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Playing the fool: jesters of the Safavid and Zand courts

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Abstract

This article looks at the history of jesters affiliated with the Iranian court during the Safavid and Zand periods. I present several case studies of jesters (*dalqak*), featuring Kal ‘Enāyat and Dalāleh Qezī from the Safavid period and Lūṭī Šāleḥ from the Zand period. From various primary resources including memoirs, European travelogues, and court-associated chronicles, I relate several accounts associated with these personalities and describe their unique relationship with the ruling shāh of their time. Through various staged and spontaneous performances involving irony, subterfuge, and satire, jesters – as embodied “mirrors for princes” – demonstrate the inherent precarity of the shāh’s rule and the need to be accountable to his subjects. In comparing the Safavid jester to others across time and place, the performative simulation of transcending the status quo’s gender, class, political, and moralistic boundaries will be shown to help preserve them.

Keywords: Dalqak; Court jester; Safavid studies; Zand; Shāh ‘Abbās; Performing arts

Introduction

In *Fools are Everywhere*, Beatrice Otto mines a teeming corpus of material to provide the fullest ambit of cross-cultural study on the court jester.¹ Otto discovers a universal phenomenon in the court jester, “symbol of physical and verbal dexterity and of freedom from convention”.² The jester trespasses on what is taken to be quotidian, proper, dignified, aesthetic, and normative. His humour, whether manifest in Italian jesters of Renaissance vintage or the Ryōkan “holy fools” of Japan, collapses the remoteness of cultural spheres and geographic locations. Otto emphasizes a close proximity between “scepter and bauble”, or crown and clown, in the historical record, consistent with other Western academic accounts.³ “Fools are”, as Otto’s title indicates, “everywhere”, but proved most useful in royal halls where they were able to speak truth to power without sabotaging or subverting it.

¹ Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

² Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*, xviii.

³ See Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1961); John Doran, *The History of Court Fools* (New York: Haskell House, 1966); Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015); John Southworth, *Fools and jesters in the English Court* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1998).

Vanessa Martin has covered the variety of *dalqaks* in the Persianate world during the Qājār period and has presented cogent theories for their socio-political role that support those of Otto.⁴ These include the jester-as-wise fool, disabusing the king of delusions of grandeur and reminding him of his accountability through counsel and humour. Martin also shows that the *dalqak* was a useful tool in neutralizing any potential challenge or undue sense of prestige from courtiers that might undermine the shāh's own sense. These features are certainly not exclusive to the Qājār dynasty's jesters and reflect those of the antecedent Safavid and Zand periods of Iranian history. My purpose is not merely to make this connection, but to view such features in a broader light. I connect Persian performative transgression to a larger phenomenon, spanning geographic regions and eras, with a view of jesters as preserving socio-ethical norms by non-formal means (i.e. contra legislation, legal institutions, or scriptural sources and their authorities). Persian jesters share many outstanding features with comedic avatars appearing elsewhere in time and place with whom I offer a brief comparison. These actors interface between the real and the symbolic, presenting, in non-discursive capacities, the absurdities of life and a critique of power. Paradoxically, these performances will be shown to help preserve, and often valorize, the traditional social order. Each *dalqak* acts as the exception to the rule – whether social, religious, or political, by custom – that not only proves the latter, but helps sustain it.

Varieties of court entertainment

The Safavid period in Iran (1501–1722) coincides with the court jester's popular culmination in European art and social life of the early sixteenth century.⁵ Safavid rulers, like those who came before and after them, enjoyed varied court entertainment. The wide canopy of what would count as entertainment included the *dalqak*. The word *dalqak* made its way into the Persian language through a particular personality, the jester of Maḥmūd of Ghaznī (r. 998–1030) who was known as Ṭalkhak.⁶ Since then, many other *dalqaks*, crystallized at different times and in different personalities, have encompassed the idioms of jester, fool, trickster, buffoon, merrymaker, and clown. Often, their classification appears nebulous. For example, one of those listed among Shāh 'Abbās' jesters is Sag Lavand, "Coquet Dog", who is described as a "good natured member of the Shāh's coterie" (*khūsh ṭab'ān-i maḥfel-i shāh*).⁷ Sag Lavand's timely humour occurs in a pair of moments in the historical record: when Shāh 'Abbās neglects to include his "dog", Sag Lavand, while on an early morning hunting expedition; and when a passerby inquires as to the role of a stray dog, to which Sag Lavand jokingly responds, "Chief of Arms!" (*qūrchi-bashī*).⁸ These two small instances,⁹ featuring plays on Sag Lavand's pet name, provide sufficient reason for chroniclers to insert his name among the category of *dalqak*.

⁴ Vanessa Martin, "The jester and the shadow of God: Nasir al-Din Shah and his fools", *Iranian Studies* 40/4, 2007, 467–81.

⁵ Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, 129–30.

⁶ Hossein Nūrbakhsh, *Karīm Shīrā'i: Dalqak-i mashūr-i darbār-i Nāshir-al-Dīn Shāh Qājār* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kitābkhāneh-yi Sanā'i, 1968), 10–11; "Dalqak", in *Lughatnāmeḥ-yi dehkhdā* (Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 1998), 11043. Otto, referencing the fourteenth-century Zakani, provides an alternative reading, where *dalqak* derives from the Persian word *daghal*, meaning "fraud, falsification, adulteration". Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*, 55.

⁷ Raḥam 'Alī-Khān Īmān, *Muntakhab al-laṭā'if* (Tehran: Intishārāt Ṭahūrī, 2008), 335.

⁸ Hossein Nūrbakhsh, *Dalqakhā-yi mashhūr-i darbārī va maskharehkhā-yi dawrahgird* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kitābkhāneh-yi Sanā'i, 1996), 73–4.

⁹ A short poem is also associated with Sag Lavand: "Any lion, with all its might, speed, and bravery, is a kitten compared to (Imām) 'Alī, and I am the dog of 'Alī". Nūrbakhsh, *Karīm Shīrā'i*, 74.

