The Much-Maligned Panegyric: Toward a Political Poetics of Premodern Literary Form

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THE MUCH-MALIGNED PANEGYRIC: TOWARD
A POLITICAL POETICS OF PREMODERN LITERARY FORM

Rebecca Gould

ABSTRACT
This article examines the panegyric across the literary traditions of West, South, and East Asia, concentrating on Arabo-Persian qaṣīda, the Sanskrit praśasti, and the Chinese fu. In radically different albeit analogous ways, these three genres elaborated a political aesthetics of literary form that corresponded to many key features of epideictic rhetoric. All three genres cultivated a metapoetics for praising rulers and patrons that bolstered poetry’s political status. All three genres were additionally conditioned by the panegyric’s characteristic indirection whereby the object of praise shifts in the course of the text’s unfolding. In elucidating a differential politics of literary form, the essay aims to deepen the interface between poetics and power in premodern literary cultures and to stimulate the discipline of comparative literature to move beyond its reliance on more familiar European genres as normative modes of literary expression.

KEYWORDS: panegyric, epideictic rhetoric, ode, praise, aesthetics, genre, global comparison

In the decades since the institutionalization of contemporary literature within the North American academy, few scholars working within its paradigms have confronted the implications of bounding our typologies of literary form by European norms. One of the first visionaries to challenge this typological limitation was Earl Miner (d. 2004), comparatist par excellence, scholar of classical Japanese, early modern English, and chronicler of the complex fortunes of literary comparativism across space and time. Miner postulated that, among the many genres of world literature, the lyric is the foundational
genre. “The primacy of the lyric in the emergence of literature,” Miner wrote, “confirms its role as the originative or foundation genre for the poetics or poetic systems of all literary cultures except the western holdout.”

While Miner’s attempt to look beyond drama as the normative form for literature and to open comparative literary studies to non-European archives stands as a landmark achievement, the substitution of drama by lyric leaves unresolved the cultural hegemony implicit in existing typologies for literary form. Whereas for Miner the lyric is the foundation genre, other poetic genealogies reveal the lyric’s origins in the lengthier praise poem. The division of poetry into praise and blame that began with Aristotle and persisted, via the commentary of the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) in Hermannus Alemannus’ Latin translation, into the early modern period, reveals more about the values animating premodern literary cultures.

Following up on such premodern precedents, this article argues that the diversity of literary forms in Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, among many other literatures, is best accounted for through local taxonomies of praise, as found in the rhetorical traditions of these respective literatures, as well as in the poems themselves. Through close readings of specific panegyrics across the Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Chinese traditions, I demonstrate how the panegyric’s structure counter-intuitively subverts a patronage-based economy by glorifying poetry while ostensibly enacting the patron’s elevation, as well as by maximizing the rhetorical powers of the tropes of discursive indirection, double entendre, and self-referentiality.

Greco-Arabic Genealogies

While the poetry of praise “from Plato and Aristotle through the Renaissance” is regularly taken to be “the master model of poetry per se,” this literary mode has in recent centuries fallen into disrepute. The defense of the panegyric by the Dutch Renaissance humanist Erasmus already suggests the advent of a literary culture that was hostile to the poetry of praise. The great humanist criticized his contemporaries “who think Panegyrics are nothing but flattery [and] appear not to know with what design this kind of writing was invented by men of great sagacity, whose object it was, that by having the image of virtue put before them, bad princes might be made better, the good encouraged, the ignorant instructed, the mistake set right, the wavering quickened, and even the abandoned brought to some sense of shame.” The panegyric, its defenders sought to prove, is not simply
a medium through which the poet expresses his subservience to the state. And yet the case for the panegyric has had to wait for a time when critics could discern the many ways in which autotelic poetry extracted a political agenda from its rhetorical objects.

Defenses similar to those that Erasmus mounted for the panegyrics of his day have been articulated in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Arabic. In particular, the phenomenology of praise in classical Chinese literary history converges with Renaissance anxieties. Concerning *fu*, the Chinese panegyric, it has been noted that a poet who practices the art of praise was “more interested in the internal value of his writing than in its purported external function” of rendering praise to its patron and audience. As with the epideictic, a rhetorical mode that originates in a Greek verb meaning “to display,” the aesthetic goal of the *fu* is first and foremost “a celebration of itself” (Wu, 4). Before assaying a comprehensive geography of the global panegyric, it is worth examining developments in ancient and medieval theories of rhetoric that parallel the genre’s literarization in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Arabic.

For readers in medieval Europe and the Islamic world, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was a major locus for the poetics of praise. Aristotle determined that all verse could be divided into the poetry of blame, which corresponded to comedy, and the poetry of praise, which corresponded to tragedy. Speculating on the origins of poetry, he postulated that it “bifurcated in accordance with the corresponding kinds of character: more serious-minded people imitated fine actions . . . more trivial people imitated those of inferior persons (the latter at first composing invectives, while the others composed hymns and panegyrics).” His origin theory is currently displaced by the modern assumption that Aristotle’s primary genre of interest was drama and that his attention was occupied primarily by mimesis. However, the Aristotelian taxonomy of praise and blame exerted a substantially greater impact on medieval literary theory than did the mimesis concept. Specifically, this dual taxonomy inspired Ibn Rushd’s influential endeavor, on the basis of his Arabic-mediated encounter with Greek literary theory, to reduce all literary forms not to epic, drama, and lyric, but to praise and blame. “Every poem and all poetic discourse is blame or praise,” reasoned Ibn Rushd, while poems themselves pertain to either “the honorable or the base.” The Latin translation of Ibn Rushd’s commentary by Hermannus Alemannus (d. 1272) bequeathed to medieval European literatures this foundational Greco-Arabic (and subsequently Latinate) typology of literature into praise (*laudatio*) and blame (*vituperatio*).

A second locus for the poetry of praise, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, condenses within itself the taxonomic rubric that has structured discussions of the
panegyric from East to South and West Asia. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* divided the discipline into three parts of rhetoric: epideictic, also known as demonstrative; forensic, used in courts; and deliberative, used by politicians and in assemblies. Among these, the epideictic was held by Aristotle to be the “most literary [graphikotoiē], for it is meant to be read.” With this simple qualification, Aristotle singled out the global panegyric’s most recurring trait: its self-referentiality. In drawing attention to its status as a text, the epideictic panegyric has a double goal: to praise the patron who occasions its existence, and to confer glory on itself and its author. Diversely and yet with remarkable consistency, this goal ramified across Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian literatures.

The poetics of praise shaped discourse on the nature of poetry well into the sixteenth century, capturing the imaginations of critics as varied as the Florentine man of letters Coluccio Salutati, Dante’s commentator Benvenuto da Imola, and the Renaissance scholar and literary theorist Julius Caesar Scaliger. Following Ibn Rushd’s paraphrase of Aristotle, the Florentine critic Trissino (d. 1550) divided the first poetry into *encomium* and *vituperatio*. Like Ibn Rushd, he regarded tragedy as the highest form of praise and comedy as its antithesis, a form of satire or ridicule. Far from seeing lyric as the foundation genre, Trissino saw the lyric as derivative of both praise and blame, and divided it into two categories: “that of praise and admiration of better things, as in tragedy and heroic poetry, and that of execration and the blame of evil, as in comedy.”

While the temptation to make the praise/blame taxonomy normative for all world literatures should be resisted, grappling seriously with the forms of sociality and power this literary taxonomy enables can substantially revise our understanding of the place of poetry in political life and the place of political life in poetry. Unlike the tripartite and by now outmoded lyric–drama–epic taxonomy, the poetics of praise that were debated by Chinese and Sanskrit critics, theorized by Aristotle, revived by Ibn Rushd, and transformed by Renaissance literary criticism wield remarkable elasticity across cultures. Only in the wake of a Romanticist dispensation, which did away with patronage’s legitimacy, did the poetry of praise come to be seen as a fawning art, beneath poets’ dignity. Briefly surveying the fate of the panegyric in classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, this essay looks toward a time when the panegyric had not yet fallen into disrepute. It seeks to recover the poetics that shaped these literary texts, much maligned in modernity, but central to the political aesthetics animating premodern literary forms.
The Aesthetics of Indirection: Feng in Fu

While the Greco-Arabic genealogy shaped the rhetoric of praise in medieval European literary culture, the textual history of the panegyric itself begins with the Chinese fu. The first-century chronicle *History of the Former Han* describes the fu as a litmus test for a dynasty’s political power. “In ancient times,” writes the poet Ban Gu (32–92 CE), “when the lords, ministers, and great officers had contact with a neighboring state they tried to exert their influence with subtle words. When the time came to present themselves they invariably recited a poem in order to express their intention . . . in this way they could distinguish between the worthy and unworthy and perceive whether a state would prosper or decay.” So intense was the *fu*’s power that its recitation served as a barometer of a state’s stability.

