways and guises, also many of the other 'sister' genres we listed at the beginning. Despite this complexity, a *hajv* text can be easily identified as such because of a number of well-defined features.

Firstly, let us look at the most common type of *hajv*. In this first type, the texts, in addition to a strong and structural critical approach, have humorous elements. They may make use of crude, direct images, at times obscene, also characterised by colloquial vocabulary and hyperbolic fantasies. Some of these tendencies, especially the obscene and colloquial, obviously violate the classical code. The overall structure of this code, however, not only with regard to rhetoric and prosody but also in terms of vocabulary and images, is preserved in the texts, thus ensuring the continuity of tradition. The co-

existence and combination of classical and innovative elements is one of the typical and striking features of this type of *hajv* and it permeates various aspects of it. For example, the usual figures of speech (especially similes, metaphors, hyperboles, 'fantastic etiologies', personifications and semantic analogies) are often dissociated from the usual models, which remain in the background as memory, and are applied in provocative and shocking ways to new subjects and contexts. This all produces a series of contrasts which, to be fully understood and enjoyed, requires deep knowledge of and comparison with the traditional canons. Each aspect of the stylistic heritage is called into question, starting from the pen-name. Thus we find a poet using the irreverent pen-name Kir-e Khar ('Donkey's Cock') in Râduyânî's *Tarjomân ol-Balâghe* (late 11th century).²⁵ The effect is desecrating and aims not only to capture the readers' attention but also to make them smile. Amir Khosrow (d. 1325) offers some enlightening remarks on the subject:

Regarding the apparently vain vaunt and ostentatious display of glory when I described the camel's dung as the choicest perfume of civet cat (or the best cream of its milk), it was nothing but a facetious expression of pleasantry that I offered to the well-directed ones for mirth and amusement. When what was a mere 'Darmana' grass or hyssop was given the name of powdered saffron, my object was to step up laughter at the expense of the merits of my own poetical pieces.²⁶

In the dialectic between the old and the new a key function is played by the themes, whose novelty brings shocking comic elements to the existing repertoire. In the general context of personal topics, the most disturbing elements concern the disparaging of important symbols in the Islamic tradition, such as the beard or male organ, and the violation of basic taboos related to cleanliness, nudity, sexual activities and the family. The descriptions are often amusing caricatures highlighting instincts and animal needs (eating, drinking, defecating, vomiting, having sex, etc.) in the attempt to humiliate rivals and bring them into disrepute. This kind of facetious and outrageous *hajv* is the most typical and widely found.

There is also, however, a variant of *hajv* with serious tones and content, more in line with tradition. Although less significant and representative of *hajv* in the overall sense, this variant is generally more appreciated by the critics, compared to its facetious and outrageous counterpart: its moderate approach makes it morally and aesthetically acceptable. Frank humour is replaced by irony, crudity is stripped of obscenity, fantasy no longer reaches

extreme heights, the vocabulary and imagery remain within the classical canon, the subjects no longer have outrageous accents and here concern, above all, ethical and intellectual faults such as avarice, corruption and pride. A conscientious point of view takes over from material calculations and individual interests: the poet prefers to stigmatise and denounce the *mahju* rather than make him the butt of humiliation and ridicule.

Many factors condition a poet in choosing which of the two variants of *hajv*, facetious or serious, to use. The causes inspiring it, its purposes and the types of *mahju* are certainly very important.

Various causes may drive the poet to compose *hajv*. They are often identified and described by the poet himself: he may be rebelling against an insult or a wrong done to him or his patron; he may be involved in a dispute with another poet; he may be disappointed at not having received hoped-for gifts, possibly promised by the patron; or he may be reacting to private or public customs and behaviour that he views as questionable. Other more unfathomable reasons may be related to existential dissatisfaction and could derive, for example, from psychological complexes or physical problems.

As with the causes, the purposes of these poems are also often identified and described by the poet himself. Summarising what we have said so far, the main purpose of these compositions is to attack and denounce individuals or groups of individuals that the poet deems to be his rivals or his patron's enemies. Sometimes the personal vein is diluted and the poet is concerned to highlight vices and defects of a moral, political or social nature, and, in such circumstances, may even suggest remedies and solutions. The purpose is literary when the poet focuses on phenomena limited to the art of writing. In the frequent cases in which the poet is a court professional, he obviously also aims to entertain his patron and entourage and to obtain some recompense.