Among those included by Nasrollah Falsafi (d. 1981) under the category are several bards who entertained Shāh ‘Abbās I (r. 1642–66), including one known as ‘Āqilī, “The Wise”. During poetry reading circle events, ‘Āqilī would provide humorous distraction in ecstatic dance and facetiae (*hazliyyat*), enhancing the overall entertainment value for the Shāh.¹⁰ The literary biographer and contemporary of ‘Āqilī, Taqī al-Dīn Awḥadī Balyānī, recounts how, despite ‘Āqilī’s poetical skills, he served the shāh as a humorist and jester, and considers the position the peak a person of his humble standing could reach.¹¹

Another affiliate was the court herald, Malik ‘Alī Sulṭān Iṣfahānī, who would be summoned to ritually mock and deride anyone that invoked Shāh ‘Abbās’ displeasure.¹² Malik ‘Alī Sulṭān’s title also included the leader of the “live eaters” (*zindeh khūrān*), a unique contingent convened at a moment’s notice to consume the Shāh’s enemies while still alive, piece by piece, organ by organ, until the victim perished.¹³ One can only imagine the type of personality fit for both positions, where the line between torture and entertainment blurred, if there was ever any distinction in the court’s eyes. In *Rawḍat al-ṣafawīyya*, Mīrzā Ḥasan Junābādī includes the following description of the live eaters’ appearance:

This squad wore a distinctive dress, marked by bulky, tall hats with no turbans that sat a small measure down on their heads and were adorned on the sides with bunches of cranes’ and owls’ feathers.¹⁴

Their dress bears an uncanny resemblance to Safavid jesters who, depicted in the miniatures of Sulṭān-Moḥammad Naqqāsh (c. 1565–1625), wear tall conical hats from whose top dangles various trinkets.¹⁵ This style of headwear also marks a continuity with comic entertainers in the succeeding Qājār period, including Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh’s (r. 1848–96) most renowned jester, Karīm Shīra’ī. The miniatures additionally depict the dancing performers in zoomorphic attire, including the wearing of sheepskins, that recalls the dress of the wandering dervishes and Qalandars of Asia Minor of the middle period.¹⁶ Richard

¹⁰ Nasrollah Falsafi, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh ‘Abbās-i Avval*, vol. II (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānishghāh-i Tehran, 1955), 250.

¹¹ Balyānī provides one of ‘Āqilī’s quatrains:

I am the wise, despite how ignorant I have become.
I remain in ignorance, despite how wise I have become.
I would not be the wise, having become completely ignorant,
should I neglect the Friend for an instant.

(Taqī al-Dīn Awḥadī Balyānī, *‘Arafāt Al-‘āshiqīn va ‘arṣāt al-‘arīfīn*, vol. V (Tehran: Markaz-i Pezūhesh-i Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 2011), 2834.)

¹² Falsafi, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh ‘Abbās-i Avval*, 1955, II: 250.

¹³ Falsafi, II: 250–51. Elsewhere in his account, Falsafi describes the live eaters, also known as Chīgiyyin (Turkish: “raw/uncooked”) and claims this lurid style of execution was first learned from the Mongols and Timūr’s example. Falsafi, II: 125–6. There is ample evidence to suggest their example is part of a broader pattern of ritual cannibalism practised by the Qizibāsh. See Shahzad Bashir, “Shah Isma‘il and the Qizilbash: cannibalism in the religious history of early Safavid Iran”, *History of Religions* 45/3, 2006, 234–56.

¹⁴ Translated and cited by Shahzad Bashir, “Shah Isma‘il and the Qizilbash”, 249; Mīrzā Ḥasan Junābādī, *Rawḍat al-ṣafawīyya* (Tehran: Bunyād-i Mawqūfāt-i Dr. Maḥmūd Afshār, [n.d.]), 724.

¹⁵ Bahram Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Iran* (Tehran: Kaviyan Press, 1965), 54–5. Ettinghausen identifies these ornaments as animal tails – Richard Ettinghausen, “The dance with zoomorphic masks and other forms of entertainment seen in Islamic art”, in George Makdisi (ed.), *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 212.

¹⁶ See descriptions in Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 1, 2, 14, 19, 63, 68.

Ettinghausen provides a forensic analysis of the figural and literary themes of these pictorial representations, exploring the possibility of their portrayal of Sufi dance and musical performance as court entertainment. Although Ettinghausen maintains a plausible scepticism,¹⁷ it is possible that jesters adopted and/or parodied aspects of the anti-nomian appearance of Sufi groups, some of whose origins and practices lay adjacent to the Safavid order, founded by the murshid Shaykh Ṣāfi al-Dīn (d. 1334). Franz Rosenthal's description of the figures as "wandering musicians and entertainers, two of whom are dressed up in goat-skins",¹⁸ lends weight to this theory, particularly in consideration of the description's musical elements which may have been a feature of public performance inherited by the jester from the wandering dervish in the Safavid age.¹⁹

As we see in these examples, a classificatory ambiguity persists in the figure of the *dalqak*. Rather than attempt to resolve this ambiguity, I have provided a small inventory of those listed under this broad category. The following sections, that make no pretence of completeness, present several *dalqak* profiles, chronological only from their Safavid-to-Zand transition. In many respects, the comedic figures appear out of time, with few accessible details of their lives other than the scattered anecdotes that came to define their place in history, however apocryphal. The episodes involving their names nonetheless provide access into court life and their role therein, in addition to varieties of popular humour and glimpses into Safavid society.

Mawlānā Taqī Pīrẓād: from periphery to centre

During the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb, a member from the tribe of Pīrẓād made his way from his native Mazandaran to Mashhad in pursuit of an education. Mawlānā Taqī Pīrẓād settled in the city, near the holy shrine of the eighth Shii Imam, where his sharp wit and humour earned him local fame, first among the locals and later among the gentry.²⁰ Pīrẓād was soon performing in the ceremonies and festivities hosted by the notables, where his bon mots (*laṭā'if*) and witty improvisation delighted his audience.²¹ This special attention led to another migration, part of a larger wave of Safavid poets and performers, to the Mughal court. As jester, his humour was ill-received by Jahāngīr.²² Despite this, Pīrẓād was able to tap into other performative wherewithal, built into the overall craft of the *dalqak*, and salvage a court career. He managed to secure the patronage of the famous poet and statesman, 'Abd al-Raḥīm "Khān-i Khānān" (d. 1627), for whom he composed panegyrics (*madaḥ*). Pīrẓād would die in Agra in the year 1612.²³ His case is a reminder that humour is culturally inflected and not always transferable.

Mawlānā Taqī Pīrẓād's humble start resembles that of other jesters who followed him. Out of their relationship with common people would develop a popular recognition of their ability, subsequently court-honoured.²⁴ The *dalqak* was one of the few

¹⁷ Farrokh Gaffary ("Evolution of rituals and theater in Iran", *Iranian Studies* 17/4, 1984, 364) more emphatically than Ettinghausen asserts no such connection.

¹⁸ Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), ix.

¹⁹ Theodore Craig Levin provides an anthropological interpolation, exploring the musical contributions of the Abdāls of Central Asia, defined as "fools of God". One of his interlocutors references the *masxaravāz* or "clown comedian" who would gather people in the squares of Bukhara for singing performances and panegyrics (Theodore Craig Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 109).

²⁰ Balyānī, II: 874.

²¹ Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭāhirī Shahāb, "Mawlānā Taqī Pīrẓād", *Armaghān* 39/4, Tīr 1971, 265.

