Puzzles and Patronage in the Persian Cosmopolis: Moʿin al-Din Esfezāri’s Acrostic Letter to Mahmud Gāvān

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Abstract

This article studies a literary puzzle, a maktub-e movashshah or acrostic letter, that is among the Persian monshaʾāt (stylized literary letters) of the Herat-based historian and secretary Moʿin al-Din Mohammad Zamji Esfezāri (fl. 1468–94/873–99). Created in praise of the Bahmani vizier Mahmud Gāvān (d. 1481/886), Esfezāri’s composition fits within a corpus of letters that testifies to the existence of epistolary contacts between Gāvān and the élites of the court of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā (r. 1469–1506/873–911). Esfezāri’s letter is especially valuable because it elucidates Timurid intellectuals’ interests in such relations in the second half of the fifteenth/nineteenth century. An analysis of its message shows that Timurid literati could pursue long-distance patronage in the Deccan, without necessarily migrating to the region. The letter’s acrostic form, moreover, is an interesting case of how authors of Persian texts could strike a balance between local expectations and transregional aspirations in the Persian cosmopolis.

Keywords

Among the extant writings of the monshi (secretary) Mo’in al-Din Mohammad Zamji Esfezārī (fl. 1468–94/873–99) there is a little-known letter to Mahmud Gāvān (d. 1481/886), the vizier of the Bahmani sultanate (1347–1528/748–934) from 1466/870 to 1481/886 (Esfezārī 2019/1398, 163–65).1 Esfezārī worked at the court of the Timurid ruler Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā (r. 1469–1506/873–911) in Herat, as a contemporary of the celebrated Sufi poet Nur al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1494/899) and the important patron Nezām al-Din ‘Ali-Shir Navā‘ī (d. 1501/903). His nesba, Esfezārī, indicates that he was born in or that his family hailed from Esfezar, a town in eastern Khorasan on the road between Sistan and Herat (Bosworth 1995). His date of birth is unknown, but he went to Herat in the year 1468–69/873 while still in his youth. There, he entered the service of one of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā’s courtiers, Khvāja Majd al-Din Mohammad (d. 1494/899) (Esfezārī 2019/1398, xxv). In 1472/876, his patron was appointed vizier and head of the financial administration (Subtelny 2007, 83, 86). In 1490/895, however, Majd al-Din Mohammad was dismissed from his offices and faced a trial which eventually led to his ouster and murder in 1494/899 (ibid., 92–99). Esfezārī possibly relocated to work as a secretary for another of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā’s prominent officials, Khvāja Qevām al-Din Nezām al-Molk (d. 1498/903). He dedicated to his new patron his most famous work, a history of Herat entitled Rowzāt al-jannāt fi owsāf madinat Herāt (Gardens of Paradise, or Description of the City of Herat), written between 1491/897 and 1494/899 (Bosworth 2004; Subtelny 1988, 493). Esfezārī also composed poetry and treatises (Esfezārī 2019/1398, xxii–xxviii). In addition, he gathered reproductions of letters, official documents, and introductions in an enshāʿ collection, Monshaʾāt-e Esfezārī (Writings of Esfezārī). Enshāʿ or “literary construction” is the term for writings for which specific sophisticated styles and formats were required. It is this work of Esfezārī that contains the letter to Gāvān. Regarding the date of the collection’s composition, the year 1468–69/873 has been proposed (ibid., xxv), but letters such as the ones to the Aq Qoyunlu sultan Ya’qub (r. 1478–90/883–96) suggest that the collection also contains later materials (ibid., 148–52, 202–10). Esfezārī might have begun collecting his writings when he joined the Timurid court in Herat, but he probably

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1 To the best of my knowledge, only Jehādi Hosayni in his introduction to Esfezārī’s Monshaʾāt (idem 2019/1398, xlii) and Uzbek (38–39) in his master’s thesis on Esfezārī have discussed this letter.
kept on adding to it as the years progressed. Contemporary sources are silent about Esfezāri’s date of death, but one seventeenth/eleventh-century source states that he passed away in the year 1509–10/915 (ibid., xxx).

Esfezāri’s correspondent, Mahmud Gāvān, was born in Gilan around 1410–11/813. Following years of travel, study, and trade throughout the Islamic world, he arrived in the Indian subcontinent around 1452–53/856. In Bidar, the capital of the Bahmani sultanate, his meanderings came to a halt when the sultan ʿAlā al-Din Ahmad II (r. 1436–58/839–62) offered him a position at the court. He gradually rose through the ranks, until he virtually ruled the sultanate between 1466/870 and 1481/886 instead of the young sultan Shams al-Din Mohammad III (r. 1463–82/867–87). In 1481/886, however, the sultan ordered Gāvān’s execution after charges of treason, based on false evidence fabricated by his enemies. Gavan’s legacy includes two works on ensā’, the collection Reyāz al-ensā’ (Garden of Composition) and the manual Manāzer al-ensā’ (Aspects of Composition), and a madrasa which still partly stands in Bidar (for more detailed treatments of Gāvān’s life, see Eaton 2005, 59–77; Flatt 2015; Sherwani 1942; 1985, 197–243).

Though living far apart in Khorasan and the Deccan, Esfezāri and Gāvān were able to correspond because they both mastered the transregional contact language of the age: Persian (for theorizations about Persian as a transregional contact language, see Fragner, 33; Green, 4–8). When Esfezāri wrote his letter to Gāvān (probably between 1468/873 and 1481/886, when both were professionally active at their respective courts), Persian had since long found a stable footing in South Asia. The Delhi sultanate (1210–1526/607–932) had inherited upon its establishment the Perso-Islamic ideals of its Ghurid predecessor. When the Delhi sultans subsequently expanded their territory further southwards, Persian also got underway in the subcontinent’s Deccan Plateau. In the middle of the fourteenth/eighth century, military commanders serving the Tughluq house (1320–1413/720–816) carved out their own territory in the area lying roughly between the Krishna River in the south and the Tapti River in the north, creating the Bahmani sultanate. The Bahmanis retained their former overlords’ preference for Persian as the administrative and court language, that way anchoring the official use of Persian in the Deccan for centuries to come.