The type of *mahju* is also crucial. There are various types of *mahju* and their status obviously influences the tone of the composition. In most cases the target is an individual, whose name may or may not be mentioned and whose position as part of a socio-political category is generally established (sovereign, poet, minister, judge, family member, acquaintance, enemy and the like). The *mahju* may also be a group or class of people and can be identified collectively: for example, as a particular religious order, the inhabitants of a city, a professional category or a set of people sharing the same attitudes. Lastly, the poet may fire his criticism, not at people and human contexts, but at literary phenomena: the *mahju* in this case may be a genre, form, style, type of lexicon or something similar.

Whatever its characteristics, *hajv* poetry, like any other poetic expression in that literary world, must observe a set of conventional rules in order to guarantee its own plausibility and enjoyment as a literary product. In other words, as we have said above, it must show those linguistic, rhetorical and prosodic expedients typical of Persian poetry in general. Consequently, the content of *hajv*, as with all kinds of Persian poetry, is a subject that the poet must above all be concerned to dress in beautiful and polished forms. In this case too, judging the merits of a poem in a traditional way means focusing more on the effectiveness of the *elocutio* than the materials of the *inventio*, which basically remain the same throughout the centuries.

This formal attitude suggests a key for interpreting *hajv* compositions, whereby the aesthetic-intellectual aspects are more important than the socio-political and emotional circumstances. From this point of view, the text becomes a kind of verbal performance in which what is displayed and tested is the poet's compositional skill rather than his personal feelings and reactions. Indeed, the themes are actually often so conventional and predictable that they can be considered part of the related poetic code. The *extra-text*, in other words, appears in many cases to be of little relevance for the purposes of a textual evaluation, and simply takes on the features of a *pre-text* for what is mainly a display of artistry. In this situation, the rhetorical function of the poem assumes a greater role compared to the criticism conveyed, and contrivance overshadows the sincerity of the inspiration. The text thus adopts the tones of a literary act that may be enjoyed beyond the related socio-political and emotional context. This kind of interpretation is in line with the general canons of the Persian poetic tradition, in which the panegyric vein shares similar formal inspiration.

There are, however, some situations in which the content of *hajv*, again analogous in this sense to panegyric poetry, is crucial and the focus of attention. Here the knowledge of personal and political circumstances is fundamental to understanding the passages in question. But such circumstances may be difficult to grasp or even wholly incomprehensible today, limiting, or even preventing not only the interpretation but also the enjoyment of such texts. These may well be *hajv* poems that were very successful in their day, but since their interpretative key has been lost they are much more difficult to appreciate today. In such cases the socio-political and emotional circumstances overshadow the aesthetic-intellectual aspects.

In line with these distinctions, the relationship between a poet and his audience may also vary. To cite two extreme possibilities, it may range

from a technical understanding, involving the encoding and decoding of texts, to a kind of psychological complicity fuelled by the sense of superiority towards the denounced subjects and pleasure in the effrontery and transgression.

The Genre of *Hazl* ('Witticism', 'Facetiae', 'Bawdy Poetry')

Just as the term *hajv* is set in opposition to *madh*, *hazl*, again following the Arabic tradition, is opposed to *jedd* (earnestness) in the Persian world. This antithesis is documented in old texts, such as the *Târikh-e Beyhaqi*:

Your speech is *jedd*, not spiteful joys and *hazl*.²⁷

There are numerous poems on this topic. An example is the following lines by Manuchehri about 'Onsori (d. 1039), where the *hazl/jedd* pair, accompanied by the *hajv/madh* pair, seems to indicate the complete range of possible behaviour as a writer:

He is calm like a mountain with a cave of peace,
his nature is like a sea with the pearls of the mind:

in his poetry and in his prose, in his *madh* and in his *hajv*,
in his *jedd* and his *hazl*, when he writes and when he drinks.²⁸

As in the case of *hajv*, the boundaries of *hazl* are rather wide-ranging and loose. It actually shares the same expressive features as the most typical *hajv*, being witty, often crudely direct and striking in its fantastic and outrageous invention as well as in its blending of classical and innovative vocabulary and imagery. *Hazl* shares with *hajv* the same addressees and the same audience, but its emphasis on amusement is more significant than the critical intent. In *hazl* no judgement or serious commitment is necessarily expressed. It reflects a playful and frivolous attitude and focuses on the comic and nonsensical side of human affairs leaving aside political or social discontent and denunciation. In this sense *hazl* is less anchored to reality than *hajv*, and is distinguished by a greater freedom in distorting contents and references. Among its specific official tasks is that of entertaining by distracting and attracting the public at the same time, following some specific lines of the *adab* literature.²⁹ Its most typical feature is

obscurity, often leading it to be identified, in the view of Persian authors, with humorously bawdy anecdotes.