The first extant text to refer to itself as fu is known as the “Owl Rhapsody” (*Fu-niao fu*) by Chia Yi, and is dated between 173 and 175 BCE. (A chapter of an earlier treatise by the philosopher Hsün Ch’ing also bears the title fu, but scholars regard this denomination as a later interpolation.) Partly but not exclusively a kind of rhetoric, the poet who composes fu is “a kind of rhapsode, and the poems he composed often display the ecstasy, grandeur, and emotional intensity associated with the rhapsody.” While the “Owl Rhapsody” is unusual for its subjective elements and Daoist philosophy, the real masterpiece in the canon of Chinese epideictic is the “Rhapsody on Literature” (*Wen fu*) by Lu Chi (261–303 CE), a work that is at once “literature and literary thought.” One feature of Lu Chi’s treatise is its embrace of contradictions, a characteristic consistent with the epideictic *fu*, which “encourages contradictions to exist together in close proximity.” As will be seen, indirect criticism became a genre marker of the Indic *prāśasti* and the Arabo-Persian *gāsīda* as well.

Another characteristic feature of the later *fu* is its incorporation of direct political criticism into its artifice of praise. One particularly notable instance of this tendency is Pan Yue’s “Guangzhong Poem,” composed after the suppression of the Di people’s rebellion in the Guangzhong region of southern China in 274. According to later testimony, the poet had been commissioned by Emperor Hui to compose a poem celebrating the ruler’s victory over the rebels. The text the emperor received must have considerably diverged from his expectations, assuming that he ever read it. Although Pan Yue’s *fu* was ostensibly written to honor the ruler’s victory, the poet devotes the bulk of his text to dwelling on civilian suffering and challenging official condemnations of the rebels. One of the poem’s most
poignant passages reads more like a lament than a panegyric, conventionally understood:

    I grieve for those common folk,
    Who are entirely innocent,
    Their livers and brains smear the ground,
    Their white bones lie across the roads.
    Husbands leave, wives remain widowed. [ . . . ]
    How are these common folk?
    They were brutalized in the Qin region.
    Armies and troops were forced on them, 
    After which followed starvation.
    Plagues ran rampant everywhere,
    Thorns grew into bushes.
    The crops and grains of Jiangyang
    Were transported along the Wei River.\textsuperscript{19}

Such lyric digressions, which contest the panegyric’s presumed uncritical allegiance to the sovereign, have stimulated subversive readings of Pan Yue’s poem. Such readings discern in the text a reminder “of the corruption and injustice in the court, which had caused and aggravated the Di rebellion, rather than a celebration of the victory over it.”\textsuperscript{20} Looking ahead to South Asia, this brief consideration of the Chinese \textit{fu} can be concluded with a Sanskrit inscription that partakes of the panegyric genre while, like the Chinese \textit{fu}, infusing the ideology of praise with the pathos of subjective suffering. These words were inscribed on a stone in honor of a twelfth-century Buddhist monk who had strayed far from his homeland in Bangladesh to the Buddhist university of Nālandā. The monk died in exile after bequeathing his property to the university:

    In Somapura there lived an ascetic
    named Karunāśrīmitra,

    He cultivated the Buddhist virtues
    by showing compassion to all living things
    and bringing them happiness and welfare.

    From Vangāla came armies, they threw fire
    in his dwelling, and it burst into flames.
    Clutching the Buddha’s lotus feet
    the ascetic went to heaven.\textsuperscript{21}
The Praśasti’s Quest for Glory

Fu originates in a Chinese term for declamation and was originally recited orally. Its Sanskrit equivalent, the praśasti (nominative plural: praśastayah), has always been represented textually. What has differed most about the praśasti over time is the medium of its textualization: originally inscribed in stone, the praśasti was in later periods carved on copperplate, until it attained its final and, from the point of view of literary history, most significant stage when it was transposed from a material object into a courtly aesthetic that acquired a new life in manuscripts. Before turning to this later moment in the praśasti’s trajectory, it is worth considering the genre’s status within Sanskrit literary theory.

One of the most geographically capacious genres in South and Southeast Asian literary cultures, praśasti suffused the inscriptional world from India to Nepal to Cambodia and Indonesia from the first centuries of the common era until soon after the beginning of the second millennium. Most extant praśastis are in Sanskrit, but where the local language was the language of state, praśastis were inscribed on rocks, walls, and pillars in local vernaculars. More than historical documents, praśastis are “full-fledged ornate poems, written usually in elaborate meters, and now and then in literary prose.” The Sanskrit critic Namisadhu (fl. 1069) defined the praśasti as a “description of the king’s family on behalf of their glory.” Unlike both the qaṣīda and the fu, there is no evidence for the praśasti’s genesis within an oral realm. This genre was fundamentally and exclusively inscriptional.

Notwithstanding the genre’s geographically capacious reach and multilayered meanings, modern scholarship has until recently exhibited an unambiguous disdain for the praśasti’s dependency on patronage. Nineteenth-century Indology was content to reduce the genre to texts “composed in accordance with the desires of princes or rich men.” Such reductions lend credence to Daud Ali’s observation that “whereas texts like the Puranas have been able to move beyond the ‘documentary’ readings of colonialist Indology, inscriptional eulogies . . . have tended to remain in the empiricist framework of dynastic chronology.” As Ali’s complaint indicates, prasastis have been treated by modern scholarship as flawed historical documents at best, and as mere obsequy at worst. This condition is paralleled by the fu in Chinese modernity, wherein, according to one scholar, the genre “is held in low repute in China, both on the mainland and Taiwan.” Not coincidentally, this situation is paralleled in contemporary Persian criticism, in which context a recent study bears the revealing title The Panegyric: A Shameful Stain.
on the Face of Persian Literature. Although Sheldon Pollock and Daud Ali have recently elaborated methodologies for reading praśasti sympathetically, with the single important exception of Pollock no scholar has yet assayed to read praśasti as literary artifacts. Hence the complaint, voiced twenty years ago, that “virtually all modern readers of these public poems have been uninterested in them as texts, and have only used them as documents to be mined for reconstructing the economic or social or political history of southern Asia,” still stands.

While ignoring their literary qualities, scholars have, from the nineteenth century onward, mined praśasti for historical data. A typical Orientalist reconstruction of this genre delineates the following characteristics of the praśasti:

1. A genealogy and panegyric to the patron, and to the prince if the prince is not the patron.
2. A description of the physical monument on which the praśasti is engraved.
3. An expression of desire for the monument’s permanence and its conservation.
4. Mention of the chief builder who built it and the priest who consecrated it.
5. Mention of the poet who composed the praśasti and its scribe.
6. The date of composition (not always accurate).

Even when they deride the genre, scholars conceive of praśastayah as collective creations, dependent on the poet’s linguistic choices, and operating within complex social networks that enable figurative language to engender political engagements. Like the fu, praśastayah conform to the didactic imperative that animates literary epideictic globally, and which confirms the genre’s intimacy with sovereign power.

Although praśasti ultimately came to be treated as kāvya (poetry) in classical Sanskrit literary theory, modern scholars assumed that such texts could never transcend their absorption by history, inasmuch as pure literature, if it was to be found anywhere in premodern South Asia, could only be discovered in apolitical contexts. A socially implicated literary form such as the praśasti, qaṣīda, and the fu, which is driven by values embedded within a given social structure, cannot easily be reconciled either with the aesthetic criteria of literary modernism or with the positivist empiricism of nineteenth-century Wissenschaft. Thus the Indologist Winternitz indicates that praśastis matter only as historical sources. That the “insignificant poet
named Rāma” calls himself “prince of poets” (kaviśvara) and “boasts that the goddess Sarasvatī came to live in his mouth-lotus even before he had forgotten the taste of his mother’s milk,” is merely grounds for mockery from the perspective of nineteenth-century Indology. Winternitz attaches more importance to the assessment of his colleague George Bühler, who edited and published the inscription, than to the literary imaginations of the praśasti poets themselves. Accordingly, Bühler’s description of Rāma, this praśasti’s author, as a poet of “much talent and learning” is deemed by Winternitz more hermeneutically significant than the fact that Rāma refers to himself as “prince of poets.” Winternitz’s injunction to accord greater weight to positivist historical criticism than to the text in question attests to the anti-epideictic bias of modern scholarship.