²² Aziz Ahmad, "Ṣafawid poets and India", *Iran* 14, 1976, 124.

²³ Ṭāhirī Shahāb, "Mawlānā Taqī Pīrẓād", 266.

²⁴ Martin, "The jester and the shadow of God", 468.

positions available in the court where common people could elevate their socioeconomic standing from scarcity to abundance and from obscurity to fame. Their fortune was earned and not inherited. Although, in an official capacity, the occupation offered economic security, it produced a dependency on court largesse and new motivations for a continual, personalized style of performance. As an outsider now inside the imperial estate, the *dalqak*'s humble background still served as a conduit for the common sentiment of the king's subjects.²⁵ Jesters provided a form of entertainment with the power to inform and reform the king's views, a capacity partially informed by the feelings and experiences of people with humble class origins.

Dalāleh Qezī: jester/conqueror of Mughals

A notable addition to the court of Shāh 'Abbās I was Dalāleh Qezī, a female humorist (*maskhareh*) and companion of the Shāh. Unfortunately, there are no reports of her background, nor her comedic repertoire, in the available sources. The Italian traveller to Persia, Pietro Della Valle (d. 1652), provides an unflattering physical description of her as fat and old, yet says that she was vivacious (*shādāb*) and beloved by the Shāh.²⁶ Because of this close association, she was unique in commanding the respect of the heads of state and the Shāh's relatives, many of whom sought to earn her respect and feared her satirical wit in the event it was ever directed at them.²⁷ She often accompanied the Shāh on his travels, providing companionship and entertainment.²⁸

Dalāleh Qezī was exceptional in many ways, licensed to participate in behaviour and experiences that would otherwise have been interpreted as beyond the pale of Persian norms. Unlike other women who would accompany the Shāh, Dalāleh Qezī did not observe gender segregation and did not wear a chador nor any other veil in the public sphere.²⁹ Dalāleh Qezī evaded Shāh 'Abbās I's official mandate, prohibiting alcohol during the month of Ramadan in the year 1620.³⁰ Many associated with the court wished to have this privilege extended to others, principally themselves. Despite Dalāleh Qezī's pleas and offering of a large sum of money on behalf of the notables, the Shāh was unyielding and refused to reverse the mandate.³¹ It was these same court functionaries who, fearful of appealing to the Shāh directly, recognized the powers of Dalāleh Qezī's persuasion and influence over him. Perhaps this variety of intervention informs her name, Dalāleh, which conveys in Persian the position of intermediary and broker.

²⁵ Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*, 48.

²⁶ Pietro Della Valle, *Safarnāmeḥ-yi Pietro Della Valle*, trans. Mahmoud Behfurūzī, vol. II (Tehran: Nashre Ghatreh, 2002), 954.

²⁷ Muhammad-Reza Javadi Yeganeh, *Irānīyān dar zamāneh-yi pādīshāhī*, vol. VIII (Tehran: Shūrā-yi Ijtima'ī-yi Kishvar, 1394), 187.

²⁸ Nasrollah Falsafī, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh 'Abbās-i Avval*, vol. III (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānīshgāh-i Tehran, 1955), 226. Providing jocose company for the Shāh during travel was customary, a role sometimes taken on by avocational humorists. Spanish diplomat García de Silva Figueroa (d. 1624) recounts Iskandar Beg Munshī (d. c. 1633), the famed bureaucrat and author of *Tārīkh-i 'ālam-ārā-yi 'abbāsī*, acting as buffoon and boon companion of Shāh 'Abbās, whose antics and bodily humour were on display even while in the official company of ambassadors. García de Silva Figueroa, *Safarnāmeḥ-yi Don García de Silva Figueroa*, trans. Gholam Reza Samii (Tehran: Nashr-i Nau, 1984), 325.

²⁹ Della Valle, *Safarnāmeḥ-yi Pietro Della Valle*, II: 954.

³⁰ Rasul Jafarian, *Şafavīyya dar 'arşa-yi dīn, farhang va siyāsat*, vol. I (Tehran: Pīzhūhīshkadeh-yi Ḥawza va Dānīshgāh, 2000), 382. This prohibition had little success but was reinstated by Shāh 'Abbās II (r. 1642–66) with more stable results. See Rudi Matthee, "'ABBĀS II", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, edited by Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/abbas-ii-COM_11401?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-iranica-online&s.q=%27Abbas+II.

³¹ Falsafī, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh 'Abbās-i Avval*, 1955, II: 266–7.

Dalāleh Qezī's exceptional role bled into politics. In 1622, Shāh 'Abbās' troops attacked and seized a fortress in Kandahar held by the fourth Mughal Emperor, Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad Salīm Jahāngīr (d. 1627). Prior to his loss, Jahāngīr boasted that after recapturing Kandahar, he would take the fight to the then Safavid capital, Isfahan.³² Before ordering his Qizilbāsh troops to deploy in Kandahar, Shāh 'Abbās ordered Dalāleh Qezī and a band of prostitutes to occupy the fortress. Soon, the intended rumour spread that the so-called invincible castle of Kandahar, guarded by Mughal commanders, had been taken by a group of Safavid women led by a female clown.³³ Answering bravado with ridicule, we see that Shāh 'Abbās' political theatre did not exclude humour.³⁴

While at face value, Shāh 'Abbās' positioning of his favourite clown in Kandahar appears an elaborate taunt to a political foe, it has implications for the underlying gender and social coding of Safavid society. Its outrageousness involves not only the position of the jester whose very presence is mocking and absurd, but also female prostitutes. Women in Safavid Iran – excluding those in the royal court – did not serve in any military capacity³⁵ and, as far as the scant information affords,³⁶ maintained low public profiles. If women were born into court life or related to ruling men, they could become patrons of the arts and help promote the building and architecture of shrines and religious institutions, such as in the case of Shāh Ismā'īl I's wife Tājilū Khānum (d. 1540) and the fourth daughter of Shāh Ṭahmāsp, Zaynab Begum (d. 1640). They may also have been involved in diplomacy, writing official correspondence with foreign diplomats, providing court consultation and advice, and even at times taking charge of visiting foreign delegations, engagements designed to defend royal patrimony.³⁷ Women outside of royalty, however, often acquired political influence through performance and dance, and often coupled with prostitution.³⁸ The gradual institutional shift away from Turco-Mongol norms of relative gender parity to an urbanized and patriarchal religious ethos only accelerated this

³² Falsafī, II: 251.

³³ Della Valle, *Safarnāmeḥ-yi Pietro Della Valle*, II: 1218–19.