The situation is not, however, always unequivocal and clear-cut. Sometimes poems, although amusing and daring in the *hazl* sense we have just described, also express political or social discontent and denunciation, rightfully taking their place among the texts we wish to present in this book. The borderline between *hazl* and *hajv* is a very grey area in this case, as has been evidenced by some critics who deal with them as two branches, one comic and the other serious, of the same ‘tree’.³⁰ In fact, compositions technically defined as *hazl* may reveal an alternation or a mixture of the typical tones of *hazl* (generally condemned as anti-ethical) and critical accents associated with a more responsible, sometimes even morally impeccable, involvement. This often led to contradictory attitudes on the part of Persian authors towards the phenomenon of *hazl*. The differences in judgement depend on the various contexts and purposes of the output in question. There are, thus, expressions of disapproval, as in these lines by Nâser-e Khosrow (d. c. 1077) where the opposition between *hazl* and *jedd* is stressed:

Don't make lies, swearing and *hazl* your trade:
don't go and cut off your nose to spite your face!

If you lie, when judged fairly,
you do not have a bright future.

He who swears when speaking,
won't be respected and esteemed.

Anyone practising *hazl* will certainly lose all his honour,
even if a king, and will be humiliated, even if the moon:

instinct leads to *hazl* and enjoys it,
but the mind seeks and delights in *jedd*.

Arguments that set out to honour wisdom
must be stripped of lies, swearing and *hazl*.

The soul will be dowsed if you engage in *hazl* every day,
but a radiant instinct becomes like the spirit through *jedd*.³¹

Disapproval of *hazl* is also expressed at times by authors, such as Monjik (fl. second half of the 10th century), who are notorious for their outrageous

passages.³² This highlights differences in judgement even within works by the same author:

I won't listen to absurdities, lies or *hazl*:
saying *hazl* is always heresy in Islam.³³

Sanâ'i and Rumi, who, as we shall see below, support the didactic usefulness of *hazl*, also express a similar negative opinion, generally discouraging and condemning *hazl*. Sanâ'i claims:

Every time a judicious person hears *hazl*,
he plugs his ears with the fingers of religion.

When a frivolous spirit spouts *hazl*,
people will rightly grow hard of hearing.³⁴

And Rumi says:

Close the bodily eyes to *hazl* and lies,
and you'll see the city of the bright soul.³⁵

Sharing these negative opinions, Owhadi (d. 1338) gives a clear warning of the dangers involved in writing *hazl*:

Hazl can bring shame on you,
and, if excessive, also enemies.³⁶

Criticism of *hazl* poetry may even be accompanied—in a rather unusual combination—by negative comments on *madh* verse. In the following line by 'Attâr (d. 1221) it is the general human and social context, whether praised or mocked, which is called into question for the purposes of a philosophical-type reflection.

Composing verse with *madh* or *hazl* tones is tantamount to nothing,
it is better to write poetry on wisdom since it has no twisted logic.³⁷

In addition to these severe judgements, however, we find a number of positive opinions about *hazl*. The utilitarian interpretations of *hazl*, proffered in the collection of fables entitled *Kalile o Demne* (completed c. 1144), are a good example:

The chapters of the book are based on wisdom and spiritual warnings in a setting, however, of *hazl*, so that ordinary people, thanks to this *hazl*, will be induced to read it and gradually become familiar with its truths, in the same way that high-ranking people are normally attracted to this book to gain experience.³⁸

Positive judgments on *hazl* are expressed especially in relation to its opposite *jedd*, as in this line by Anvari:

Only wiseacres are devoted to *jedd* without ever indulging in *hazl*:
this kind of speech anguishes the soul and makes boredom grow.³⁹

We are generally talking, in any case, about a measured use of *hazl*, the function of which is often compared to that of salt in food, as Sanâ'i claims:

Jedd expressions with no *hazl* are bland,
food requires salt to be truly savoury.⁴⁰

A famous example of this approach is the opening of the *Resâle-ye Delgoshâ* by 'Obeyd (d. c. 1370):

The faculty of speech, on which depends the nobility of man, has two aspects, *jedd* and *hazl*. Although *jedd* is undoubtedly superior to *hazl*, when *jedd* is continuous, it brings boredom, just as uninterrupted *hazl* leads to disdain and disrepute. On this subject the ancients have said:

All year *jedd* wears out the soul,
all day *hazl* ruins your honour.