The Panegyric’s Indirection: Vakroti and Feng

It is by no means clear that praśasti are solely concerned with praise, if such a characterization is taken to mean that these texts are monologically related to the social order or tethered to its uncritical idealization. Indeed, Pollock argues that the poetic intention of praśastayab consists not in their obvious denotative function (the praise of a ruler and/or patron) but in their expressive functions, in its obsession, not with the what, but with the how, of literary signification. “If as a genre praśasti can be said to be about anything,” writes Pollock, “it is as much about exploring the capacities of the Sanskrit language for the production of praise as about the content of the praise itself.” The panegyric’s indirection is enacted more through its expressive capacity than its formal content. This insight reinforces the dictum of the eleventh-century king and literary theorist Bhoja (d. 1060), who, as we will see shortly, was himself the subject of a praśasti: “Ordinary language is the direct language of science and everyday life; kāvyā, by contrast, is the indirect language [vakram] found in descriptions.” Bhoja’s distinction between kāvyā and the language of everyday life is structured by a literary device that had long animated the Chinese panegyric. Whereas Bhoja perceives the distinction between literariness and everyday language to reside in indirection, the Chinese panegyric tradition politicized this insight through the concept of feng (indirect criticism).

One thousand years before Bhoja, the Chinese poet and theorist Yang Hsiung (53 BCE–18 CE) argued that the Chinese epideictic (fù) exists “for the purpose of criticizing by indirectness, and a writer is required to . . . use
ornate language to the extreme, grossly exaggerate, greatly amplify, and strive to make it such that another person cannot add to it.”\(^{34}\) Yang Hsiung related the fu’s reliance on ornate language to its indirect poetics (feng). Feng, which also means “wind,” fulfills its etymological destiny by obliquely suggesting what is wrong with the ruler’s conduct and how this conduct might be corrected. In his History of the Former Han Dynasty, Pu Khan singled out the Confucian poets Hsün Ch’ing and Ch’ü Yuan for mourning their country by deploying feng in their fu.\(^{35}\)

The conclusions reached by Bhoja in this relatively late period of Sanskrit poetic theory are central to any endeavor to grapple with the politics of premodern poetics in Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian. In resisting purely denotative language, premodern literary cultures constituted the panegyric as a discourse about, within, and sometimes against, sovereign power. Although such stances would appear to imply contradiction, the panegyric as a literary genre is relevant to our political present precisely because it managed, as few literary genres can today, to hold all three relations to power in tension with one another, in a single poetic gesture. Unconcerned with conveying meaning through the direct manipulation of language, the panegyric aesthetic in these premodern contexts altered meaning indirectly.

To the argument that the panegyric’s specificity resides in its discursive indirection, it might be objected that many forms of verbal (and nonverbal) art rely on indirection. However, the panegyric’s aesthetics of indirection is qualitatively distinct from that of nonliterary genres. While other speech acts (for example, professions of love or acts of deception) are also performative in the sense outlined by J. L. Austin, the global panegyric maximizes discursive indirection’s capacity to intervene in the world.\(^{36}\) Without indirection, the panegyric can neither attain beauty nor confer immortality. Neither Bhoja’s nor Yang Hsiung’s formidable theories of literary meaning could have developed had these theorists not been awed by the panegyric’s expressive power. From South to West to East Asia, every literary tradition with a courtly component activated its power through the panegyric.

Praśastayah were originally not considered to constitute literature by scholars who devoted their attention to traditionally elevated registers such as the mahākāvya (epic) or story genres such as the kathā and ākhyāyikā. Even “thus-it-happened” narratives (itīḥāsas) such as the Mahābhārata have fared better in terms of the scholarly attention they have received. Unlike the Arabo-Persian qaṣīda, which was regarded by the Islamic rhetorical tradition as the normative literary genre, the praśasti was not defined by Sanskrit literary theorists as a genre onto itself. Praśastayah often mingled with other genres, including even dramas (nataka). Winternitz lists
two dramatic prāśasti that were, like thus-it-happened narratives, carved into stone on temples later turned into mosques. Madana, the author of one dramatic prāśasti, Pārijatamañjarī, refers to his ruler–patron, King Arjunavarman (r. 1210–1215) of Dhar in central India, as an avatar of Bhoja, the very same king who pioneered new ways of thinking about literature’s discursive indirection. One need not look far to discern Arjunavarman’s motives for presenting himself as an avatar of his illustrious ancestor, also of the Paramara dynasty. “The might of the virtuous Bhoja himself has appeared in the body of Arjunavarman,” the text declares in its opening verses. In this recently discovered dramatic prāśasti, inscribed on the walls of a former temple to Sarasvatī (the goddess of knowledge), situated in Bhoja’s dominion, the dialectic between denotation and expressivity comes full circle. Bhoja, the poet–king who theorized the literary, is transformed by Arjunavarman into a figure of the poet’s literary imagination. Materially and poetically, this prāśasti birthed a new discursive world into being.

This short quotation from Pārijatamañjarī condenses the prāśasti’s ideological structure: a ruler is elevated through the poem’s claim to immortality. This claim in turn functions as an argument for poetry as a manifestation of otherworldly sovereignty. Poetry, it is argued, enables the praised one’s immortality through textual inscription. Compared to the paper on which the qaṣīda was written and which conditioned the genre’s materiality as well as its mortality, the stones and copper plates on which prāśasti were originally recorded were relatively permanent media for textual transmission. In contrast to the qaṣīda, inscribed on delicate paper, and requiring many transcriptions in order to be preserved for posterity, a single prāśasti could survive in its original form, if not forever, then at least for millennia.

The prāśasti inscribed on the stone pillar at Allahabad by the court poet Hariṣena, dated 345 CE, is arguably the best-known text in this genre. Its concluding verse explicitly designates itself as a kāvya (poetry) and includes a long genealogy for the poet. The claim that the Allahabad prāśasti “saved the name of the king [Samudragupta] from oblivion,” is reinforced by the prominent place accorded the king in the text. Such inscriptions have as their basic goal the conferral of immortality on the object of praise, who is in this case Samudragupta. But it is not only praise that the poet is after. The prāśasti is interested in the capacity of poetic discourse to create reality anew through what Yang Hsiung and Bhoja called discursive indirection. The prāśasti’s attenuated relationship to orality was conditioned by its aspiration to transcend the fleetingness of everyday speech, which leads once again to Bhoja’s sharp distinction between the “direct language of science and everyday life” and kāvya’s discursive indirection.
A ninth-century *praśasti* from Gwalior enacts the same immortalization of the ruler witnessed in the Allahabad pillar half a millennium earlier as well as in *Pārijātamanjari*. As in the earlier examples, the poet confers immortality on his verse only after paying homage, once again to King Bhoja, who signifies not just kingship but also poetry’s sovereignty:

Bālāditya the single son of Bhaṭṭadhana . . .
who stands before King Bhojadeva like his own inner wisdom
[made manifest],
is the poet of this *praśasti*, which will last,
no less than the earth itself, to the end of the cosmic age.

Further examples in this lineage that links poetry to kingly sovereignty include a poet’s statement that he has inscribed “his own kārya, upon the face of this rock” in deference to the “command of King Śāntivarman” (ca. 455–470) and the *praśasti* of twelfth-century Gujarati poet Śrīpāla, who calls himself “emperor of poets [kavi-chakravartti] and adopted kin of King Siddharāja” before memorializing how he “composed this superb praśasti.”

In light of the poet’s bold claims to kingship, it is not surprising to read an anonymous poet claim that his *praśasti* “will be a source of inspiration for poets who read it” in an unspecified futurity. Indeed, this poet’s decision to remain anonymous even while laying claim to glory attests to his faith in his poetry’s immortality. Although the genre has not been given its due in Sanskrit literary history, it is clear that *praśastayah* were regarded as at once poetic and permanent by those who composed and received them, notwithstanding modern distaste for their panegyric aesthetics.

Defining the terms of literary culture in what he has famously called the Sanskrit cosmopolis, Sheldon Pollock notes that, from the common era and until the end of the first millennium, “inscribed and textualized forms of literature . . . belonged by and large to two separate social domains that rarely overlapped.” The *praśasti*’s confinement to inscriptive discourse shifted crucially toward the end of the cosmopolitan era. From 1000 CE onward, both the *qaṣīda* and the *praśasti* were fully textualized, and made available to the literary culture that circulated around the court.

*The Panegyric’s Purposiveness: Xing and Qaṣd*

Having considered the many parallels between the Chinese *fu* and the Sanskrit *praśasti* at the textual as well as literary–theoretical levels, it is time to confront
the variety of the much-maligned panegyric which is the centerpiece of this essay: the Arabo-Persian qasīda (plural: qasī́d). The qasī́da has thus far been relegated to the background due to its comparatively recent origins in late antiquity. As a genre roughly contemporaneous with the Qur’ān, the qasī́da must cede chronological precedence to the fu and praśasti. What this genre lacks in longevity, however, it compensates for in terms of its ambition and theoretical scope. While the fu and praśasti were never wholly normative genres within their literary cultures, the qasī́da reigns supreme among the many genres that animate both Arabic and Persian literature. Beyond simply being the most important and frequently reflected on among the many available literary forms, the qasī́da is the genre from which nearly all other genres in Islamic literary cultures, including the lyric (ghazal) and the elegy (ritḥā), derive.