Further, the expansion of Persian in north India and the Deccan was carried by Persian élites emigrating from Khorasan and Central Asia to the Delhi

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2 A detailed study of the Monshaʿāt-e Esfezāri has not been conducted so far and so this statement should be seen as provisional until future research provides more certainty about the work’s context and that of the different writings it contains.

3 Rizvi puts (62) 1493–94/899 as Esfezāri’s date of death.
sultanate and its successor sultanates (Eaton 2018, 68, 71). In relation to the Bahmani sultanate, instances of Persian émigrés entering the army, administration, and court can be traced as early as the reign of sultan Mohammad II (r. 1378–97/780–99), and the process gained momentum under sultan Firuz Shāh (r. 1397–1422/800–25) and his successors, who systematically sent ships to the Persian Gulf to recruit qualified men (Eaton 2005, 61; Flatt 2019, 79–81; Subrahmanyam, 342). Immigration did not only import the Persian language in South Asia but also the cultural sensibilities, attitudes, practices, and knowledges rooted in Persian texts. Similar processes took place from Anatolia to South East Asia (and beyond; cf. Green). At the same time, local languages and their associated traditions endured, both parallel to the usage of Persian and in composite cultural expressions. To capture this set of historical circumstances tied to the transregional appeal of the cultural and political ideas carried by the Persian language and their conversation with local languages and cultures, scholars today revert to the phrase “the Persian cosmopolis” (a favorite among scholars of South Asian and South East Asian history, e.g., Eaton 2018; Flatt 2019; Petrů) or “the Persianate world” (e.g., Amanat and Ashraf; Green; Spooner and Hanaway).

An immigrant himself with strong ties to his home region near the Caspian Sea and well-versed in Persianate learning, Mahmud Gāvān is often depicted today as both a product and a driving force of the diffusion of Persianate culture to the Deccan. His most visible project as vizier of the Bahmani sultanate, his madrasa, bears the stamp of a Persianate orientation (Eaton 2005, 66–67; Merklinger; Philon). It is reminiscent of Timurid architecture and was possibly built using a Timurid ground plan and the help of migrant craftsmen (Blair and Bloom, 186–96). Further, Overton suggested a relationship between Gāvān’s correspondence—some of it preserved in his ensāʾ collection and that of his secretary ʿAbd al-Karim Nimdehi (d. c. 1501/906)—and the Deccan’s cultural links to the home regions of various of his addressees:

Cultural ties between Bidar, Herat, and Fars persisted through the mid-to-late fifteenth century, thanks in large part to the Gilani horse merchant Mahmud Gavan ... As prime minister of Bidar, Mahmud Gavan exchanged correspondence with elites in Shiraz and Herat ...  

OVERTON 2020a, 10

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4 This sustained élite migration is a well-explored topic in academic literature and continues to attract scholarly attention. On the Deccan, notable recent contributions are Flatt 2019; Overton 2020b.
Letters, for sure, were a direct way of sharing ideas over long distances and a means for arranging the transfer of things such as books or building plans—though there is at the moment no written evidence for the latter in relation to Gāvān’s madrasa. In the process, letters also exposed the recipient to (possibly novel) literary styles, language registers, modes of expression, and cultural sensitivities. Yet, pertaining to the fifteenth/ninth-century connections between Khorasan and the Deccan, few detailed analyses of letters that elucidate how such communications looked like in practice have been carried out (an exception being Flatt 2017). This dearth of attention stands in stark contrast to the importance that scholars of the Persianate world have attributed to the role of viziers, administrators, secretaries, and other composers of ensāḥā in the formation of Persian as a transregional contact language. Hanaway argued (95–100) that it was mostly the work of secretaries, in tandem with that of court poets, which gave shape to a formal, written Persian as the standard, courtly language between the tenth/fourth and the early fourteenth/eighth century. Similarly, Green pointed out (13, 16–18) that chanceries (where many composers of ensāḥā worked) were crucial spaces for the development and expansion of Persian. Though, in Gāvān and Esfezārī’s time, the formative period of a (New) Persian chancery style, and a standard Persian more broadly, had certainly passed, the proliferation of ensāḥā works in the fifteenth/ninth century indicates that the normative influence of the genre and its producers remained—possibly even increased. Moreover, in this period, Persian ensāḥā was not just “Persian” but also quintessentially “Persianate,” in the sense that it had become a transregional genre to the core. Not only were ensāḥā works produced, read, and copied from Anatolia to South Asia, the emphasis in many of them is on materials (letters, documents, and state papers) that involve two or more parties which were geographically separated by enormous distances.

Against this background, this article turns to ensāḥā in order to add historical detail to concepts such as “the Persianate world” and “the Persian cosmopolis.” By remaining close to Esfezārī’s text (I translate substantial parts of the letter below), we can observe Persian as a transregional contact language, and related literate knowledge, in action. At the same time, this article points out an aspect of the communication that possibly betrays that the author sought compromises between local and overseas expectations and preferences, to wit, the letter’s acrostic form. The close reading of the letter further provides an opportunity to assess the exact content and aims of epistolary exchanges between Herat and Bidar from the side of a Timurid monshi; and how these could have played a role in fundamental processes of the Persian cosmopolis such as migration and patronage. But before turning to the analysis of the letter, the next section discusses the challenges of using documents that are
preserved in *enshāʾ* collections as historical sources, and the place of Esfezārī’s letter within the currently available evidence on contacts between the intellectual élite of the Timurid court in Herat and Gāvān.