³⁴ The Syrian-Armenian traveller and diplomat of the Roman Empire, Pedros Bedik, who sojourned in Safavid Iran from 1670–75, relates an embellished version of this story where the courtesan protagonist, referred to as Arabkizi, is not mentioned as a jester. After capturing the fortress, Arabkizi emasculates the captive Mughal soldiers by forcing them to wear veils in imitation of Iranian women, while she sips from a glass of wine. After her conquest, she is relieved of her concubinage by the Shāh, who honours her with twelve court servants. Willem Floor, who translated Bedik's travelogue, asserts that Pietro Della Valle's version is far more credible and likely the source of Bedik's narrative variant; Pedros Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds: Pedros Bedik in Iran, 1670–1675*, trans. Willem Floor (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2013), 205–9.

³⁵ Shirin Mahdavi posits that women, at the onset of the Safavid revolution, served as warriors that fought alongside their male counterparts. Their participation was curtailed with the ascent of the traditional Shii clergy and especially with regards to the influence of the famous *muḥaddith*, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699). Shireen Mahdavi, "Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, family values and the Safavids", in Michel Mazzaoui (ed.), *Safavid Iran and Her Neighbors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 81–2.

³⁶ Amoretti and Matthee conclude in their article, "We know little about the life and activities of upper-class women, less about ordinary women, and almost nothing about women in the rural parts of the country". Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti and Rudolph Matthee, "Safavid dynasty", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*, Oxford University Press, 2013. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref:oislo/9780199764464.001.0001/acref-9780199764464-e-0343>.

³⁷ Banafshah Ḥijāzī, *Da'ifa: Barrasi-yi jaygah-i zan-i irāni dar 'aṣr-i safavī* (Tehran: Qaṣīdasarā, 2002), 52–5; Nazak Birjandifār, "Royal women and politics in Safavid Iran", MA Thesis (Montreal, McGill University, 2006), 42–5.

³⁸ Rudi Matthee, "Courtesans, prostitutes and dancing girls: women entertainers in Safavid Iran", in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (eds.), *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2000), 1221–50. This situation mirrors the medieval European scene, starting in the thirteenth century, where English women performed as "glee-maidens" who provided as much music, dance, and acrobatic performances as sexual charisma; see John H. Townsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976), 46.

pattern.³⁹ In this way, Dalāleh Qezī's presence, as jester and woman, doubly reifies the female role as provider of enchantment. She is rewarded by the Shāh, not for her celibacy or piousness, as was customarily extended to royals, but for her skilled spectacle.

Despite her privileged status, Dalāleh Qezī's situation had changed little since the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 1524–76) who was known to host troupes of humorists, singers, and prostitutes.⁴⁰ On one occasion, he dispatched such a troupe, including several *mukhannathān* or “effeminate” that may have included transexual, homosexual, and intersex individuals,⁴¹ for the purpose of ridiculing Amīreh Dubbāj Muẓaffar, a Gilānī prince who had run afoul of the Shāh.⁴² Despite his marriage to one of Shāh Ṭahmāsb's daughters, Amīreh Muẓaffar's history of fomenting rebellion in the Caspian region known as Bīa-pas and fraternizing with the Ottoman Sultan Selim eventually earned him death by immolation on the Shāh's orders.⁴³ It is not incidental that Shāh Ṭahmāsb's attempt at diminishing Amīreh Muẓaffar included equating him with others regarded as the dregs of Safavid society.⁴⁴ This was the Shāh's way of showing that he, like them, was a rogue, also to be treated as a laughing stock.

Kal 'Enāyat

Another famed jester and courtier of Shāh 'Abbās' court was Kal 'Enāyat, “Enāyat the Bald” (d. 1608), also known as Karbalā'ī 'Enāyat.⁴⁵ It was the Shāh himself who, on account of 'Enāyat's baldness, chose this sobriquet.⁴⁶ Before capturing the attention of the court, Kal 'Enāyat wandered with groups of itinerant performers, including musicians and dancers, who would visit the residences of the affluent and notables. They would keep their performance accoutrements, comprising costumes and masks, in a portable trunk whose contents they could unload and don to stage performances involving romantic dramas and comedic, often ribald, song renditions.⁴⁷

Kal 'Enāyat was a talented and witty humorist whose renown in his native Isfahan included a bathhouse (*garmābeh*) and gardens in his name.⁴⁸ Amid details about the Dardasht quarter of the city, the French Huguenot traveller Jean Chardin (d. 1713) includes a description of one of its notorious residents, Kal 'Enāyat. He remarks that the Shāh's jester had the unique ability to make anyone laugh at will through comedic

³⁹ Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 370–71.

⁴⁰ Farrokh Gaffary, “DALQAK”, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/dalqak-COM_7981?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-iranica-online&s.q=dalqak.

⁴¹ See Everett K. Rowson, “The effeminate of early Medina”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111/4, 1991, 673; Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed (trans. Adi S. Bharat), *Homosexuality, Transidentity, and Islam: A Study of Scripture Confronting the Politics of Gender and Sexuality* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 36.

⁴² Iraj Afshar, *Ālam-ārā-yi Shāh Ṭahmāsb* (Tehran: Dunyā-yi Kitāb, 1991), 71.

⁴³ H.L. Rabino, “Rulers of Gilān”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52/3, 1920, 14.

⁴⁴ Nielson finds, “After the tenth century, the *mukhannathun* are mentioned less frequently, though they still existed on the margins as actors, jesters and prostitutes”, in Lisa Nielson, “Gender and the politics of music in early Islamic courts”, *Early Music History* 31, 2012, 260.

⁴⁵ Mullā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Munajjim Yazdī, *Tarikh-i 'Abbāsī yā Rūznāmeḥ-yi Mullā Jalāl al-Dīn* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Vahid, 1988), 356. The author records Kal 'Enāyat dying in Mashhad.

⁴⁶ Nūrbakhsh, *Dalqakhā-yi mashhūr-i darbārī va maskharehā-yi dawrahgird*, 75.

⁴⁷ Gaffary, “Evolution of rituals and theater in Iran”, 372.

⁴⁸ Nūrbakhsh, *Dalqakhā-yi mashhūr-i darbārī va maskharehā-yi dawrahgird*, 75. Kal 'Enāyat's residence is described by the German explorer Engelbert Kaempfer (d. 1716) as including vast gardens enclosed by quarried stone, indicating opulence; see Engelbert Kaempfer (trans. Willem Floor and Colette Ouahes), *Exotic Attractions in Persia, 1684–1688: Travels & Observations* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2018), 235.

parody and body language, skills aided by “a sharp and sensible mind”.⁴⁹ Perhaps it was this clever mind that allowed Kal ‘Enāyat the rare ability to take liberties with the Shāh that would otherwise have earned punishment or scorn. In one example of this latitude, Shāh ‘Abbās attempts humour on his jester who, due to an inflamed eye, is in no laughing mood. “Don’t you know that I’m a skilled doctor?!” the Shāh exclaims, before prescribing a concoction of chalk and ammonia salts to apply to the affected area. Unamused, Kal ‘Enāyat sarcastically retorts, “With these skills, I wonder why you’re not able to cure your father’s leaky, squinting eyes”.⁵⁰ Here, Kal ‘Enāyat alludes to Mohammad Khodābanda (d. 1595), who suffered from a debilitating eye condition that left him partially blind. One can reasonably assume that such a malady, which challenged Khodābanda’s ability to rule and led to his son’s forceful assumption of power, would be a sensitive, if not taboo, subject.