With respect to Miner’s thesis, invoked at the beginning of this essay concerning the lyric as the “foundation genre,” the qasī́da is the single most important exception to Miner’s rule. Not only is the qasī́da not a lyric, it is itself the lyric’s origin, the beginning of literary meaning, and the source of all language used to express poetry’s power. Formally as well as conceptually, the qasī́da is the point of departure for nearly all Arabic and Persian literary forms, and, even more conclusively, for all Arabic and most Persian literary theory, until the modern period. The qasī́da’s normative status in Islamic rhetorical traditions explains Ibn Rushd’s otherwise paradoxical attraction to the (pseudo) Aristotelian reduction of all literature to praise and blame.

Although some pre-Islamic poets had limited familiarity with writing, qasī́́d were never systematically collected before the Islamic period. The Arab world had to wait for philologists and folklorists to gather texts into anthologies such as the Mufaddalyyāt (anthology of the folklorist al-Mufaddal al-Dabbī), the Kitāb al-aghānī (Book of Songs of Abūl Faraj al-Iṣfahānī), and the Mu’allaqāt (Seven Suspended Qasī́das of Hammād al-Rāwiya). The last collection received its name from the legend that the poems it contained had been embroidered in gold and suspended over the Ka’ba, the sacred Muslim pilgrimage site, before the advent of Islam. That these qasī́́d were suspended above the powerful pagan idols Lat and ‘Uzza further indicates the political importance the pre-Islamic Arabic tradition attached to the praise poem genre.

The most important section of the qasī́da in the pre-Islamic period and immediately afterward was the panegyric (madiḥ). But the genre also included praise of the self (fakhr) and praise of the dead (ritḥā), both of which came to be regarded as subgenres of the madiḥ. Even invective (bijā), which Ibn Rushd opposed to praise in his interpretation of Aristotle’s Poetics, merely inverts the panegyric register. The tripartite scheme to which the Arabic qasī́da adhered
both before and after Islam demonstrates a continuity from its oral to written phase (and represents another major distinction between the *fi* and *praśasti*): first, an erotic prelude (*nasīb*) wherein the poet laments the past and reflects on the ruins that surround him, conditioning his mortality; second, a journey (*riḥla*) wherein the poet reflects on the past, and narrates his wanderings; third, the panegyric section proper (*madiḥ*, or *bijā* if the *qaṣīda* is satirical in register). In this final section, which is analogous to the *praśasti*’s opening, the poet extols his patron. As with the *praśasti*, in certain texts the praise of the patron is overshadowed by the poet’s praise of himself and his verse.44

On most accounts, the *qaṣīda* emerged from the rhymed speech (*saʿ*i) used by soothsayers and sorcerers in the days before Islam to make prophetic utterances.45 (The *qaṣīda*’s origin in prose is worth bearing in mind in light of the *fi*’s occasional incarnation as prose poetry and rhymed prose.)46 The genealogy that locates the *qaṣīda*’s beginnings in rhymed speech also affilliates the genre with a major literary work that is, according to the Islamic hermeneutical tradition, emphatically distinct from poetry: the Qur’an.47 Along with the origins of the Arabic word for poetry (*shiʿr*), in intuitive, nonrational knowledge (*shuʿur*), the *qaṣīda*’s proposed origins in *saʿ* clarifies the association of poetry with “licit magic” (*sihr-i ḥalāl*) and sorcery in the Islamic tradition.48

In contradistinction to the *praśasti*, the *qaṣīda*’s status as a literary genre preceded its conversion to written form. The history of this genre entails no necessary link between textualization and praise of the patron. One of the best-known courtly pre-Islamic poets is Imru’l-Qays (d. 540), a descendent of the ancient kings of Yemen. Banished by his father from the court, Imru’l-Qays led a vagrant life and came to be called “the strolling king” (*al-malak al-ḍillī*). He sought protection from the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 504 CE, and was rewarded with governance over the province of Palestine for his services to the king. Other pre-Islamic poets who spent much of their life at court include Ṭarafa ibn al-ʿAbd, of the court of King ʿAmr ibn Hind (r. 554–568), who was also banished from the court for his vituperative panegyrics, and ultimately buried alive according to his patron’s command.

Like the *fi* and *praśasti*, the *qaṣīda* is grounded in rhetorical purposiveness and epideictic deliberation. By definition, every praise poem has a goal. Together with discursive indirection (*feng, vakroti*) and double meaning (discussed below), the panegyric’s purposiveness is one of the three features that mark it as a genre. Fusheng Wu has cataloged many Chinese *fi* that make of the ruler a “stimulus,” or *xing*, for the poem (82, 90). The *qaṣīda* is similarly governed by political purposiveness. The trilateral Arabic root from which *qaṣīda* is formed (*qāf-ṣād-dāl*) means “to endeavor, to intend, to wish for.”49
Much has been made of this etymology by Arabic and Persian literary theorists ranging from al-Jāḥiz to Ibn Khaldūn to Shams-i Qays.⁵⁰ The treatment of the qasīda in the Islamic critical tradition attests to the genre’s status as a literary form driven by historical events and political exigency. Hence the qasīda’s political salience, which distinguishes it from the relatively small number of non-qasīda-derived genres such as the Andalusian strophic muwashshah and zajal, the muzdarwaj, and its Persian equivalent, the rubāʿīyyāt. Although none of these is qasīda-derived, they are exceptions that prove the rule of the overall panegyric orientation of Islamic literature’s genre systems.

Perhaps because quatrain-based forms such as the muzdarwaj and rubāʿīyyāt originated outside patronage contexts and are less formalized in terms of their poetics, they are rarely theorized in medieval Arabic or Persian literary theory, and are indeed treated with disdain by the Arabic tradition.⁵¹ The qasīda’s ubiquity as well as its status as the structural basis of nearly all major Arabic and Persian forms lend conviction to A. J. Arberry’s generalization that the qasīda “was esteemed as the only valid form of ‘classical’ poetry” in medieval Arabic and Persian literary culture.⁵² As difficult as the genre is to assimilate today, in the Islamic world, as in classical Chinese and Sanskrit, the much-maligned panegyric, even more than the lyric, made possible a politics of literary form that also envisioned poetic ways of being political.

The poetry of al-Mutanabbī—whose chosen name, revealingly in this context, signifies “the would-be prophet”—is often seen to mark the pinnacle of the classical Arabic tradition. Fundamentally a court poet, al-Mutanabbī has often been accused of compromising his ethics for the sake of his panegyrics. The complaint of the prominent nineteenth-century Ukrainian Orientalist Alexsander Krymsky to the effect that “greedy Mutanabbī was prepared to praise anyone for the sake of financial reward” typifies this Orientalist tradition.⁵³ Krymsky also compares al-Mutanabbī unfavorably with the Syrian poet–philosopher Abū ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarrī, praising the latter for remaining aloof from the patronage matrix. Similarly, when comparing the Persian poets Khāqānī and Niẓāmī, modern critics have praised the latter for avoiding the panegyric, while condemning Khāqānī for his proximity to courtly power.⁵⁴ Such modern skepticism toward the efficacy of poetry composed for a patron misses the incendiary power of al-Mutanabbī’s panegyric to the very same ruler Krymsky attacked al-Mutanabbī for praising too much, Hamdānīd Sayf al-Dawla (r. 944–967):

You are not just the king who vanquished his peer.
You are the king who triumphed over doubt.
Rabī‘a and ‘Adnān too were ennobled by you.
Not only the capitals but the world too boasts of you.
Your praise is in the pearl of my word.
You gave [this praise], but I was its arranger [nāzīm].
Your bounty makes me fly into battle.
I have no sin, and you have no regrets.

While discursively ceding all glory to the patron, al-Mutanabbī in fact retains the largest share of glory for his art. The praise (al-hamd) of the patron is said to be encapsulated in the pearl (durr) of the poet’s utterance (laṭīf), and thus Sayf al-Dawla’s political success is seen as due less to his intrinsic merits than to the talents of his court poet. The king bestowed praise, but the poet took the crucial step of arranging an inarticulate sultan’s verbiage into well-ordered words radiant with eloquence and meaning. Al-Mutanabbī notably applies to himself in this poem the weighted term “arranger” (nāzīm), which, in varying morphologies, describes the ordering of the cosmos, as if to suggest that he is an arranger of worlds as well as of words. While declaring his dependency on his patron, the poet also describes their mutual debts in ways that make it impossible to say who owes more to whom, and who possesses greater power.