**Enshāʾ Collections and a Bidar-Herat Connection**

There are certain methodological issues to employing letters in *enshāʾ* collections as historical sources. First, by definition *enshāʾ* collections do not contain original documents and letters, and consequently it is an open question in how far included materials are truthful copies of original writings, or if perhaps they are examples of good style created specifically for the collection. Some pioneers of *enshāʾ* research already recognized the problem of establishing authenticity, yet were also quick in dismissing it and pointing to the relevance of *enshāʾ* for historical research (e.g., Horst, 8; Marvārid, 19; Zilli, 5–7). For example, Roemer writes:

> Notwithstanding [that we have to examine the authenticity of *enshāʾ* materials], forms [included in *enshāʾ* works] of dubious authenticity are rare, since the form books [*i.e., *enshāʾ* collections*] were usually created for educational purposes and not for panegyric purposes or for political reasons.

MARVĀRID, 195

These scholars also proposed different methods for dealing with the problem, such as evaluating if an *enshāʾ* author was in the position to write a certain letter and what his motives were for including it in a collection (*ibid.*, 19); or perusing *enshāʾ* writings to deduct chancery practices and administrative rules, but not historical details on people and events (Horst, 8). A method which is particularly effective is that of Sherwani. In his study of Gāvān’s life, he compares *Reyāz al-enshāʾ* with letters from other collections, such as an Ottoman reply to a Bahmani letter in Feridun Bey’s (d. 991/1583) *Monshaʿāt* (Sherwani 1942, 223). Where perfectly-matching letters that can be arranged in a succession of replies cannot be unearthed, difficulties concerning letters’ authenticity can still be attenuated by bringing related evidence scattered over several collections (and other types of sources) together.

In relation to Esfezārī’s letter to Gāvān, such an exercise indicates that the letter fits within a context of repeated contacts between the literati of Herat and Bidar. Among the letters in Gāvān’s collection *Reyāz al-enshāʾ*,

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5 This is my translation of the German text; unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
there are several to intellectuals and Sufis in various regions of the Persianate world—a fact which has not gone unnoticed in scholarship (e.g., Eaton 2005, 65–66; Sherwani 1942, 184–86; Vosuqi, 8–9). The names of two luminaries of Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā’s reign stand out: the Naqshbandi Sufi sheikh Khvāja ‘Obaydollāh Ahrār (d. 1490/895) and the noted poet Jāmi (Gāvān 1948, 19–23 [no. 2 to Jāmi], 23–27 [no. 3 to Khvāja Ahrār], 152–57 [no. 38 to Jāmi], 167–72 [no. 40 to Jāmi], 207–11 [no. 58 to Jāmi], 227–32 [no. 64 to Jāmi], 300–4 [no. 102 to Jāmi], 365–66 [no. 131 to Jāmi]). The letters to Jāmi are remarkably numerous: seven in the published edition, as compared to generally just one letter to other intellectuals (on Gāvān’s letters to Jāmi, see Flatt 2017). In addition, there is a letter from Gāvān to Jāmi and one to Navāʾi in the enshāʾ collection Kanz al-maʿāni (The Treasure of Meanings) of Gāvān’s secretory ‘Abd al-Karim Nimdehi (idem, 63–66, 129–30). Jāmi and Navāʾi were so close to the Timurid ruler that they have been called “the Herat triumvirate” in modern scholarship (Algar, 43–44). These men were also close companions to each other: Jāmi was a follower of Khvāja Ahrār, while the latter’s correspondence with Herat often passed via Navāʾi (Gross and Urunbaev, 23), and Navāʾi in turn was a disciple and friend of Jāmi. As such, the Bahmani enshāʾ collections provide a first indication that Gāvān, from his position in the Indian subcontinent, participated in a learned community that was closely connected to the Timurid court in Herat.

A letter album with original letters produced in the vicinity of Herat and known as Moraqqaʿ-e Navāʾi (Navāʾi’s Album), or Majmuʿa-ye morāsalāt (Collection of Correspondence) further corroborates Gāvān’s contacts with Jāmi, Khvāja Ahrār, and Navāʾi. Located today in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the album contains 594 letters which were once supposedly in Navāʾi’s archive (Gross and Urunbaev, 57–60). It preserves among others a short letter written by an associate of Khvāja Ahrār to Jāmi which is significant for our purposes. It requests Jāmi’s help in arranging the travel of a third man from Herat to the Hejaz and subsequently to Gulbarga (in the Deccan) by writing a recommendation on that man’s behalf to Gāvān (Gross and Urunbaev, 245–47). In this letter, we can see an epistolographic network at play which connected the Naqshbandis in Samarqand—where Khvāja Ahrār was based—via Jāmi to Gāvān (Flatt 2019, 172). In addition, Jāmi’s published letters contain three sent to “malek al-tojjār” or “the prince of merchants” (Jāmi, 240–45, 274, 283–86). Mohammad Bāqer suggested that the “malek al-tojjār” in question was an official at the Delhi
sultanate’s Lodi dynasty (d’Hubert and Papas, 3–4), but more recent scholarship prefers Gāvān, given that “malek al-tojjār” was one of the Bahmani vizier’s titles (Alam, 136–38). Many questions still surround these letters from Jāmi and the actual texts bear further scrutiny, but if the identification of their addressee as Gāvān is correct, they as well provide testimony to the Bahmani vizier’s network in and around Herat.