Despite the dearth of information about his origins and background, stories involving Kal ‘Enāyat abound. One anecdote is set in a battle between Ottoman and Safavid cavalymen. Shāh ‘Abbās is fearful of the Ottoman columns holding an advantage by having established their positions before the Safavids, and in his panic consults Shaykh Bahā’ al-Dīn al-‘Amilī (d. 1621). The cleric, known to provide advice to monarchs in times of need, offers the common religious prescription of performing the ritual ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) and two prayer cycles (*rakʿa*), supplicating for divine-assisted victory. Kal ‘Enāyat overhears Shaykh al-Bahā’i’s advice, and exclaims, “Oh Shaykh, this king is in such a state of fear that he can’t hold it in. As soon as he performs the ablution, he’ll immediately break his state of purity [i.e. wet himself]!” The jester’s levity, rousing the Shāh’s mirth, proves more useful than religious counsel, as the story ends with the Safavids winning the battle.⁵¹

Another account, recounted by Chardin, features the aftermath of Shāh ‘Abbās’ 1621 decree banning an opium decoction (*jūshānde-i kūknār*)⁵² that much of the populace enjoyed to the point of addiction. The ban, however, had disastrous health outcomes, including widespread withdrawal sickness and death. Naturally, many were discontented. In response, Kal ‘Enāyat established a makeshift store, selling burial shrouds, across the street from the Shāh’s seraglio, so that the latter could witness the resulting suffering and death incurred by his subjects, including among the dignitaries, and reconsider his poor policy decision.⁵³ Once the Shāh passed by the staged scene in his horse carriage, he was greeted by Kal ‘Enāyat who proclaimed in delight:

Your Majesty, since the moment you banned opium I have taken up this line of business so as to become rich, and this has been a great success. In a single day I make as much as I may expect to make in almost a year by flattering and joking at court and earning the wages of a parasite. May you and yours prosper. I will continue in this manner for as long as the law is in force.⁵⁴

Here, we find the court jester erecting a vivid reminder of death across from a place where life is conceived. In illuminating the Shāh’s moral oversight, Kal ‘Enāyat, well-versed in the gentle art of persuasion, provides no strident argument, but instead uses his skilled

⁴⁹ Jean Chardin, *Voyages de monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’orient*, vol. VIII (Paris: Le Normant, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1811), 125.

⁵⁰ Chardin, VIII: 127–8.

⁵¹ Falsafī, *Zindigāni-yi Shāh ‘Abbās-i Avval*, 1955, II: 250–51.

⁵² Bedik (*A Man of Two Worlds*, 320–21) describes *kūknār* as opium poppy, mixed with grenadine root juice and herbs, that induces a form of delirium in its consumer.

⁵³ Chardin, *Voyages de monsieur le chevalier Chardin*, VIII: 125–7; Gholam Reza Jalālī, *Mashāhīr-i madfūn dar ḥaram-i rizavī*, vol. IV (Mashhad: Astan Quds Razavi, 2010), 320–21.

⁵⁴ This exchange is included by Kaempfer in his rendition of the account; Kaempfer, *Exotic Attractions in Persia*, 233.

knowledge of performance to communicate truths that would be difficult to convey directly, without offending the honour and sensibilities of a monarch. The “bald” truth of Kal ‘Enāyat is screened through a performative intervention whose language, although oblique, is clear. As a result, it is most effective, leading to the ban’s immediate reversal.

Kachal Muṣṭafā: a cautionary tale

Playing the fool included certain occupational hazards. It involved the practice of artifice, precarious for its delicate balance between knowing precisely when to use guile and when to be guileless; and when to respect interpersonal boundaries and when to trespass them. This balancing act often resulted in danger, as in the case of Kachal Muṣṭafā, a court jester who found himself in the crosshairs of Shāh ‘Abbās’ notorious irascibility.⁵⁵

Kachal Muṣṭafā was ordinarily afforded every opportunity to occupy any court space, except for the Shāh’s harem. On the twenty-second morning of the month of Dhū al-Ḥijja, this privilege was challenged. Kachal Muṣṭafā raced to the roof of the royal palace where a tightrope performance was taking place. This was a space where on this occasion, for unknown reasons, he was not welcome. The Shāh angrily ordered him away, but the jester brazenly returned. In a fit of anger, Shāh ‘Abbās unsheathed his sword and struck Kachal Muṣṭafā in the neck, severing his head.⁵⁶ Outside of the account of his sudden execution, there is little information about Kachal Muṣṭafā. His fate is nonetheless illustrative of the perils of his occupation. Among those in the Shāh’s midst, it would be easy to dispose of an unnecessary distraction once a jester was deemed as such. Kachal Muṣṭafā’s lesson is that that if one was imprudently acting the fool, they might risk being the fool. It was thus necessary, along the lines of Dalāleh Qezī and Kal ‘Enāyat, to cultivate deep, personal relationships with the Shāh that transcended casual amusement.

Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ and the rogues of the Zand dynasty

The most popular court-associated jester of the Zand period (1750–79) was Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ of Shiraz who entertained the Zand ruler, Muḥammad Karīm Khān (d. 1779). He is described as a fixture of Karīm Khān’s court, whose noisy troupe of players were allowed to perform for guests of the ruler’s royal harem.⁵⁷ The Zand shāh evidently found Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ’s comparison of the Lorī dialect of Karīm Khān’s clan to barking dogs uproarious. In the account related by the British diplomat and East India Company administrator, Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), Muḥammad Karīm Khān sends Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ to investigate the noise of a dog’s barking, sarcastically instructing him to find out what the dog wants. Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ returns, informing the shāh that he does not speak the “barbarous dialect”⁵⁸ of dogs with which only “his majesty’s family are familiar”.⁵⁹ Malcolm chauvinistically remarks that the style of the Persian court jester was popular among its European counterpart centuries ago. He reads an ethnocentric impetus into the study of the “trifling form” of Lūṭī Ṣāleḥ’s humour, writing:

It leads to conclusions on the progress of knowledge, and the condition of society: and we may perhaps judge as correctly from the character of their (Persian)

⁵⁵ Donald Rayfield describes Shāh ‘Abbās, in his dealing with potential adversaries, as “a murderous paranoiac when aroused” (Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 182).