Having said this, to dispel boredom and cheer up the spirit, refined people have at times been interested in a certain kind of *hazl*, in keeping with the saying of the wise, whereby '*hazl* must be used in words, like salt in food', which is the same invitation that can be read in the following lines:

Relieve your troubled tormented mind
with pleasant sayings and witticisms,

but don't use them overmuch;
dose them well, like salt in food.

The poet's thought is thus enacted when he says:

Even when talking about the unique God and about eloquence
you can indulge in nonsense, but only gracefully and moderately.

All of this will be forgiven, since our great considered it licit!⁴¹

This attitude of moderate approval also affects the contents of *hazl*, as can be seen in the following lines by Jâmi:

The garden is joyous with smiling flowers,
a smile is indeed fitting dress for the wise.

Smiling is certainly different from *jedd*,
but continuous *jedd* is not indispensable.

The heart suffers because of *jedd* from morning
to evening: cheer up your spirits with *hazl*!

Jedd is like hurting your feet on a unending walk,
hazl is like a moment of relief along that road.

If the relief fails to soothe the wound,
you will surely perish from the pain.

But *hazl* must not end up darkening
the bright face of your *jedd* with lies,

and thus sow the seeds of rancour in hearts,
making the brow bead with shame's sweat.

Be inspired, therefore, by enlightening wisdom,
and say just things, but in a sweet witticism!⁴²

As we have seen, the positive attitude to *hazl* focuses on the use of light and pleasant poetry without any reference to its outrageous and obscene variant. It must be said, however, that even those who argue that elegant, moderate *hazl* is the only acceptable form often indulge in poetry with decidedly indecent tones, thus evidencing the widespread dichotomy in that world between the theory and practice of writing poetry.

In the context of the *hazl/jedd* pair, it is also significant that the great masters of mysticism acknowledged the didactic usefulness of *hazl*. This is what Sanâ'i says on the subject:

Jedd has clearly nothing at all to do with *hazl*,
but my *hazl* poetry and my *jedd* poetry are kin:

in the treasure honouring the sovereign,
both beautiful and ugly things can be seen.

My *hazl* is not simple *hazl*, it is instruction!
My poems are not simply poems, but a universe!

And do you know how the master's mind
exercises his teaching in that universe?

While his *jedd* cheers up the listener,
his *hazl*, with its magic, inspires the soul.

I thank God that, for experienced people,
my *hazl* is more welcome than others' *jedd*.⁴³

Rumi literally borrows (albeit with the hemistichs inverted) the third line by Sanâ'i just quoted,⁴⁴ and also repeats this opinion in greater detail:

Hazl is instruction: consider it equal to *jedd*,
don't be deceived by its appearance as *hazl*!

Every *jedd* is *hazl* for a *hazl* person,
every *hazl* is *jedd* for a *jedd* person.⁴⁵

The great master of the art of life, Sa'di, is of a similar opinion:

I didn't say these things for pure amusement,
leave their *hazl* side and look to their *jedd*!⁴⁶

An expert like 'Obeyd is more categorical and explicit in his *Resâle-ye Sad Pand*:

Don't despise *hazl* and don't disdain whoever writes it!⁴⁷

To complete this assessment of *hazl*, we would like to quote some other comments justifying the presence of such expressions only in specific circumstances. Here is the advice given by Key Kâ'us to his son:

Jesting may be tolerated but offence should never be given. If you cannot resist making crude quips and unworthy gestures, make sure they are not aimed at people below your social rank, because you would expose your dignity to the ignominy of their reaction. Choose your peers and, if they reply, then no ill will come of it. Ensure that your *hazl* is, in any case, alternated with *jedd* and do not go so far as to be insulting. Although jesting inevitably involves some *hazl*, be careful not to overstep the mark, because you will be in danger of cutting a petty figure.⁴⁸

The same balanced approach is advocated by Key Kâ'us when addressing an ideal boon companion for the sovereign:

He must be dedicated to both *jedd* and *hazl*, showing an awareness of the appropriate moment for each by not saying *hazl* when the moment requires *jedd* and not showing *jedd* when everyone is saying *hazl*.⁴⁹

Again on the subject of the relation between *hazl* and the sovereign's boon companions, Nezâm ol-Molk (d. 1092) claims:

The sovereign can say a thousand different things, both *jedd* and *hazl*, to his boon companions, things that he could never say to his minister and other dignitaries ... Only with his boon companions can he be completely at ease. With them he spends carefree moments, and tells witty curious stories and even pleasantries mixed with *hazl*, without his honour or regal nature being impaired. He has them with him precisely for this reason.⁵⁰

In line with this measured approach is what Shams-e Qeys notes on the subject, even if he does not actually mention the word *hazl*:

Human speech is as varied and different as the kinds and classes of people. Speech can be beautiful and ugly, good and bad, pleasant and weak, and all these forms are widespread and often practised. And it may be the case that unpleasant witticisms and silly quips are well suited also to important gatherings and bring greater success than pleasant witticisms and subtle quips to those who pronounce them on such occasions. The same happens with the catamite ballads. Despite their vulgar expressions and base content, they manage in some gatherings to give pleasure that goes beyond that generated by more admirable words and elegant poems.