Meanwhile, there is firm evidence that Gāvān was the addressee of the letter in the Monshaʾāt-e Esfezāri (Esfezāri 2019/1398, 163–65), thanks to the fact that it is an acrostic letter (maktub-e movashshah). An acrostic is a kind of literary puzzle that appeals aesthetically to the gaze of the reader. In its most simple form, the text is arranged on the paper sheet in such a way that the first letters of each line, read vertically from top to bottom, spell out a phrase together. In an early modern Persian context, also more complex forms of acrostics were composed, as Mohammad al-Hosayni b. Nāser al-Haqq Nurbakhshī, a scholar-bureaucrat in sixteenth/tenth-century Safavid Esfahan, explains in his ensḥāʾ manual Enshāʾ-ye ‘ālam-ārā (World-Adorning Composition): 8

Another [literary] technique is the acrostic, which has three sub-forms: the acrostic with letters, the acrostic with words, and the acrostic with both letters and words. As regards the acrostic with letters, this means that one brings together a [new] verse or line of prose from the first and the last letters of the lines [of a text]. This can be done with one or two letters. An acrostic with words works as follows: one extracts from the first and last words of the lines [of a text] a [new] verse or line of prose. An acrostic with both letters and words means that one acquires a [new] verse or a line of prose from the first and last words of the lines [of a text], and another verse or line of prose from the first or last letters of those words.

Nurbakhshī, fol. 72b

Esfezāri’s missive is an “acrostic with letters” and forms meaningful phrases both at the beginning and at the end of its lines. In modern terminology, it is a double acrostic. The published edition of Monshaʾāt-e Esfezāri does not preserve the letter’s lay-out, but it can still be seen in the manuscripts (e.g., Esfezāri n.d., 258–60). In addition, Esfezāri was considerate enough to add the solution at the end of the letter in the Monshaʾāt, which would not have

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7 The Persian movashshah should not be confused with the Arabic muwashshah, a “postclassical form of Arab poetry, arranged in stanzas,” unrelated to acrostics (Schoeler).

8 On this work, see Mitchell.
been part of the original. This solution mentions Gāvān by way of his epithet ʿEmād-e Dowlat ō Din and his title “khvāja-ye jahān (lord of the world)”:  

The acrostich of the first [letters] of the lines: “Someone whose rule may flow over the life of every person.” The acrostich of the last [letters] of the lines: “May he be ʿEmād-e Dowlat ō Din Khvāja-ye Jahān.”

Esfzāri 2019/1398, 165

“Khvāja-ye jahān” also appears in the body of the letter as the recipient, as well as in the letter’s heading in the collection. Gāvān received the title “khvāja-ye jahān” around the year 870/1466, when he became vizier under the Bahmani sultan Mohammad Shāh III (Sherwani 1942, 117–19). His predecessor in this function had also borne it, as did others throughout history, but Gāvān was exceptionally well-known as “khvāja-ye jahān” in an interregional context (Flatt 2019, 152). Esfzāri’s addition of the epithet ʿEmād-e Dowlat ō Din further points in the direction of Gāvān. The famous historian Mohammad Qāsem Hendu Shāh Astarābādi (d. c. 1033/1623–24), known as Fereshta, similarly calls him Khvāja ʿEmād al-Din Mahmud (Fereshta, 11, 462–63). Lastly, any doubt that might still remain about the identity of the addressee is ruled out by the fact that one of the manuscripts of Monshaʾāt-e Esfzāri adds, in the title to the maktub-e movashshah, that it was written for “Mahmud Gāvānī” (Esfzāri 2019/1398, 162 n. 4). As such, Esfzāri’s letter is a sure addition to the corpus of letters from Reyāz al-enshā’, Kanz al-maʿānī, Majmuʿa-ye morāsalāt, and Jāmi’s letters, which attest to epistolary exchanges between the Bahmani vizier and Herat.

Considering Timurid and Bahmani sources alongside each other also addresses a second methodological issue, which is that an investigation focused on one collection can render a disproportionate picture of directionality and agency. In this case, the general impression of an epistolographic connection between Herat and Bidar in the second half of the fifteenth/ninth century was so far largely based on Reyāz al-enshā’, which was edited and published as early as 1948. For over seventy years, Gāvān’s letters have been much more easily accessible to researchers than Monshaʾāt-e Esfzāri, which appeared in a published edition only in 2019, or other Timurid collections. As a consequence,
modern scholarship sometimes portrays Gāvān as an ambitious visionary who almost singlehandedly tried to transform the cultural life of the Bahmani capital by writing to and inviting Persian scholars from abroad (e.g., Eaton 2011, 12–16; Nayeem, 17). Adding up the Timurid letters above, however, Gāvān's supposed initiating or perpetuating role in a Bidar-Herat connection appears little contextualized in relation to the interests of Herat’s administrative and literary elite. This provides grounds for a detailed analysis of the under-researched material in Monshaʾāt-e Esfezāri.

Moʿīn al-Din Esfezāri’s letter to Mahmud Gāvān

Esfezāri’s letter to Gāvān does not contain a clear and succinctly formulated message. The author does not have any specific news to share, and a modern reader would look in vain for tangible details about life in fifteenth/ninth-century Herat or about events in the relations between Khorasan and the Deccan. What, then, is the letter about? The solution of the acrostic contains a clue to understanding the text as a whole. It is generally a concise reference to someone or something that is significant to the text: the author, addressee, main topic, or anything that gives the text an extra dimension. In this case, it mentions the addressee, Gāvān, and adds the wish that his hokm (authority, rule) may, as a life-giving stream of water, flow over every person and nourish their existence. In the letter itself, this idea is further elaborated upon in several directions.