The Panegyric’s Multiple Meanings: Īhām, Śleṣa

Two of the global panegyric’s genre markers—discursive indirection and purposiveness—have been explored thus far. A third genre marker is overwhelmingly present in both the Indic and Islamic tradition. This is double entendre, known in Persian as īhām and in Sanskrit as śleṣa. Although double entendre varies in its usage within the Persian as compared to the Indic tradition, its functions in these two traditions parallel each other with remarkable proximity. This section examines how the global panegyric’s third genre marker conditioned and informed local conceptions of sovereignty while setting the stage for the fourth and final characteristic of this genre, which, while not universally applicable to all examples and traditions, stands as its crowning achievement from the point of view of global poetics.

As the courtly language of the Eastern Islamic world shifted from Arabic to Persian, the qaṣīda acquired a new life at the courts of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1080) and Akhsatān in Shīrwān (d. 1196), in present-day Azerbaijan. Although founded by native Turkic speakers, the Ghaznavid
and Shīrwānshāh dynasties became the leading patrons of Persian literary culture as the power of the ‘Abbāsids, and later the Sāmānids, declined. At the Ghaznavid court especially, the qaṣīda was pioneered as a courtly genre under the leadership of ʿUnṣūrī (d. 1039/1040), who earned the title “king of poets” (malik al-shuʿarā) under Sultan Maḥmūd. Two of ʿUnṣūrī’s verses quoted frequently in Persian rhetorical manuals suggest how the intricacies of the Islamic panegyric unfolds through double meaning:

Oh shah, ruler of east and west
Of jews, zoroastrians, christians, and muslims
Everyone speaks in prayer beads and praise
Of maḥmūd, god’s successor.

These verses were cited in the three major treatises on Persian poetics, by Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Rādūyānī (late twelfth century), Rashīd al-Dīn Waṭwāṭ (ca. 1184), and Shams-i Qays Rāzī (ca. 1223). Each time ʿUnṣūrī’s verses were cited, a new rhetorical dimension was grafted onto it. In the first two texts of Rādūyānī and Waṭwāṭ, ʿUnṣūrī’s verses exemplify al-badīʿ, a generalized rhetorical trope that encompasses all modes of literary figuration for the two critics. In the later rhetorical treatise of Shams-i Qays, written less than a half a century after the first citation of ʿUnṣūrī’s panegyric, the poet’s verses are interpreted as a double entendre (ihām).

Shams-i Qays does not explicate how ʿUnṣūrī’s verses constitute double entendre, but it probably has to do with the final line, which admits of multiple interpretations, and in particular with two crucial terms deployed there, ʿāqibat and Maḥmūd, the name of the sultan, but literally meaning “he who is praised” (hamd, a variation on the trilateral root in Maḥmūd’s name, means “praise”). The most obvious and conventional ihām, which requires no creativity on the poet’s part, is already inherent in the formulaic usage of Maḥmūd’s name, given its immediate referent to the sultan as well as to anyone who is praised. More complicated is the first term, ʿāqibat. The term’s associations range (in various morphologies) from “successor,” “posterity,” to “son.” The double entendre here derives from its association with the epithet given Muhammad when he was publicly acknowledged to be chosen by God as his Prophet. Reading ʿUnṣūrī’s text in this fashion, against the grain of its surface but in the spirit of its depths, reveals that the sultan moves his subjects to piety through the prophet’s praise.

Other readings, however, inevitably emerge from the foregoing analysis. In a different morphology, ʿāqibat’s trilateral root signifies torture (ʿuqība). Relatedly, the word is associated with ʿuqābain, the two high poles on which
the Sāsānian king and hero of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, Anūshīrwān (r. 531–579), suspended the body of Hamza, sewn into cow skin, after executing him. According to this reading, the double meaning pertains not only to Maḥmūd, the name of the sultan and generic cipher for any object of praise, but, also, more subtly, to the multiple meanings active in this term: successor and torture. This second double entendre is bolder in that it equates sovereignty with oppression and suggests that the sultan’s method of governance relates to his application of torture (ʿuqābat). Regardless of whether such nuances were wholly present in the poet’s mind when he composed this qaṣīda, its citation as an illustration of Ḭām by Shams-i Qays demonstrates that medieval readers read ʿUnṣūrī’s panegyric ambiguously. This third citation makes explicit what had no doubt long been perceived by Persian authors and their audience: the poetics of praise inscribed into qaṣīda poetics is itself a conceptual double entendre, a way of saying indirectly what loses its force in direct speech. By engaging power through the process of paying homage, the panegyric performed what genres less embedded within the courtly patronage matrix, such as the rubāʿī, could only describe from afar.

What Michael Sells terms the qaṣīda’s “semantic overflow” is amply on display in the panegyrics of non-Islamic traditions, including Indian vernaculars such as Brajbhasa (classical Hindi). Allison Busch has recently studied the double meanings that animate and give structure to Jahāngirjachandrikā, an early modern prāṣasti by the Brajbhasa poet Keśavdas (1555–1617). The Brajbhasa prāṣasti is of great interest in this context for the bridge it constructs between Indic Sanskritic and Islamic Persian traditions. Addressing the Mughal Emperor Jahāngīr (r. 1605–1627), Keśavdas declaims:

See how the emperor Jahangir is as astonishing as the god Indra.
In his court are poets and generals,
skilled artists and discerning scholars,
warriors, officers, stable masters, sheikhs, masterminds,
the clever, the glamorous, the lustrous,
a range of entertainers and their companions.

Although he was working within a tradition that deployed a Sanskrit rather than Persian lexicon to describe the trope of double meaning (ślesa), this passage from Keśavdas’s prāṣasti qualifies as an extended Ḭām. Every eulogistic detail bestowed on the Mughal emperor is equally applicable to the Hindu god Indra. Keśavdas’s prāṣasti achieves its aim of praising the ruler by Indicizing a Muslim patron, a discursive move that was controversial in itself and may have gone considerably beyond Jahāngīr’s expectations.
The Qaṣīda’s Metapoetics

In addition to the three qualities highlighted so far—indirection, purposiveness, and double entendre—Persian panegyrics introduce a fourth dimension to the discussion. While present in panegyrics from other traditions, this dimension reaches an attenuated stage of development in Persian. This fourth quality is self-referentiality, also termed metapoetics. While there is no specific term to describe the self-referential gesture in Persian poetics, it overwhelmingly characterizes the best qaṣīdas. The tripartite qaṣīda that is given here as an illustration of this tendency was composed by the little-known fifteenth-century Central Asian poet ʿĪṣmat of Bukhāra (d. 1436), and dedicated to Khalīl Sultan (d. 1411), grandson of the much-feared Timurlane of Samarqand. ʿĪṣmat’s poem was later cited in Dawlāshāh of Samarqand’s fifteenth-century biographical dictionary, through which medium it reached an audience ranging from South Asia to the Caucasus.64

Khalīl Sultan was one of the few Timurid princes to compose poetry in both Chaghhatay Turkic and Persian.65 The poem that makes him the object of its praise demonstrates both the panegyric’s continuity and the transformations the qaṣīda underwent in the four centuries intervening between Ghaznavid and Timurid rule. The double entendre that drives this fifteenth-century qaṣīda is even more extended than in ʿUnṣūrī’s poems. As in the Jahangīraschandrikā, rather than encompassing a single word, ibām engulfs the entire text as it elucidates the cosmology of literary discourse. Distinctive in the formal sense for lacking a nāṣib, and also semantically for its extensive praise of the patron’s verse, ʿĪṣmat revives the semantic ambiguity of the oral pre-Islamic qaṣīdas, but now with an inscriptive discourse pertaining to writing’s material implements. Such figuration underwrites the belief, attested as early as the Allahabad praśasti, that inscription consolidates poetry’s sovereignty. The terms of sovereignty, classically understood as a top-down movement from ruler to ruled, are thereby reversed in literary milieus suffused by panegyric poetics: far from being subservient to his patron, in such worlds, the poet dictates the terms of the patron’s power.

Although it is ostensibly a panegyric, many verses in ʿĪṣmat’s qaṣīda intervene between the poet’s initial homage to his verse and the real object of praise. The qaṣīda begins by invoking the aqueous horizon wherein the poet encounters his patron:

آن بحر بیکران که جهانیست در برش
غواص عقل کل نبرد پی بگوهرش.66
(That boundless ocean has an entire world in its embrace.
The pearl diver of the universal intellect will not find his treasure.)