Given this situation, rejecting some statements and rebuking someone for what they say is neither perceptive nor wise, and is against the rules of virtuous people.⁵¹

This series of comments highlights how the approach to *hazl* is more elaborate and complex than that to *hajv*. In fact *hajv* and *hazl* are usually dealt with and described as two different categories but, as we have already suggested, *hajv* poetry and the *hazl* poetry expressing political or social criticism (i.e. the two kinds of poems making up the corpus of our book) are ultimately so close that, in terms of their historical development in the Persian world, they may be considered two sub-divisions, each with its own specific characteristics, of a single category.

Historical Background

Significantly, two of the earliest examples of Persian poetry (not yet influenced by Arabic prosody) show precisely those features of invective and satirical poetry typical of the majority of our corpus. The first example, containing touches of *hajv* and *hazl*, was composed towards the end of the 7th century by Ebn-e Mofarreh (d. 688). Guilty of having written *hajv* against his lord, the poet was punished: having been surreptitiously administered a laxative, he was left in the streets of Basra tied to some animals, including a pig. When the laxative took effect and some stinking liquid began to drip on the pig from the poet's clothes, some boys in the street asked him what it was, to which he replied:

It is water, date juice,
with nectar of dried figs,
and the pig is Somayye.⁵²

Somayye was the mother of Ebn-e Mofarreh's lord. Interestingly, the poet was of Arab stock, and this fact seems symbolically to mark the entry of this specific Arabic tradition into the Persian world.⁵³

The second example is a set of *hajv* lines recited at Balkh by a group of boys poking fun at Asad ebn-e 'Abdollah (d. 738) when he returned in 726 after being defeated in a campaign against the lord of Khatlân:

You are back from Khatlân,
 you are back in disgrace,
 you are back in disarray,
 you are back scraggy and skinny!⁵⁴

The interesting feature in this second example is its popular aspect, suggesting that this kind of poetic attitude had autochthonous Persian roots, onto which the inheritance from the Arabic world was grafted.⁵⁵ On closer examination, it truly seems to have been a successful combination: Arabic culture provided the Persian world with a complex heritage of technical forms and content concerning *hajv* and *hazl*, and the Persians, for their part, found this specific inheritance so congenial that they soon made it a lively part of their new literary tradition.

And in fact the development of *hajv* and *hazl* poetry in Persian follows the development and fate of all Persian poetry. The first significant examples date from the Samanid period (10th century) and testify in general to disputes of poets with rival poets, with their patrons and with other, not always identifiable, figures. Here is what Bertel's has to say on the subject:

A characteristic feature of the poetry of that time [10th century] was the development of satire (*hajv*). To be precise the use of the word satire is not completely appropriate here. In fact 10th-century *hajv* is not what we usually mean by satire. In similar poetic compositions there is no kind of social criticism (any criticism of the ruling class was even unthinkable). The purpose of these satires was in general only to eliminate rivals. The authors mainly poured scorn on their rivals and accused them of the most disgusting vices, even resorting to false accusations without the least scruple. The less talent a poet had, the more he concentrated on satire, thus trying to carve out a successful career. At that time satire was typically considered unworthy of respectable people and it was usually not included in collections of poems. Only individual fragments of these satires have survived. But this is no great loss. These compositions are interesting only from the linguistic point of view: unlike panegyrics, they are written in a humble style, and for this reason may contain some very interesting vocabulary.⁵⁶

This ethical and aesthetic judgement by Bertel's appears to be unjustly severe. In the light of our readings, we must also revise the notion that the

ruling class was above criticism, although freedom of speech is more evident after the 10th century. On the other hand, there can be no doubt about the linguistic importance of these poems, despite the fact that they have only survived in isolated lines and are often difficult to interpret.