After invoking and honoring God, the opening section in praise of the addressee provides Esfezāri with a first opportunity to highlight Gāvān’s excellence, portray him as indispensable to the people, and draw attention to his political power:

The sun of might and loftiness, the shadow of excellence and favor, that most pure soul of mankind, the Lord of the World (khvāja-ye jahān) and the people in it (jahāniyān), the seal (mokhattam) on the eloquent mandate, “This cannot be human, this must be a noble angel” [Qur’an 12:31], the one endorsed in the affirmation, “We created humans in the best form” [Qur’an 95:4], favored with the greatest grace, the protector of the welfare of religion and of the world, his dazzling fineness [is like] sunny rays and his intention [is] high like the stars, the reviver of the principles of compassion in our countries, the destroyer of traces of infringement and rottenness, may God perpetuate the shelter afforded by his justice, and make the works of his dominion (eyāla) everlasting,
forever and ever, over the heads of all men (ʿalāmiyyān), may He keep [it, i.e. the justice and dominion of Gāvān] extended and prolonged.

O! In the duration of your life [is] benefit for the people of the world (jahāniyān) / May God forbid that anyone remains who does not want you to live on.

ESFEZĀRI 2019/1398, 163

Laudatory phrases embedding the addressee’s name or title were a required element of most fifteenth/ninth-century Persian and Arabic correspondence that aimed at projecting a certain level of sophistication and awareness of what was good practice. But authors could—and were expected to—eloquently navigate the stiffness of such structural requirements. They could give an extra layer of meaning to them by turning phrases in original ways, in line with the letter’s message and purpose (Flatt 2017, 71–74). Comparisons such as “the sun of might and loftiness (āftāb-e ʿezz ʿalā)l)” and “the shadow of excellence and favor (sāya-ye fazl ʿalā efzāl)” are rather commonplace in enshā’ to describe someone’s superior character, but the author moves up a gear in his choice of quotations from the Qurʾan. By applying the verses “this cannot be human, this must be a noble angel” (Qurʾan 12:31) and “We created humans in the best form” (Qurʾan 95:4) to Gāvān, Esfezāri suggests that God created the Bahmani vizier as the finest man on earth, or that he was superhuman like an angel. He becomes the personification of these verses, and even their final fulfillment, as the word mokhattam (“sealed”) signifies. The underlying idea is that the Qurʾan predicts worldly events. To some extent, such bold statements were a matter of style and convention, but claims in contemporary diplomatic correspondence about what or what was not predicted in the Qurʾan were also taken seriously. For example, a fath-nāma from the Aq Qoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan (r. 1454–78/858–82) to the Mamluk sultan Ashraf Qāyyūbā (r. 1468–96/872–901) provoked the latter’s anger, among other things, because Uzun Hasan stated that his victories were foretold in Surat al-Rum—a clear way of claiming religious superiority over the Mamluks (Melvin-Koushki, 211–13).

Tied to this great appreciation of Gāvān is that Esfezāri considers him to be needed for the prosperity of all people in the world. Several phrases evince this idea. For example, in a witty way, Esfezāri turns Gāvān’s title “khvāja-ye jahān” into “khvāja-ye jahān ō jahāniyān” (literally, “lord of the world and the world-dwellers,” translated above as “lord of the world and the people in it”). Moreover, the word jahāniyān (“world-dwellers”) is repeated—and this is no coincidence in highly sophisticated texts like this one—in the verse inserted after the address, which is borrowed from the famous poet Saʿdi (d. 1292/691). In the context of the letter, the verse comes to mean that it would be beneficial to
the “world-dwellers” if Gāvān lived a long life. The word ʿālamiyān, synonymous to jahāniyān, also occurs in Esfezāri’s prayer asking that God prolong Gāvān’s righteous dominion “over the heads of all men.” The first part of this request is written in Arabic, hence probably Esfezāri’s choice of the Arabic-derived ʿālamiyān instead of the Persian jahāniyān, which alliterates nicely with the preceding word “all (ʿāmma).”

Though such exaggerations about the extent of someone’s influence and significance are again part and parcel of literary letters in the period, especially to rulers, the emphasis (through repetition) on words meaning “world-dwellers” suggests that Esfezāri considered Gāvān particularly important to the people inhabiting his known world—and not only to the subjects of the Bahmani sultanate. In the first instance, this may be interpreted to mean that Gāvān was also an influential name among the intellectuals living in Timurid lands and the attendants of courtly life in Herat, but the text also calls to mind a world beyond those circles. The statement that the khvāja-ye jahān’s “dazzling fineness shines like sunny rays and his intention soars high like the stars” not coincidentally evokes astronomical bodies. It conjures up an image of a world-wide, and indeed cosmos-wide, sphere of influence. Moreover, such an image was in itself universal, in the sense that it would be well understood across the Persian cosmopolis as an expression of power.10

An acknowledgement of the Bahmani vizier’s political power and authority is also found in the word eyāla, meaning “government” or “dominion.” In the letter, it appears at the end of an Arabic phrase, but is given the Persian definite direct object marker rā, creating the curious (though not entirely uncommon) Persian-Arabic grammatical construction “āthār eyālatehe rā (the works of his dominion).” Interestingly, eyāla also means “regency” in Arabic, which seems fitting in relation to Gāvān, given the particular state in which the Bahmani sultanate found itself after the death of the sultan Homāyun Shāh (r. 1458–61/862–65). Succeeding him were, in short succession, his two young sons, still only children, Nezām Shāh (r. 1461–63/865–67) and Mohammad Shāh 111. With a child sultan on the throne, a triarchy, consisting of Homāyun Shāh’s widow, an official bearing the title Khvāja-ye Jahān Tork, and Gāvān, directed state affairs initially. After the murder of Khvāja-ye Jahān Tork and the retirement of the queen mother in 1466/870, Gāvān became the sole regent (and the title “khvāja-ye jahān” was transferred to him) (Sherwani 1985, 187–88, 197–200).