This opening fits within the tradition of the riddle genre (*lugbz*), whereby
an object is described in the expectation that the reader will identify the
object through clues. The object here is not immediately discernable, or
rather, the referent changes over the course of the poem. That the shore-
less ocean (*bahr-i bikarān*) that encompassed the world is also a metonym
(*kinaya*) for the patron’s collected poems (*diwān*), intensifies this panegyric’s
polysemy. It is not only of the patron that the poet writes; the art to which
both poet and patron have consecrated their verse—*sukhan*, poetic discourse,
the Persian equivalent of *kāvyā*—is similarly the subject of this poem.

While the universe is vast, the poem’s compass is small. The poet sud-
denly enumerates his vision in terms of delicate writing devices, such as a
gilded slate (*lawḥ-i maḍib*) and a blank page (*ṣafḥa*). These implements now
merge with the cosmos, embodied in the moon and sun:

مِه عکسی از لوامع لوح مذهبش
خورشید عکسی از صفحات مصورش

(The moon is a reflection of the sparks from the gilded slate.
The sun is a reflection of the pages of its creator.)

The cosmos reflects the poet’s horizon. The moon is his notebook and the
sun is his page:

پر لوح چرخ گرم همی گردد آفتاب
از بهر مهره کردن اوراق دفترش

(The sun warms on fate’s slate
so that it can stamp the pages of its notebook.)

Whence the poet’s yearning for closure? Does it signify that poetry’s power
exceeds the compass of the universe, and that even the sun cowers from
the profusion of meanings (*afzūn-i ma‘ānī*) to which the poet refers in the
panegyric section (*madh*) proper? The verses that follow trace the sun’s
metamorphosis into a poet, which for the purposes of this *qasīda* means that
he becomes a crafter of praise:

گیرد زنب سیاهی و از مه دوات زر
جلد از ادیم نور دهد چرخ اخضرش
(The ink is extracted from the night and a golden inkpot from
the moon.
The leather cover emits light. Fate offers its verdure.)

By the end of this riddle (lughz), the act of writing has come to rhyme semantically with the transfiguration of the cosmos. This identification is made manifest when the poet compares his poem and his patron, and ultimately, his patron’s poems, with his own:


(Every word of his is a jewel from the treasury of meanings.
Who besides a jeweler could discern its value?
Every entrancing line that has been realized as good
has been annotated on the pages of his verse.
For every wondrous meaning made manifest by him,
the mind, for the sake of art, exerts itself from his heart.)

These verses equate the meaning (maʿnī) of the text with the cosmic entelechy. The poem has merged with the true reality (maḥaq) and poetic meaning has been inscribed like an annotation (taʿlīq) onto the pages containing the poet’s verse. Finally, every wondrous meaning (badīʿ-i maʿnī) has been made manifest (zabīr). Although here badīʿ means “wondrous,” the word, which derives from the same Arabic root that gives us “heresy,” also signifies “innovation” and “trope” in Persian poetics, as witnessed in Rādūyānī and Waṭwāṭ’s taxonomy of Unṣūrī’s poem in praise of Maḥmūd of Ghazna. In most contexts its usage carries the implication of newness. To invoke a “wondrous meaning” is therefore to highlight the work done by poetry in re-creating the world.

These metapoetic figurations are not by any means confined to Īṣmat or to early modern Persian poetics. They are directly generated by the panegyric’s autotelic mode of reference, which reached a summit in Īṣmat’s qasīda, but which already structured the prāṣasti. The panegyric’s metapoetic capacities account for the qasīda’s encoding of a specific poetics of power. Īṣmat concludes the lengthy panegyric section that usually follows the erotic


prelude (nasīb) but which in this case opens the qaṣīda by constructing a metonymy of the ruler–poet–jeweler sequence that frequently appears in Islamic political and literary theory:

(Every necklace of jewels, which has been brought to order, is arranged according to the order of its thread.)

It is not necessary to know the biographies of the poets listed in the following catalog to appreciate the significance of ʿIṣrobat’s invocation of the greatest Persian poets in a text that finds its ostensible raison d’être in the patron’s praise:

(Salmān collects verses from the light of his qaṣīdas.
Saʿdī relaxes with his soul-nourishing ghazals.
Khāqānī luxuriates on the virtues of his wondrous poetry.
Ānwarī’s veil expresses his light
Niẓāmī’s soul delights in his narrative romances.
Ibn Yamīn is praised for his isolated verses and fragments.
The pen crookedly wanders into his margins.
Amazed, I wonder what stirs in its head.)

This concluding distich meticulously traces the movements of a pen (qalam) across the margins of a page. Whereas the poet began by praising poets, he soon moves to praising poems as creations that acquire autonomy from their creators. This textual movement fulfills Ibn Rushd’s Aristotelian insight that an art which “teaches from what and how poems are composed is more important and more perfect than the making of poems themselves,” because “every theoretical art that includes in itself the techniques for performing its tasks
is more worthy than the techniques which are included within it.” Within an Aristotelian framework, Ibn Rushd’s postulate might seem to vindicate philosophy over poetry. However, in the context of qasida poetics—which is to say within the framework of the global panegyric—Ibn Rushd’s words vindicate a metapoetics that deconstructs the art of praise even as it performs it, and synthesizes the techniques of indirect discourse, purposiveness, and double meaning into a robust poetics of praise. Ultimately, the panegyric’s structure, premised as it is on the patron’s elevation, foregrounds the agency of the poet within a patronage-based economy. The qasida realizes itself by glorifying poetry even as it enacts the patron’s elevation. Similarly, the fiu and prasasti flourish in the domain of indirection, where literary signification promulgates an aesthetics of power distinct from that found in everyday discourse.

The poet has already specified that the patron transforms the pearl necklace—a metonym for the cosmos—into a synecdoche for the regime’s stability. ‘Iṣmat elaborates on this metonymy with a catalog of Persian poets from Salmān Savaṣī to Sa’dī to Khāqānī, to Ānwarī to Niẓāmī Ganjevi and the lesser-known Ibn Yamīn. This list raises an ambiguity: even though Khalīl Sultan composed no-longer-extant verse in two languages, could the poet realistically have classed his patron’s poetry alongside the poetry of Persian literature’s greatest luminaries? Did ‘Iṣmat really believe that his patron belonged in the company of Niẓāmī and Khāqānī?

‘Iṣmat’s poetic devices call into question the surface meaning of his text. It is not the patron who is great, this list implies, and not the poet who is immortal. Rather, his verse is generated by a panegyric tradition, and cannot exist autonomously of it. This tradition confers immortality on both patron and poet. The immortality conferred by the panegyric tradition on patron and poet alike is activated by the dialectical interaction of the discourses—indirection, purposiveness, double entendre, and metapoetics—that circulate around and through the panegyric. The qasida’s abundant meanings stand in tension with one another, and impart to the act of praise the polysemic function of celebrating not only poetry’s object (here the mamduh, “the one who is praised”) but also the act, and the fact, of poetry itself. As we enter the qasida’s concluding section, we learn that the abundance of meanings enabled by the poetics of praise aesthetically justifies its chosen genre:

افکرونو معانيش از فيض مدع توسط
وئه چه آید از سخنان مکررش
 مردن گرند و تکید ترك خدمت
گر در میان هر دو بسازی مخیرش
(The proliferation of meanings is from the praise of the wine cup. If not for this, what is gained by his repetitions? He may choose death, but he will not leave your service, even if you let him choose. As long as God gathers the light, so will his order illuminate the seven continents. May your personhood last eternally at the zenith of your power. May its sovereignty advance the fixed and reliable fortune.)

**The Qaṣīda and Modernity**

In Arabic and Persian literary modernity, the *qasīda*’s rigorous meters have largely been superseded by free verse. But poet–critics steeped in premodern poetics have not ceased to devote attention to the poetics the genre used to encode. The contemporary Syrian poet Adūnīs (b. 1930), for example, opens his *Introduction to Arabic Poetics* (1971) with an extensive exploration of *qasīda* poetics, which includes a celebration of the *qasīda*’s power. According to Adūnīs, it was the pre-Islamic poet’s duty “to give to the collective, to the everyday moral and ethical existence of the group, a unique image of itself in a unique poetic language.”

Relatedly, although from a different tradition, a contemporary Senegalese poet whose work is informed by the African panegyric invokes the poet’s role as mediator between the living and the dead to explain the work of praise poetry in the world. “The task of the poet,” the Senegalese poet declared, “is to remember the watering places—the metrical feet of the water holes. The survival of the whole group depends on whether you can find the water holes in the desert.”