A major source at the linguistic level in this context is the *Loghat-e Fors* (10th century), the earliest Persian monolingual dictionary to have survived in several manuscripts. It contains many lines of *hajv* and *hazl*. Significantly, a number of obscene lines are used to illustrate entry words which are not obscene. The presence of such lines is thus due to the choice made by the lexicographer, who could easily have selected illustrative lines of a different kind.⁵⁷ This may suggest that the lines in question were particularly useful for the purposes of exemplification, probably because they were well known.

Regarding their textual features (especially the lexicon and imagery), the 10th-century examples are fairly far removed from the complex, daring compositions of later periods. This is both because of their brevity and because they are part of the as yet not fully-developed origins of Persian poetry itself. The many authors include ‘Ammâre, Ma‘rufi, Monjik and Shahid.

In the Ghaznavid period, parallel to the rise of the first great panegyrists in the 11th century, there was a considerable development in the output of *hajv/hazl*, with the first long poems in this mode. A typically prolific author was Labibi, but some traditionally more celebrated poets also wrote *hajv*: Ferdowsi lashed out at the Ghaznavid sovereign Mahmud;⁵⁸ Manuchehri rebuked a rival who envied him at court;⁵⁹ while ‘Onsori clashed with Ghazâ‘eri, giving rise to one of the earliest disputes in Persian poetry.⁶⁰

At the end of the 11th and beginning of the 12th centuries, with Sanâ‘i we find the first substantial examples of *hajv/hazl* focused not only on personal matters (the dominant trend at the time to which the same Sanâ‘i had contributed through many poems) but also extended to wider-ranging issues with social and political hues. It was also Sanâ‘i, in his role as writer of both religious texts and *hazl*, who paved the way for the use of *hazl* in mystical poetry. From then on, *hazl* elements, like all the other elements from the earlier secular heritage, were enlisted in spreading the spiritual message, as was well exemplified a century later by a good deal of Rumi’s poetry.

Like panegyric, this poetry took off in the Saljuq period: in the 12th century *hajv* and *hazl* often became so thoroughly mixed as to be inextricable in many cases. One of the most striking features of this output is great inventive skill, reflecting analogous developments in contemporary serious poetry.

This flourishing of *hajv* and *hazl* was encouraged by the difficult socio-political situation that generated more occasions for disputes between poets and also between poets and patrons. It is unusual to find a 12th-century poet who has not composed some lines of *hajv* and *hazl*, but the prize, both for quantity and quality, is usually awarded to Suzani and Anvari. For his part, Khâqâni is often classed as one of the touchiest and most irascible poets. The targets of his poetry include his master Abu'l-‘Alâ’, his supposed pupil Mojir od-Din, some contemporary poets such as Vatvât, masters of the past (‘Onsori) and his own family (his father). Among the other significant poets in this period were ‘Am‘aq, Asir od-Din-e Akhsikati, Jamâl od-Din, Mojir od-Din, Mokhtâri, Qamar, Ruhi, Shatranji and Zahir od-Din-e Fâryâbi. Kamâl od-Din and Qomri were trenchant and prolific poets at the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th centuries.

In the 13th century, Sa‘di considerably furthered the tradition of this kind of poetry with his ironic and amused comments on the vicissitudes of daily life. Although very audacious *hazl* poetry has been attributed to him, most of his *hajv* is in a sincere and moralizing style that was further elaborated in the 14th century by Hâfez, Khâju and, especially, ‘Obeyd, whose acute observations of the social and political scene opened a new chapter in the history of this kind of poetry. Two other 14th-century poets with a watchful critical eye on public life were Ebn-e Yamin and Owjadi.

With the advent of the Timurid dynasty in the 15th century, the output of *hajv/hazl* again shared the fate of all contemporary poetry: it spread endemically among the various strata of the population, and at times reached extremely refined heights, as can be seen in the poetry of Boshâq, Qâri and Jâmi, who marks the chronological limit of our survey.⁶¹

Poetic Forms

The range of poetic forms used in *hajv/hazl* poetry is broad. The *qet‘e* is the most recurrent form, thanks mainly to its nature, which permits freedom in choosing themes even from the sphere of daily life, and its formal flexibility. In this form, the rhyme in the initial hemistich is usually omitted and the number of lines may vary. The *qaside*, commonly used for panegyric, that is, the opposite of *hajv*, can also be used for *hajv/hazl* (this is also attested to in the Arabic tradition). *Masnavi* (long poems with rhyming couplets) and *robâ‘i* (quatrains) are both well suited to composing *hajv/hazl*, albeit for different reasons. Because of its length and its