⁵⁶ Falsafi, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh ‘Abbās-i Avval*, 1955, III: 129.

⁵⁷ Nūrbakhsh, *Dalqakhā-yi mashhūr-i darbārī va maskharehkhā-yi dawrahgird*, 88–9.

⁵⁸ Literally, “crooked tongue”: *kaj zabān*.

⁵⁹ Sir John Malcolm, *The History of Persia, from the Most Early Period to the Present Time*, vol. II (London: J. Murray, 1815), 551–2.

amusements, as from their more serious occupations, of the degree of civilisation that a people have attained.⁶⁰

Lūṭī Šāleḥ's talents also included spying on potential rivals of the Shāh, whose dissemblance required donning the appearance of a menial servant during drinking gatherings, where tongues might loosen.⁶¹ The recorded history is less than clear about Lūṭī Šāleḥ's fate, but in most accounts, this clandestine service produced unanticipated consequences that would cost him dearly. While managing to serve in the succeeding Qājār dynasty's court in Tehran, some divulgence gleaned through Lūṭī Šāleḥ's espionage implicating Ja'far Qolī Khān, the brother of the dynasty's founder Āghā Muḥammad Khān Qājār (r. 1789–97), spurred the latter to kill his brother. Afterwards, according to the son of the monarch, Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh, who would replace Āghā Muḥammad Khān, the Shāh felt contrite and blamed his *dalqak*, demanding Lūṭī Šāleḥ pay an atonement ransom.⁶² After Lūṭī Šāleḥ was only able to produce 8,000 of the 15,000 tomans demanded, the Shāh had Lūṭī Šāleḥ's nose cut off. He was later exiled, toman-less, to the 'Atabāt region where he died and was buried in Kāzīmāyn, near the shrines of the Shii Imams Mūsā b. Ja'far al-Kāzīm and Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Jawād.⁶³

An important, though historically elusive, phenomenon of bald "rogue" (*lūṭī*)⁶⁴ performers emerged shortly after the time of Kal 'Enāyat, stretching into the subsequent period of the Zand dynasty. "Bald play-acting" (*kachalak bāzī*), as it became known, involved a variety of bald buffoons specializing in pantomime (*taqlīd*) and parody. One of its renowned performers, Ḥasan Kachal, provides an indication as to *kachalak bāzī*'s comedic forte. In his act, he plays the hapless and poor marriage petitioner of a bazaari cleric's daughter. The would-be father-in-law is impervious to Ḥasan Kachal's comically recurring entreaties and rebuffs him with profanity and futile supplications to be left alone.⁶⁵ On each occasion, the ludicrousness swells, in a version of the Theatre of the Absurd. Such a performance by the bald rogue, Bahram Beyzai asserts, acts as a social commentary of the mundane performances involved in everyday life, its superficialities and contradictions, including the quest for wealth and honour aspired to by the baron and the free-loader alike.⁶⁶ On a stage, these dispiriting experiences are transformed into the absurd and hilarious, ultimately making them more bearable for the audience.

The act of head-shaving has had different historical and religious significance across cultures and civilizations. The practice of tonsure among Buddhist monks and nuns, in the Jewish mitzvah of *metzora*, in preparation for performing the Islamic *ḥajj*, and previously by Eastern and Roman Catholic monks, all hint at ritual purification and world renouncement. Its particular role in *kachalak bāzī* remains unclear. Actor and playwright Javad Ensafi, who in 2014 staged a play based on the character Kal 'Enāyat, speculates that *kachalak bāzī*, or alternatively *kal-bāzī*, originated in the Safavid period. The smooth pate of performers' heads, he claims, indicated their inner purity and sincerity

⁶⁰ Malcolm, *The History of Persia* II, 552.

⁶¹ Aḥmad Mīrzā 'Aḍod-al-Dawla, *Tārīkh-i 'aḍudī* (Tehran: Nashr-i Bābak, 1976), 75–6.

⁶² 'Aḍod-al-Dawla, *Tārīkh-i 'aḍudī*, 77.

⁶³ 'Aḍod-al-Dawla, *Tārīkh-i 'aḍudī*, 77.

⁶⁴ The term *lūṭī*, took on different meanings from century to century in Iran. Its origins are speculative but came to convey chivalrous figures of an unconventional nature. See Willem Floor, "LUTĪ", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/luti-COM_10384?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-iranica-online&s.q=luti.

⁶⁵ Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Iran*, 170.

⁶⁶ Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Iran*, 170.

(*cheshm pāki*).⁶⁷ They were chivalrous heroes or “champions” (*pahlevān*), that, along with copious humour, injected into their performances a dramatic flair, its protagonists protecting the vulnerable against the injustice of tyrants.⁶⁸ By the end of his performance, the *pahlevān kachal*'s acts of chivalry and self-sacrifice reveal his special spiritual nature, displacing the perceived physical defect of his baldness.⁶⁹

The popularity of *kachalak bāzi* as a theatre continued into the Qājār period, and produced several famous rogues, including Ḥasan Kachal and Dāsh⁷⁰ Ākel/Ākol. The latter would be the inspiration for Sadegh Hedayat's (d. 1951) story of the same name, contained within his first collection of short stories. In *Dāsh Ākol*, the titular protagonist falls in love with the young daughter, Marjān, of Hajji Ṣamad whose estate he is tasked to manage after the wealthy merchant's death. Dāsh Ākol dies a tragic death, confronting a lifelong nemesis who mortally wounds Dāsh Ākol with his own dagger, after swearing off its use in battle. After succumbing to his wounds, Dāsh Ākol's unrequited love for Marjān is finally professed by a parrot who kept him company on lonely nights and imbibed his alcohol-fuelled love poems. Although morally compromised in many respects according to social convention, Dāsh Ākol remains honest and courageous to the bitter end, even arranging for the wedding of Marjān to a man of lesser stock, out of a residual feeling of duty and honour towards Hajji Ṣamad.

In this overview, the figure of the *lūṭī*, from the Safavid to late-Qājār period, evolves from a mischievous figure into an antihero who, despite his faults and eccentricities, does the right thing at the right time. His virtue takes on more subtle complexity and less slapstick comedy in the process. As noted, the term *lūṭī* would come to mean different things in the Indo-Persian context, dissociated from its original meaning derived from the Arabic *lawwāṭ*, “of the people of the Prophet Lot”, referring to sexual deviancy. For centuries, it modulated from designating a pederast to a vagabond in the literary works of Muḥammad al-Kisā'ī, Muḥammad b. 'Alī Sūzanī, and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.⁷¹ In the Qājār period, the term became a catch-all for unsavoury character types, e.g. hooligans and performers alike, including acrobats, buffoons, and artists.⁷² It subsequently evolved to encompass the figure of the outcast, and particularly one with a macho chivalry or *javānmardī* disposition, such as Dāsh Ākol. An endogamous group called Lutis, perhaps related to the Roma ethnic group, today live in south-western Lorestan and the Bakhtiari regions of Iran. From the little information available, they remain socially marginalized and often referred to by the pejorative *ḥarām-khār* “eaters of the unclean”, for their practice of hunting and eating wild boar.⁷³ The *lūṭī* has travelled a long way, bringing along abundant semantic complexity. As a phenomenon associated with entertainment and jesting, it appears that much of its defining contours were sculpted during the Safavid epoch.