That the *qasīda* retains its power today is evident in Yemeni tribal society. “Tribesmen hold a fundamental belief in what we might for now call the efficacy of poetry,” ethnographer Steve Caton observes in his ethnography of poetry as a social practice in contemporary Yemen. Because the praise poem’s occasionality crucially conditions its efficacy, “the special circumstances under which a famous poem was composed” had to be recited before the *qasīda* as such could be performed. In the absence of such knowledge...
among the auditors of the poem, praise would lose its political salience. “Contrast this view of the poem as text-utterance with our own,” continues Caton. “We believe the text, at least ideally, is self-contained so that it could be understood on its own terms.”\(^7\) When the *qasida* parted ways with the institution of literature under the influence of a modernist aesthetics that opposed the literary imagination to hegemonic political power, panegyric aesthetics continued to flourish in unprestigious contexts outside literary culture and in discursive domains less inflected by modernity’s denigration of functionalist art.

Just as the most political poets of Arabic modernity excelled in the *qasida*, so did the most political poet of Spanish modernity, Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936), draw on the Arabic tradition to generate his own poetics of praise. Lorca wrote three books containing political poetry in the panegyric mode: *Odas, Poeta en Nueva York*, and *Divan del Tamarit*. All three remained unpublished during his lifetime. One of the most startling among these poems is “Cry to Rome” (*Grito hacia Roma*), labeled an ode, and included in *Poeta en Nueva York* alongside Lorca’s more famous “Ode to Walt Whitman” (1930). The immediate occasion for the ode was the treaty that Pope Pius XI signed with Mussolini in 1929 that sanctioned the execution of a priest who had courageously combated fascism.

Historical context alone however cannot explicate Lorca’s ode, for while the text resounds as a powerful protest against the corruption of the Catholic Church, the object of critique in “Grito hacia Roma” is much broader than any single social institution. Lorca wrote this poem in New York City, from (if the words he placed beneath the title can be trusted) the “Tower of the Chrysler Building.” As with the entirety of *Poeta en Nueva York*, Lorca’s anti-panegyric elaborates a penetrating critique of American culture. Perhaps because the critique is leveled by an outsider, its cosmic indictment reverberates more deeply than much American political poetry. Consider the following:

Because there is no one to bestow the bread or the wine,
or make the grass grow in the mouths of the dead,
or spread the linen or rest and peace,
or weep for the wounded elephants.
There are only a million blacksmiths
who forge chains for tomorrow’s children.
Only a million carpenters
who make coffins with no cross.\(^7\)
Formally, Lorca’s ode is a close equivalent to the *gaṣīda*. The genre affinity set the stage for Lorca’s shift from writing politically charged odes critiquing American slavery and Catholic corruption in *Poeta en Nueva York* to compiling his own *divan* (collected poetry), as he chose to call his collection of poems after the fashion of the Arabic tradition. Even a casual reader of Lorca cannot fail to note the frequency of his references to Andalusia’s Arabic past. For the title of his collection, *Divan del Tamarit*, Lorca chose an Arabic word that corresponded to the name of a village in Spain that he visited, *tamarit* (“abundant in dates”). Typical of the late medieval Arabic poetic culture that shaped his poetics, Lorca’s *divan* includes *ghazals* and *qaṣīdas*, although the idea of giving a title to a *dīwan* is a modern innovation.

The formal, structural, and thematic distinctions between the *ghazal* and the *qaṣīda* are deliberately confounded in *Divan del Tamarit*. For example, a poem such as “Gacela II: De la terrible presencia” employs the *ghazal* (*gacela*) in the service of repetition. The first stanza’s opening lines *yo quiero* (“I want”) are repeated in the next line, followed by *quiero* followed by the repetition of *que* (“that”) in each subsequent line. Lorca’s *qaṣīdas*, by contrast, emphasize internal and end rhyme. For example, “Casida II: Del llanto” (“Of weeping”) repeats *llanto* (“weeping”) as the final word of the second and fourth lines. This is by no means an airtight schema; only some of Lorca’s *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals* can be categorized according to the placement of rhyme, but structurally and thematically the panegyric’s imprint is everywhere on display.

Lorca’s transformations of the *qaṣīda* are unprecedented in European modernism, and his reliance on the *qaṣīda* and *ghazal* to get his meaning across merits reflection. Lorca did not strive to reproduce the formal peculiarities of the Arabic panegyric in Spanish, but he did give voice to the cultural and political ethos that these forms inculcated. On the basis of such example, Lorca fuses Spanish and Arabic literatures into a new cultural whole. During the same decades that Lorca was actively reviving the Arabo-Andalusian literary vision that was shattered by the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in 1492, Indo-Persian poets such as Muḥammad Iqbal (d. 1938) drew on these same Andalusian legacies to invert colonial norms, while reimagining the *qaṣīda* as the locus of a global Islamic literary culture.

The political potentialities that Lorca discerned in the *qaṣīda* suggest a path forward for a future poetics and politics of literary form. More presciently than most modern writers, Lorca perceived that the most durable literary innovations are acutely cognizant of and responsive to prior literary achievements. It was perhaps due to this perception that, for all his many innovations in poetic forms, Lorca was critical of surrealism and other fashionably anti-traditionalist movements that dominated his literary milieu. In “Imagination, Inspiration,
Evasion,” Lorca cautioned that “Surrealism can take hold in the north . . . but Spain with her history, defends us from the strong liquor of dream.” Armed with such pronouncements, Lorca established himself as arguably the most historically minded among European modernist poets. Lorca’s investment in the Arabo-Islamic past, which was central to his Andalusian cultural identity, makes his poetry an ideal point of departure for this endeavor to reveal the relevance of premodern literary forms to our political present.

In contrast to Lorca’s attraction to the qaṣīda, Euro-American poets have tended to find the lyric ghazal, an offspring of the qaṣīda but in many respects its semantic inverse, more kindred to their aesthetic agendas. Goethe’s effusions over the ghazals of Hafez are perhaps the best-known example of such appreciation. In more recent decades, Adrienne Rich and W. S. Merwin imported the ghazal into contemporary American literature. The translations of the ghazals of the Urdu poets Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ghalib by the Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali have received wide and well-deserved acclaim. In the midst of these modern and contemporary revivals of the Urdu–Persian ghazal, the qaṣīda languishes in oblivion. This preeminently political form is regarded as an outdated artifact of a bygone age, relegated to debris cast off by the shipwreck of modernity. The qaṣīda reminds readers of everything that the modern institution of literature—including academic literary studies—has taught us to suppress, namely, the worldliness of poetry and the many compromises it has made and will make with power.

In the contemporary literary world, qaṣī‘id are thought to reek of decadent aesthetics and totalitarian politics, and are regarded as ciphers for Oriental despotism. The panegyric has become a genre to mock, a poster child for the many inadequacies that are seen to characterize premodern political life: hierarchy, lack of mobility, and metaphysically justified inequalities of class, race, and gender. I have written this essay to demonstrate how, far from perpetuating these inequities, the panegyric develop a rhetorical armory of strategies for their critique. My second aim has been to show how the premodern panegyric undid many of these hierarchies that conditioned its poetics, even while appearing to posthumous observers to have left such inequities in tact. Before modernity, the qaṣīda was more, rather than less, political than the ghazal. While the ghazal retreated to private life, and concerned itself with love and the encounter with the sacred, the qaṣīda bore witness to the mediations of power. The panegyric genre lived a political life as forcefully as did the rulers and patrons who commissioned them.

This article has aimed to suggest the need for revising contemporary political aesthetics in light of the interventions of Lorca, Iqbal, and other poets whose literary innovations were inspired by their engagements with
premodern literary forms. What would comparative literature look like if contemporary writers and critics engaged with non-European and premodern poetic forms as frequently as they do with modern European ones? “In its rendering of colonial domination and resistance thereto,” argues Hussein Kadhim in his study of the postcolonial Arabic qaṣīda, the panegyric “partook in forming as well as enunciating a new political consciousness.”80 By “elaborating a poetics that maintained the integrity of the qaṣidah without circumventing its historical moment,” the postcolonial Arabic panegyric “subsumed the political while retaining the poetical.”81 How would the political scope of contemporary literary form be extended if the examples set by the anticolonial poetics of Badr al-Shākir al-Sayyāb (d. 1964) and Muhammad Iqbāl were generalized for world literatures?

It is time to restore the qaṣīda, the praśasti, and the fū, along with the epideictic aesthetic in which these forms partake, to their rightful places within the world literary economy, not as embarrassing cousins of the ghazal and other lyric modes, but as poetic genres in their own right, with untapped potentials for stimulating poetic innovation and mediating political power. This was Lorca’s project in the odes of Divan del Tamarit and Poeta en Nueva York. Had he lived longer, the project might have constituted his most lasting legacy. This essay has aimed to pick up where Lorca, Iqbāl, and al-Sayyāb left off: to show how the panegyric can facilitate the revival of a politics of literary form vis-à-vis a poetics of praise.