rhyming scheme with a different rhyme in every line, which are elements making it easier to develop the narrative, the *masnavi* is an ideal vehicle for two common forms of *hajv/hazl*: monologues and stories.⁶² The *robâ'i*, on the other hand, because of its brevity, is an epigrammatic form particularly suitable for hitting the mark pithily and for memorising. The ghazal is not frequently used in composing *hajv/hazl*. Its identification with the lyric and its extremely rigid codification leave little room for the kind of inspiration found in the bold ideas of *hajv/hazl*. Its use in this context is generally limited to 'serious' satire aimed at bigotry and hypocrisy. Moreover, the ghazal tends to present a different theme or idea in each line and the consequent semantic independence of individual lines is not suited to the mainly narrative structure typical of poems dealing with *hajv/hazl*. If this kind of poetry appears in a ghazal, however, it seldom indulges in crude and overly-brazen tones. Exceptions are two famous *tarji'band* (strophic poems) whose stanzas are, in fact, each made up of a sort of ghazal with *hajv/hazl* contents.⁶³ The overall structure of the *tarji'band* may indeed be considered less lyrically fragmented thanks to the refrain after each stanza, allowing a certain thematic continuity to be maintained.

Tradition of Studies

Despite the wide-ranging and rich picture of *hajv/hazl* in Persian literature, the tradition of studies on the subject is very scanty. This reflects a generally accepted traditional view also in other literary worlds whereby poetry of censure or criticism in general—not just because of its content but also due to its vague broad boundaries—is usually considered a kind of illegitimate sister compared to genres codified in a more well-defined and clear fashion. Moreover, our studies even run into hostility when dealing with those texts that have an outrageous vocabulary and imagery. The obscenity typical of many of our texts is so embarrassing for scholars as to inhibit activity at all levels (critical editions, textual analyses, historical studies, theorisation) and research has suffered as a result.⁶⁴ In these cases, we are faced not simply with a lack of interest but also a prejudice, generated in particular by the fear of those very taboos that our poets delighted in violating.⁶⁵ The damage to a deeper understanding of the whole of Persian literary history is self-evident. It would be like claiming to write and study the history of Latin literature while neglecting the cruder sections of the satires of Martial and

Juvenal.⁶⁶ Here we wish to try and reverse this trend. Our aims include the possibility for readers to become familiar with some of the pages neglected in traditional studies, i.e. some outrageous sections of *hajv* and *hazl* poetry. Such a contribution is important not only from the historical, literary and aesthetic points of view, but also because this kind of poetry is notably representative of the culture at the centre of our interests, bearing in mind the great popularity it enjoyed and still enjoys with Iranian readers, as one eminent scholar points out:

Facetious poetry's success and popularity are mainly due to ordinary people's interest in futile insults and trenchant witticisms. It is precisely because of this that authors of *hazl* such as Monjik of Termez, Tayyân-e Zhâzhkhây [10th century], Suzani of Samarkand, Hakim Kushkaki [12th century], Yaghmâ [d. 1859] and Iraj [d. 1926] have become renowned and their poetry has spread among ordinary people more or less to the same extent as ballads and popular songs. Their trenchant witticisms met with favour because they afford that pleasure which many take in seeing others as the target of humiliation and moral rebuke, especially if accompanied by the terrible abuse and jokes that ordinary people are capable of. Some of their *hajv* poems are slanderous, often indecent, full of offence, and generally characterised by hetero- and homosexual obscenities, offending honour and morality. Despite this, even serious and respectable people may be attracted to that world and secretly delight in and enjoy those pleasantries.⁶⁷

Authors and Texts

To present our corpus in a balanced and unbiased way, we felt that the authors should speak for themselves. We thus decided to translate a series of texts representing the *hajv/hazl* phenomenon as a whole. This selection takes into account the various factors to be highlighted (authors, periods, themes, poetic forms and significance). We present 169 compositions by 65 poets making a total of 1,628 lines.⁶⁸ Classifying them chronologically we have the following groups:⁶⁹

10th century: 'Abbâsi, Abu 'Âsem, 'Ammâre, Kesâ'i, Ma'rufi, Monjik, Morâdi, Rudaki, Shahid and Tayyân (10 poets and 20 compositions totalling 23 lines);