⁶⁷ Javad Ensafi, “Dānesh Ākel va Ḥasan Kachal Rīsheh dar Kal-bāzi Dārānd”, *Mehr News*, Mehr 1393, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2376836>.

⁶⁸ Medjid Rezvani, *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran* (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962), 111–2, 127–8.

⁶⁹ Azimpour Tabrizi Poupak, “Iranian traditional puppet shows: Pahlevan Kachal and Khyimeh Shab Bazi”, *Bahar* 28/54, 2018, 4. Even when transposed later as a popular marionette form, the characters and themes would carry over, often involving a damsel in distress saved by the *pahlevān kachal* from the evil *div*. See Shiva Massoudi, “Kheimeh Shab Bazi: Iranian traditional marionette theatre”, *Asian Theatre Journal* 26/2, 2009, 260–80.

⁷⁰ Dānesh, alternatively.

⁷¹ L.P. Elwell-Sutton, “Lūṭī”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4706

⁷² W.M. Floor, “The Lūṭīs: a social phenomenon in Qājār Persia: a reappraisal”, *Die Welt Des Islams* 13/1–2, 1971, 103.

⁷³ Sekandar Amanolahi and Edward Norbeck, “The Luti, an outcaste group of Iran”, *Rice University Studies*, Rice Institute Pamphlet, 61, no. 2, 1975, 4.

The clown and the social relationship: a brief digression

Many jesters in the Safavid and Zand periods are either celebrated or punished for their candour. Their depth of insight, both through the screen of performance and overt counsel, depended on a rare intimacy with the monarch, unshared with other courtiers. The proximity between king and jester marks a liminal zone, combining regality and rebellion. The power of the jester would come from the momentary suspension of power asymmetries within this zone, enabling a transfer of information that might, in the open, implicate or embarrass the shāh. Facts emerge from this suspension, those in the interests of the prevailing order's maintenance. In this sense, actions of the *dalqak* serve as a concealed criticism, suspending power, briefly, in order to ensure its hold, indefinitely.

This phenomenon can be viewed across cultures. John H. Towsen presents several historical examples, including among the indigenous Pueblo peoples of North America. By way of burlesque and kachina dance, clown clans of the Southwest Yaqui and the Hopi were known to satirize community members marked for antisocial behaviour, including alcoholism.⁷⁴ Towsen recognizes these performances as producing the same effects as legal sanctions, while reaffirming connections with the sacred and the social aspects interwoven within their communities.⁷⁵ Anthropologist Deanna Paniataaq Kingston discovered something similar in her study of the competitive performance of *illugit* or “teasing cousins songs”, among the Iñupiat of northwestern Alaska. Inasmuch as they were humorous public occasions, Kingston finds that they were also indirect ways of correcting aberrant behaviour. Any interpersonal tension or resentment could instead be rechannelled and expelled in a duelling *illugit* song, avoiding the potential for a physical duel. In this way, the public song contests helped reaffirm kinship relationships and other markers of Iñupiat ethnic identity.⁷⁶

In a similar vein, in the Szechuan theatre of China, an assortment of social outcasts, including the indolent, the gluttonous, and the gossip (usually an older woman), are parodied by its comic actors.⁷⁷ The Szechuan theatre features the use of the local Sichuanese dialect and caters to the lifeworld of the countryside, affirming its mores and its provincial pride, often offended by urban elitism and centres of power. The popular Szechuan theatre evinces another widespread aspect of clowning, in keeping dignitaries modest. A variety of clowns known as “clown-dignitaries” mock the officialdom expressed in the statuses of minister, aristocrat, philosopher, and even emperor, who are depicted as corrupt and hypocritical. This parody allows the audience to indulge in challenging or embarrassing authorities from a safe distance, offering catharsis and encouraging patience in bearing their rule.

Elsewhere, Balinese clowns offer a unique window into self-reflective social criticism and its palliative effect. Balinese dramatic repertoire projects the spirituality of their traditional religion, a religion that features demigod clowns that mediate between the upper and lower registers of the universe, such as Semar in Java and Sunda and Twalen in Bali.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Similar features are found among the Zuni; see Julian Steward, “The ceremonial buffoon of the American Indian”, *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters* 14, 1930, 187–207.

⁷⁵ Towsen, *Clowns*, 9.

⁷⁶ Deanna Paniataaq Kingston, “The persistence of conflict avoidance among the King Island Inupiat”, *Études/Inuit/Studies* 32/2, 2008, 159–60; Deanna Paniataaq Kingston, “Illuweet or teasing cousin songs as an expression of King Island Iñupiaq identity” (MA diss., Oregon State University, 1994), 13–20.

⁷⁷ Dana Kalvodová, “Clowns in the Szechuan theatre”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 28/2, 1965, 356–62; Towsen, *Clowns*, 33–4.

⁷⁸ Despite supporting a strong religious ethos, Balinese clowns in their performances often blasphemously distort religious iconography and objects beyond orthodox recognition. Towsen, *Clowns*, 36.

Despite their semi-divine status, they affirm a warts-and-all realistic worldview in their repertoire, finding space to “weave local gossip and political commentary into their improvised jokes”.⁷⁹ Their dance dramas often pair two archetypes, one clever and verbal, the other foolish and physical.⁸⁰ Despite the different constitutions, their fates converge over the course of their dramatic journey, and they are unable to evade the doom that awaits them at the performance’s end. Although they are unsuccessful in confronting various injustices, the Balinese clowns reinforce symbols of courage and togetherness, encouraging an audience to vicariously act out their vexations in the clowns’ dramatic sequence. Emmett Kelly (d. 1979), who harnessed the frustrations of the American Depression to portray the tramp clown, Weary Willie, was acutely aware of his character’s sanative effect, writing, “folks who are down on their luck, have had disappointments and have maybe been pushed around by circumstances beyond their control, see a caricature of themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into the battle”.⁸¹