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10 See Flatt’s discussion (2019, 21–22) on the concept of the Persian cosmopolis and its suitability for capturing the idea of “the cosmos as a space for the articulation of power and of inclusion within a shared linguistic space.”
A translation of *eyāla* in the sense of “government by an official who holds power in the absence of a sovereign” is also supported by Esfezāri’s use of the term elsewhere, in his *Rowzāt al-jannāt*, in relation to Mo’ezz al-Din Hosayn, the Kartid ruler of Herat between 1332/732 and 1370/771 (Esfezāri 1959–61/1338–39, II, 12). The Kartids (1245–1381/643–783) were initially Mongol vassals, but, in 1335/736, during Mo’ezz al-Din Hosayn’s reign, their vassalage came to an end with the death of the Il-khanid ruler Abu Sa’id (r. 1316–35/716–36) (Mahendrarajah), and was soon replaced with an alliance to Toghā Timur (d. 1353/754), who styled himself as Abu Sa’id’s successor. The new balance of power does not seem to have been well-defined, however, as the primary sources disagree about the degree to which the Kartids submitted themselves to Toghā Timur (Jackson). This vagueness in terms of one’s official political status *vis-à-vis* a recognized sovereign, coupled with real *de facto* power, was something that Mo’ezz al-Din Hosayn had in common with Gāvān—and was encapsulated by Esfezāri in the word *eyāla*.

After the laudatory address, Esfezāri speaks of his devotion to Gāvān and his constant engagement in prayer for his correspondant’s sake. Moreover, he acknowledges his lesser rank *vis-à-vis* the addressee when he specifies the kind of document that he is writing is an *ʿariza*. According to Gāvān himself in his *enshāʾ* manual *Manāzer al-enshāʾ*, the *ʿariza* is a letter from an inferior to a superior (Gāvān 2002/1381, 185–86). Being a *monshi*, Esfezāri indeed occupied a lower position in court society than did the Bahmani vizier.

The writer of this sincere petition (*ʿariza*), whose letter of trust is ornamented (*movashshah*) with the signature (*toghār*), “And we are devoted to Him” [Qurʾān 2:139], devotes in the morrow and in the evening every thought to praying for the perpetuation of the felicity of his Highness (*ān hazrat* [i.e., Gāvān]).

Always, timely and untimely, day and night, with truthfulness from the centre of his soul and [the bottom of] his heart, he says a prayer for your felicity.

Esfezāri 2019/1398, 163

Putting his shoulder to the wheel, Esfezāri continues with an intricate prayer constructed as a long metaphor, stretched as far as possible, on the game of chess. First, the ability of the queen (called “the minister” or *farzin* in Persian) to move diagonally on the chessboard represents the deviating path that an unruly person might take, away from “the king’s (*shāh*) highway”—or away from Gāvān. Note that, again, Esfezāri’s prose exploits Gāvān’s ambiguous political position here, by likening him to the piece of the king instead of the piece of the vizier. In a second part of the metaphor, a specific position called
fil-band—by which a bishop (called “elephant” or fil in Persian) and two pawns support each other—depicts an ingenious tactic on the part of Gāvān. As a result, the challenger is obliged to go on as a footman or with a pawn (peyāda), instead of on horseback or with a knight (asb). Third, Gāvān succeeds in laying his hands on the rook (rokh), which stands on “the ignoble chess cloth (besāt-e mazallat).” A more common meaning of rokh in Persian is “face,” and, in love poetry, the word is frequently used for the face or cheek of the beloved, sometimes also as part of chess metaphors (Bland, 40–41). Here, it becomes the face of the foe, which is pressed to the ground (besāt), forcing him into submission. Finally, the intricacies of the game (mansuba-hā) become symbolic for Gāvān’s military acumen, allowing him to decisively defeat his opponent. The action of the passage as a whole is almost filmic: Gāvān’s rival is unhorsed, forced to his knees, and pushed with his nose in the dust, before being killed (māt shoda). The word māt in combination with the word which indicates that Gāvān has the upper hand, dast-bord (translated below as “superiority”), once more evokes the checkmate (bord ō māt):

He [i.e., Esfezāri], in a state of beggary, poverty, submissiveness, and humility, continually asks from God the Most High—the attributes of His perfection are beyond any shortcoming and without end—that whoever, like the minister (at chess, [i.e., the queen]), goes sideways on the king’s highway of obeying him, may give his life in a move of misery and a bet of misfortune. May he be killed (checkmated) by the superiority of the intricate [i.e., intricacies of the chess game] wonders of his [i.e., Gāvān’s] dominion, [after] having in the fil-band of misfortunes been thrown of the horse (the knight) of desire, been turned into a foot soldier (pawn), and his face (rook) having hit the ground [i.e., chess cloth] of dishonor. May this be the prayer of all the world’s creatures. Amen.

Esfezāri 2019/1398, 163–64

The military origin of the names of the chess pieces (king, minister, war elephant, war horse, chariot, infantry soldier) was for the most part evident to Persian readers. Esfezāri uses this association to paint a hypothetical confrontation between an enemy and Gāvān, which the latter wins because of

11 Steingass’ dictionary describes (269) fil-band as, “A move in chess, by which a castle and two pawns support each other,” but since fil is the name for the “elephant piece,” I assume that it in fact involves the bishop instead of the rook.

12 On descriptions of the military character of chess by Arabic writers, see Murray, 221–23. Note, however, that Kruk questions (291–92) the extent to which the ancient Indian meaning of “chariot” for the rook was preserved in Persian and Arabic and finds little evidence for it, with the exception of medieval Spain.