- 11th century: ‘Asjadi, Dibâji, Gorgâni, Kâferak, Labibi, Lâme’i, Manuchehri, Mas‘ud-e Sa‘d, Nâser-e Khosrow and ‘Omar Khayyâm (10 poets and 30 compositions totalling 169 lines);
- 12th century: Abu ‘l-‘Alâ’, Adib Sâber, ‘Am‘aq, Anvari, Asir od-Din-e Akhsikati, ‘Attâr, Ebn-e Khatib, Jamâl od-Din, Khâqâni, Mahsati, Mojir od-Din, Mokhtârî, Nezâmi-ye ‘Aruzî, Nezâmi-ye Ganjavi, Qamar, Rashidi, Ruhi, Sanâ’i, Shamsi ‘l-A‘raj, Sharaf od-Din Yahyâ al-‘Owfi, Shatranji, Suzani, Vatvât and Zahir od-Din-e Fâryâbi (24 poets and 73 compositions totalling 683 lines);
- 13th century: Badr-e Jâjarmi, Farghâni, Homâm, Kamâl od-Din, Nezârî, Pur-e Bahâ, Qomri, Rumi and Sa‘di (9 poets and 22 compositions totalling 443 lines);
- 14th century: ‘Âref-e Ardabili, Ebn-e Yamin, Hâfez, Khâju, ‘Obeyd, Owahdi and Salmân (7 poets and 18 compositions totalling 221 lines);
- 15th century: Âgahi, Bâbâ Sowdâ’i, Boshâq, Jâmi and Qârî (5 poets and 6 compositions totalling 89 lines).

Regarding the poetic forms, they are mainly *qet‘e* but there are also several examples of *masnavi* and *qaside*, various *robâ‘i*, some ghazals, a *tarji‘band* and many single lines.

The selection was made by scrutinising divans, dictionaries, *tazkere*⁷⁰ and anthologies, initially ignoring typological classifications.⁷¹ At a subsequent stage, the selected corpus was divided, bearing in mind the genres listed at the beginning of the introduction. We have thus established three main categories of poems.

Two categories include compositions reflecting a critical and censorious approach to people or human contexts.

The first of these two categories consists of poems in which the author’s attitude varies from hostility towards behaviour or actions that he condemns as offensive, depraved, evil or unpleasant, to amusement at something he considers ridiculous and absurd, with all the shades of meaning in between. These compositions all contain, albeit with various degrees of intensity, elements not only of aggression or derision but also of judgement and denunciation. They have been defined in our classification as ‘satirical poetry’ and include, at one extreme, serious social criticism, and at the other a playful, jocular treatment along the lines of comedy. This is the largest category and amounts to 109 compositions totalling 1,261 lines.

The second category is made up of compositions which, while still showing a critical and aggressive attitude, clearly lack an element of judgement and denunciation. They have been defined as ‘invective poetry’. This category also includes compositions technically described as imprecatory, ranging from simple ill-wishing to vitriolic cursing. In this category there are 49 compositions and 126 lines.

The third and last category includes compositions in which the critical comments are directed at literary phenomena instead of human subjects. They are witty, amusing compositions about forms, styles, genres and poetic procedures in the serious tradition and have been defined as ‘burlesque poetry’. This category has 11 compositions and 241 lines.

We must point out that various compositions, although clearly ascribable to one of the three categories, may also contain elements that are typical of the other two, and so with, for example, invective and imprecatory poetry characterized by traits of satire and burlesque. This confirms what we said initially about the difficulty of making clear-cut distinctions between such typological labels. Nonetheless, the three categories of satirical, invective/imprecatory and burlesque poetry do make a useful reference point for an overall interpretation of the structure of the corpus.

Following this logic, and wishing to frame in more detail the mechanisms of our selected poems, we have also made subdivisions in each of the three categories according to the textual and extra-textual features described in the introduction. Satirical poems have thus been grouped in relation to the *mahju*;⁷² invective and imprecatory poetry by theme; and burlesque poetry according to the literary phenomenon involved.

As for the subject matter, invective and imprecatory poetry turns out to be the simplest and most linear, while satirical and burlesque poetry are increasingly elaborate and complex. This led us to deal first with invective and imprecatory poetry, then satirical and lastly burlesque.⁷³

Although chronologically limited to the period from the 10th to the 15th centuries, the corpus presented here turns out to be significant in terms of both quantity and quality. The tradition continued into the following centuries (see, for example, the important texts in the Qajar and Constitutional periods) and right up to the present day. Very popular among authors in every age, and an integral and vital part of Persian literary history, this poetry of censure and criticism, especially its main aspects dealt with here, namely, invective, satire and burlesque, can take its rightful place alongside the other more celebrated and more closely studied genres, such as lyric,

panegyric, epic and mystical poetry. In addition to historical and linguistic factors, many of these poems also deserve to be read for their technical and aesthetic achievement, which sets them among the masterpieces of Persian literature.⁷⁴