The point of highlighting sundry comedic performances in far-flung corners of the world is to report their common roles. These external examples have an Iranian analogue in *ruḥawzī*⁸² performances that, according to Floor, gradually supplanted puppet plays, retaining their features of pantomime, music, and dialogue to become a variety show.⁸³ *Ruḥawzī*’s historical origins and evolution, like the *ta’zīyeh*, are obscure, but its prevalence is evident among itinerant troupes of the Safavid period.⁸⁴ These improvised comedic stagings, traditionally atop courtyard fountain basins topped with wood planks,⁸⁵ featured segments of jesters who parodied clerics, judges, and merchants for their pettiness and faux piety. In their lampooning of local personalities, the jesters’ performances involved double entendre and puns, sometimes subtle and at other times flagrant.⁸⁶ Floor describes the popular art form as a “comic drama [that] took its cues from real life”, whose actors, like those of Pueblo clown clans, “revealed details about affairs that were public knowledge, but which nobody dared to mention let alone criticize in public”.⁸⁷ Here, the *dalqak* provides audiences with a vicarious airing of grievances and the cathartic relief of laughter.⁸⁸ If, post-*ruḥawzī* performance, the hats passed around by the ringmaster were found stuffed with donation money, one can be sure that the audience left with the satisfaction of both experiences.

⁷⁹ Ron Jenkins, “‘Fratello Arlecchino’: clowns, kings, and bombs in Bali”, in David Robb (ed.), *Clowns, Fools and Picasos: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction, and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 116.

⁸⁰ Towsen, *Clowns*, 36.

⁸¹ Emmett Kelly, *Clown: My Life in Tatters and Smiles* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 126.

⁸² Otherwise known as *takhteh-ḥawzī*. Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Iran*, 233.

⁸³ Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2005), 44–5.

⁸⁴ William O. Beeman, “RUḤAWZĪ”, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/ruhawzi-COM_12166?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-iranica-online&s.q=ruhawzi.

⁸⁵ Hence their name *ru-ḥawzeh*: “[planks] over the basin”. Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 57–8.

⁸⁶ Beeman, “RUḤAWZĪ”.

⁸⁷ Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 48–9.

⁸⁸ On the *dalqak*’s transgressive role in *ruḥawzī*, Beeman comments:

The clown’s actions are “bad”, but in the context of the play they become “good”; the “good” actions of those characters representing normal, upstanding citizens are likewise held up to ridicule and mocked, and they become “bad”. Removed from clear distinctions between good and bad, the actions of the clown, while teetering on the edge of acceptability, are ambiguous in their indication of the personal culpability of their perpetrator.

William O. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011), 142.

In these examples of comedic performance, humour offers no tangible solution to social and political havoc, only temporary healing for a (mostly) hopeless position,⁸⁹ an import that can be discovered in a variety of locations and cultures too numerous to report. This melancholic streak, however, is consistent with the ironic satire found in Persian literature, including in the works of the Mongol-era Persian satirist ‘Obayd-Allāh Zākānī (d. 1370). Hasan Javadi perceives Zākānī in the mould of Jonathan Swift, as a “sad and bitter man”, the emotional weight of whose socio-political criticism was alleviated only by humour.⁹⁰ In ‘Abbās Eqbāl Ashtiānī’s introduction to Zākānī’s edited works, Ashtiānī writes that many learned men in Zākānī’s time chose to be jesters, playing the part of the “sagacious fool” who could criticize the corrupt conditions of their time and ridicule the powerful men responsible for the conditions’ persistence.⁹¹ Their satirical technique would function as a tonic, counteracting the pessimism that, if left to its own devices, would consume the individual in despair.

Concluding remarks

Although in the past, clown ensembles have been exoticized, even labelled “esoteric fraternities”,⁹² their humour is anything but unconventional. Few in any social order desire to be the centre of negative attention and pay the price of non-conformity. While the primary function of a jester’s acts is to generate humorous amusement, they nonetheless underscore certain social hierarchies and the consequences of violating them. These repercussions take the form of unwanted attention, where one becomes the “figure of fun”, such as befalls Amīreh Dubbāj Muzaffar who is greeted with ignominy before death. Comedic dimensions of performances add weight to this message, imparting the force of jocular cues into social perception and validation. This brand of humour hence becomes a propaganda device that mocks and caricatures deviance, while validating behaviour widely considered most appropriate.

When part of a larger social structure, Orrin Klapp discovers a fourfold characteristic status of the fool, comprising the low, ridiculed, tolerated, and licensed, united in their manifestation of status reduction and social control.⁹³ In suspending proper decorum and moralistic boundaries, the *dalqak*’s comedic productions reveal an element required for the maintenance of societal balance and propriety. By overstepping the line separating the appropriate from the inappropriate, they reify the line’s existence. This can be seen in the example of Dalāleh Qezī, whose play with gender roles, while leading to outrageous consequences, reasserts the gender distinctions naturalized in Safavid culture. However, this also allows a personal advantage vis-à-vis the Shāh. Dalāleh Qezī’s identity as a *dalqak* that is beyond the scope of gender allows her to navigate the positions and privileges of males, ordinarily withheld from women. Hence, she is seen by others as an effective mediator of their affairs, affairs that might run in either gendered direction.

The Safavid *dalqak* folds the above-mentioned import of offering criticism and appeals towards modesty into a mostly privatized occupation, at the behest of the shāh.⁹⁴ Keeping

⁸⁹ This sentiment is wonderfully rendered by Emmett Kelly who describes his clown character’s ethos: “The deck is stacked, the wheel fixed, the dice ‘frozen’, the race fixed and the wheel crooked, but there is always present that one tiny, forlorn spark of hope still glimmering in his soul which makes him keep on trying”. Kelly, *Clown*, 125–6.

⁹⁰ Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 113.

⁹¹ Translated by Hasan Javadi. Javadi, 113.

⁹² Matilda Coxé Stevenson, “The Zuni Indians: their mythology, esoteric fraternities, and ceremonies”, Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington, DC, 1905).

⁹³ Orrin E. Klapp, “The fool as a social type”, *American Journal of Sociology* 55/2, 1949, 161–2.

⁹⁴ Despite the mostly exclusive audience of the court jester, the *dalqak* was known in their community and usually gained notoriety through participation in roaming performance groups.

the shāh (minimally) modest would be an important task for maintaining an essential connection to his people whose fidelity he must retain. Jesters become embodied, costumed mirrors for princes. They are mediums of consultation who, unlike the vizier, “speak” without authority. Their communication is unlike that of any other figure in the functional orbit of the shāh, delivered through symbols, parody, and innuendo that avoids direct moral offence and that can either be taken in to account or laughed off. Because of these features, the *dalqak*’s constitution is paradoxical: valued and depreciated, degraded and privileged.⁹⁵ They lack honour as fools, yet are treasured for their wit.

⁹⁵ Orrin E. Klapp, “The fool as a social type”, *American Journal of Sociology* 55/2, 1949, 161.

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