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his strategic insight and tactical skills. The author is in fact creating a liter-
ary mansuba. Translated above as “intricacies of the chess game,” mansuba-hā
(or the Arabic plural mansubāt) is also the term used for “chess problems” or
“positions” in the literature. These are puzzles that use the pieces and rules
of chess, and generally require a sharp mind to be solved (Murray, 266). Not
coincidentally, the maktub-e movashshah thereby takes the puzzle theme one
step further and puts its trust in the intellectual abilities of the recipient. The
letter’s message, in sum, is that Esfezāri has a deep respect for Gāvān’s political
power, public importance, military prowess, and mental capacities, which he
expresses in the solution of the acrostic, the Qur’ānic citations, the emphasis
on the word “world-dwellers,” the apt use of the word eyāla, and in the chess
metaphor.

Transregional Patronage, Local Progression

In the remainder of text, the focus shifts somewhat from extolling Gāvān to
Esfezāri himself, and his relation to the Bahmani vizier. Again, their unequal
position on the hierarchical ladder of the court is evoked when the author cites
a verse of the Sufi poet Kamāl Khojandi (d. 1400–1/803): “The sultan does not
need the dervish” (Esfezāri 2019/1398, 164; for the verse in Khojandi’s divan,
see Khojandi, 108). Esfezāri implies that he is the unneeded dervish, elevat-
ing simultaneously Gāvān once more to the rank of the sovereign. Despite the
difference in standing and his own redundancy, Esfezāri hopes that Gāvān
will consider him worthy of attention. To that end, he quotes a verse of Shams
al-Din Mohammad Ḥāfez (d. ca. 1390/792) that alludes to a Qur’ānic verse
(27:18–19) in which the wise prophet Solomon thanks God for his ability to
overhear the speech of an ant:

To glance at beggars is not contrary to greatness /
Solaymān, with all his pomp, his glances were to the ant.

This brings us to the purpose of the letter. As Gāvān explains in Manāzer
al-enshā’, an ‘ariza was always a kind of petition to fulfill a certain request
(Gāvān 2002/1381, 209). In this case, Esfezāri wishes to become Gāvān’s “friend.”
He describes this (potential) relationship by using words such as *khelāl, velā∗, and *vesāl* throughout the letter, which all translate as “friendship.” They should, however, not be interpreted here according to a modern understanding of friendship as an informal, reciprocal affection between people who consider each other equal. Since Esfezāri focusses so much attention on his inferiority, he clearly did not harbor the idea of breaking through established social and political hierarchies. Expositions on friendship in premodern *enshā∗ often depicted more formal or official relationships, such as a diplomatic alliance or a client-patron relationship.13 In this case, Esfezāri seems indeed to solicit patronage, not only by singing the praises of Gāvān, but also by showing himself to be an accomplished secretary. In a rather short text, he parades an array of literary techniques typical of the elevated style that was in vogue in the fifteenth/ninth century, including context-matching citations from the Qurʾan, stilted formulations, Arabic phrases, complex metaphors, quotes from the œuvres of famous poets like Hāfez, Khojandi, and Sāʿdi, and puzzles such as the *movashshah*. The ability to apply correctly and creatively these literary techniques, and to engage in letter-writing more generally, was a valued skill in the Persian cosmopolis. Gāvān's appreciation of it is evident in his manual *Manāzer al-enshā∗, in which he is purposefully concerned with the training and the competences of the ideal *monshi* (Flatt 2019, 197–204).

But what did patronage entail? Gāvān’s side of the correspondence is not extant, but one might expect that a successful application would have led to Esfezāri being employed in Bidar. Migration to the Deccan was a common phenomenon and it has been noted that Gāvān extended invitations in his letters to Persian *literati* to visit or even settle in India. Yet, researchers so far have not brought to light any indication in the sources that Esfezāri ever travelled to Bidar. From the letter, it appears moreover that Moʿin al-Dīn Esfezāri did not at that point have the intention to travel. He writes that, while Gāvān is “the reason that the learned men of the world come together,” he shall not come close to the Bahmani vizier’s enlightened mind in the way a moth flies to a lamp (Esfezāri 2019/1398, 164). This can be read as another expression of Esfezāri’s inability to match Gāvān’s brilliance, but it is also implied that physical proximity would cause Esfezāri’s ruin—the moth would burn itself. Perhaps, then, this letter was a polite refusal of a prior invitation, though it does not state explicitly that such an invitation had been made. Ingenuously, however, because the moth-and-lamp comparison is also an expression of intense, all-consuming devotion, it could have hardly offended Gāvān while leaving the door open for long-distance patronage.

13 Consider in this respect Flatt’s discussion (2017, 70–71) on friendship and patronage.
Long-distance patronage might have conferred several possible benefits. First, it would complement Esfezāri’s established relations in Herat and draw both himself and Gāvān closer into the networks of Herat’s elite. The addressees in Reyāz al-enshā’ and Kanz al-maʿāni who were linked to Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā’s household establishment were also part of Esfezāri’s immediate environment: Jāmī and Khvāja Ahrār are the addressees of letters in the Monshaʾāt-e Esfezāri (Esfezāri 2019/1398, 139–42, 152–56), and Navāʾī was an early supporter of Esfezāri’s patron, Majd al-Din Mohammad (Subtelny 2007, 85). Maintaining such multiple, networked relationships fitted within a general endeavor by patron and client to build a transregional network, upon which to fall back when the need may arise (one can compare this to Nimdehi’s multi-local patronage situation, with patrons in Bidar and Shiraz, as explained in Flatt 2019, 83–88). At the end of his letter, Esfezāri in fact mentions that he just went through some difficult times (Esfezāri 2019/1398, 165), perhaps counting on Gāvān’s support. Such support might well have been primarily financial. Fereshta writes (II, 460–61) in his Tārikh that “he [Gāvān] always sent gifts and presents to Khorasan and Iraq.” To count Gāvān among his “friends” might thus have meant an extra source of income for Esfezāri.