The Politics of Panegyric Form

Centuries before the fū, praśasti, and qaṣīda had been formalized in their respective traditions, Aristotle accounted for the peculiar temporality of praise in profound and rigorous terms. Drawing on Solon’s saying that no man is blessed until he is dead, he argued that the person we call blessed is such only with reference to a futurity he does not possess. “Now if we must see the end and only then call a man blessed,” Aristotle argued, “not as being blessed but as having been so before, surely this is a paradox, that when he is happy the attribute that belongs to him is not to be truly predicated of him.”82 Applied to the panegyric, the Aristotelian entelechy of praise reveals that the structure of the epideictic is founded in a literary conceit. Praise in poetry exists to make the object of praise conform to the poet’s values. The panegyric is, in other words, pedagogic. It is more performative than descriptive. The panegyric exists to bring the object of
praise into conformity with what it is *in potentia* but which, at the time of
the writing, it manifestly is not. This entelechy conditions the panegyric’s
political aesthetic and structures the process through which this register
brings new worlds into being.83

When a Chinese, Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic, Persian, or Brajbhasa poet
ascribed positive qualities to his patron, this was done with reference to the
poem’s afterlife, and to the poet’s posterity, as well as to the patron’s present.
Within the context of the panegyric’s futuristic teleology, no praised object
can be unique or else it would not be praised, since all praise involves com-
parison between the praised object and other objects of its class. Epideictic
rhetoric relies on and reproduces a linguistic economy of convention and
repetition. However, far from suggesting an absence of purpose, repetition
serves the profoundly literary goal of rendering the patron as an object
and the poem as the agent of that process. When the object of praise is
generic and controvertible with other patrons, the referent’s emptiness
leaves greater scope for literary invention. Ultimately, the *qaṣīda*’s metapo-
etics, that construes the object of praise as controvertible and the agent of
praise as sovereign, marries the poetry of praise to the ancient conception
of poetry-as-prophecy.84

This article has outlined a preliminary comparative framework
through which Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and Indian vernacular
panegyrics contest the many varieties of modernist aesthetics that
privilege the lyric over more politically imbricated forms. When comparatively
viewed *fu*, *praśastayah*, and *qaṣāid* argue out an aesthetic of sovereignty
through poetry that confounds modern instrumentalizations of poetry.
Beyond the descriptive task of introducing these literary forms to the gen-
eral reader, my goal has been normative, and directed toward comparative
literature in its Anglo-European instantiation. Sanskrit genres have been
compared to Arabic, Persian, and Chinese literary forms not oblivious to
the vast textual and contextual divides intervening among these literatures
that require sustained analysis on their own terms, but rather with a view
to laying the groundwork for a post-Eurocentric poetics for premodern
literary form.

As with all comparative endeavors, major traditions had to be excluded,
most notably Africa’s rich vernacular panegyric tradition.85 Operating
according to the premise that literary theory (which is not the same as
literature) is allowed the fullest development in classical literary cultures
(such as Chinese, Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic, and Persian), this preliminary
excavation of the panegyric’s political aesthetic has relegated vernacular
and oral literary production to the background. At the same time, I have
gestured toward vernacular inflections to the *praśasti* in Brajbhasa and
Prakrit and to the *gašida* in Persian and Urdu, not to mention Indian, Southeast Asian, and African vernaculars such as Sindhi, Indonesian, Fulfulde, and Hausa.86

Rigorously and systematically pursued, a comparative survey of the panegyric can plot a trajectory for literature’s political encounter with modernity. Beyond its potential revisions to our understanding of literary modernity, a comparative exploration of the panegyric across world literary traditions can reveal more about the genre’s global reach than can a study confined to a single tradition. Accounting for differences among the various panegyric genres in premodern literatures can render more lucidly the structural core that constitutes the panegyric than can a study restricted to contiguous literary traditions that have already been considered in relation to one another. Minimally, it has been shown that the panegyric’s four genre markers—indirection, purposiveness, double meanings, and metapoetics—ramify across world literatures. If it is possible to argue out a political aesthetic common to panegyric traditions as disparate as Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, it follows that a contemporary quest for a global poetics can use the panegyric’s aesthetic to move beyond the anti-rhetorical bias that animates much post-Romantic literary theory.

An aesthetically open study of the panegyric register will accordingly revise literary history according to non-presentist models. In his plea for a comparative poetics of literary genre, Miner argued for approaches “that do not depend solely on historical connections between Asian and Western literatures.”87 No genetic link between the *fu*, *prāsasti*, and the *gašida* has here been proposed. Rather than attesting to direct influence, the function of each panegyric genre within its respective literary tradition demonstrates that, far from being marginal to literary creation, epideictic consciousness actively stimulated and nuanced literary form within the political realm. Someday in the future, this old, outdated, and much-maligned literary register may be revived for a contemporary poetics. Or perhaps, as suggested by contemporary poet Ilya Kaminsky’s postulate that “great poetry begins in elegy and ends in praise,”88 the transformation has already taken place, and it is only scholars who have failed to recognize it. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the panegyric is poised to generate a new politics of literary form. Viewed in relation to its postcolonial afterlife, the aesthetics of praise encoded in the global panegyric can stimulate the production of more publicly engaged texts and clear the ground for more politically salient ways of cultivating poetry’s aesthetic negotiation of political power.

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Notes

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15. Knechtges, Han Rhapsody, 17.


17. Ibid., 75.

18. For the circumstances surrounding the composition of this poem, see Wu, Written at Imperial Command, 63.


20. Ibid., 72.


30. This list is summarized from Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 91.

31. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 91, for all citations in this paragraph.


34. Cited and translated in Sheldon Pollock, “Sanskrit Literary Culture: From the Inside Out,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 58. Also compare the different translation of this passage in Pollock, “Bhoja’s Śṛṅgarapraśaśi and the Problem of Rasa: A Historical Introduction and Translation,” *Asiatische Studien* 70, no. 1 (1998): 147. Bhoja does not distinguish between literary and everyday language in order to explicate prāṣasti as such; he is concerned with kāya, a category that does not exclude prāṣasti, but also does not explicitly include it. The connection between prāṣasti and vakrati is therefore my own.


41. These texts are all cited and translated in Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 135–36. For the Sanskrit texts, see *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 18, p. 110; vol. 8, p. 36; vol. 40, p. 29, respectively.


44. A key source here is Renate Jacobi, *Poetik der altarabischen qasida* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1971).


46. See Wilhelm, “Scholar’s Frustration,” 310.


53. A. E. Krymskii, Arabskata literatura v chekerkab i obraetsakh (Moscow: Lazarevskii institut vostochnykh isazykov, 1911), 72–73. By contrast A. B. Kudelin criticizes the anti-panegyric prejudices of earlier generations of al-Mutanabbī scholarship, suggesting the sea change that has taken place in Russian philology over the past century. See his “Obraz voskhalvamovo v srednevekovom arabskom panegrike,” in Poetika srednevekovikh literature vostoka (Moscow: Izd-vo Nasledie, 1994), 103–36.


58. Iḥām was formally introduced into Arabo-Persian poetics by Waṭwāt, who glossed the term as a synonym for the imagination (takhyīl). From there it entered Arabic poetics under the name tarwīya. It operates by suggesting the obvious denotation (ma na qarīb) of a word when the intended meaning is the word’s nonobvious denotation (ma na baʿād). The fundamental study of tarwīya/iḥām, focusing primarily on Arabic material, is S. A. Bonebakker, Some Early Examinations of the Tarwīya and Safādī’s Fadd al-xītām un tarwīya wa-t-xītādām (The Hague: Moulton & Co., 1966).

59. This is the reading of Natalia Chalisova, in her invaluable Russian commentary on and translation of Shams-i Qays, Mujam (Moscow: Vostochnaia Lit., 1997), 404905.

60. Francis Joseph Steingass, Comprehensive Dictionary of Persian (1892; repr., Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal, 1996), 857, s.v. qūbaʿāin.


64. Dawlatshāh, Tazkirat al-shuʿarāʾ, ed. M. M. Qazwīnī and E. G. Brown (Leiden: Brill, 1901), 270.


69. For this passage, I cite the Latin rendering of Alemannus, “Middle Hermannus of Averroes of Cordova on the Poetics of Aristotle,” 356.


73. Steven Caton, “Peaks of Yemen I Summon”: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 40–41, for all citations in this and the preceding two paragraphs.


81. Kadhim, Poetics of Anti-colonialism in the Arabic Qaṣīda, 231.


84. For a fuller elaboration of these dynamics with respect to specific Persian poems, see chapter 3 of Rebecca Gould, The Persian Genre of Incarceration: Prisons and the Literary Imagination (book manuscript in progress).

for a comparative poetics of the praise poem is an examination of classical Arabic panegyric in relation to African vernaculars.

86. For the qaṣīda in the languages listed here, see the texts in Qaṣīda Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa, ed. Sperl and Shackle, vol. 2 and the respective essays vol. 1.