At the same time, writing an acrostic was most likely a way for Esfezāri to improve his reputation at the Timurid court. Via its inclusion in a monshaʾāt—a sign in itself that he thought the piece worthy of wider attention—the text of the letter must have reached a local audience, if it was not already circulated among a group of peers and patrons before being sent out to Gāvān. Herat’s intellectual milieu valued the ability to enrich one’s writings with embellishments in the form of puzzles. More precisely, Timurid poets demonstrated “a distinct penchant for riddle-like verse forms such as the acrostic (muwash-shah), the chronogram (tārīkh) and the enigma (muʿammā)” (Subtelny 1986, 72). Or as Kia put it (99): “[In late-fifteenth-century Herat,] the practice of composing elaborate riddles such as acrostics, chronograms, and enigmas was an obsession.” Their popularity might partly be explained by the fact that literary puzzles became a means to secure the attention of the highest courtiers in Soltān-Hosayn Bāyqarā’s household. Vāsefi noted, in the early sixteenth/tenth century, that composing a cryptographic poem (moʿammā) had been one of the most effective strategies to gain access to Navāʾī (ibid., 105 n. 116).

Later, however, the relationship between Navāʾī and Majd al-Din Mohammad became strained (Subtelny 2007, 87–88).
Gāvān also seems to have been able to appreciate a good moʿammā, as he included a discussion of it in his Manāzer al-enshāʾ (idem 2002/1381, 115–18). Of the chronogram (tārikh), contemporary examples from the Bahmani vizier’s vicinity exist: the construction year of his madrasa is recorded in one (Blair and Bloom, 175), while Nimdehi composed two chronograms on the year of his master’s murder (Fereshta, 11, 459–60). Given his knowledge of these two other types of popular Persian literary puzzles, it is likely that Gāvān was at least familiar with the movashshah, as well. Moreover, Esfezāri’s letter itself suggests that he expected that the reader would discover the puzzle through nothing more than a play-on-words, as he writes that the letter is ornamented (movashshah) with a Qur’anic “signature” (i.e., verse) that expresses his devotion to Gāvān (see the quote in translation above). Yet, examples of movashshahs from the Indian subcontinent before the sixteenth/tenth century are more rare. Neither Gāvān’s nor Nimdehi’s enshāʾ collection contains one. Only about a century later, for example, the poet Hāji Abarquhi (d. c. 1590s/1000) included a movashshah in his divān dedicated to Mostafā Khān Ardestānī (d. c. 1580/988), who was the head of finance (mirjomlā) of Golkonda (Flatt 2019, 95). In other words, the popularity of acrostics in Timurid Herat was probably not matched in Bahmani Bidar, so Esfezāri intended his movashshah to please mostly his puzzle-loving patrons in Herat.

Esfezāri’s attempt to simultaneously reach a transregional and please a local audience had an interesting impact on the acrostic’s form. Acrostics in Timurid contexts were almost always in verse. An early example is the movashshah for Mowlānā Aʿzam Jalāl al-Din Hosayn in the monshaʾāt of Qevām al-Din Mohammad Yazdi (d. c. 1426–7/830), the brother of Sharaf al-Din ʿAli Yazdi (d. 1454/858) (Yazdi, fols. 20b–21b). In contrast, Esfezāri’s movashshah is in prose. Prose is much less suited, because the hidden message depends on a stable visual arrangement of the text. But a letter in prose was without doubt the most suitable medium for transregional communication with Gāvān. This might have tempted Esfezāri to combine the two. While Persian cosmopolitanism held sway both in Khorasan and the Deccan, then, Esfezāri’s maktub-e

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15 I discuss Gāvān’s treatment of the moʿammā more elaborately in my Ph.D. dissertation (Walravens, 68–77).

16 The original letter would of course not have featured a title indicating that it was a maktub-e movashshah, nor would have included the solution to the acrostic at the end of the text, as we encounter it in the collection.

17 A similar genre, the alphabetic or abecedarian acrostic, was popular in a number of languages in northern India and used often for Sufi poetry (Behl, 23, 159; Charan Bahl, 346; Rama Krishna, xxiii–xxiv), but is not clear at this point just how far such regional acrostics were related to the Persian movashshah.
movashshah might best be seen as the kind of piece that attempted to straddle the space that still existed between Herat and Bidar. Presumably, Esfezārī tailored his text to the size of the paper on which the letter would be written, that way assuring that the right initial and final letters were in line while the overall lay-out was still balanced.18 It proved harder to reproduce the original in other formats, like the enshā’ collection: the scribe who copied one of the Majles manuscripts of Monsha‘āt-e Esfezārī had difficulties preserving the line breaks. He expanded the frame around the text, but still the words are crammed together more often than not at the end of the lines (Esfezārī n.d., 258–60). Interestingly, despite such challenges of matching text and style to medium, by 1549–50/956, all the examples of acrostics that Nurbakhshi offers (fols. 72b–74a) in his Enshā’-ye ʾalām-ārā are in prose. The development of the movashshah needs more research, but the evolution from Qevām al-Dīn Yazdī’s early-Timurid poem-acrostic to Esfezārī’s experiment with a letter-acrostic to Nurbakhshi’s mid-sixteenth/tenth-century all-prose examples suggests that ventures like Esfezārī’s to employ Timurid literary fashions for a transregional audience had a marked influence on changing literary practices. It reminds us that the Persian cosmopolis is not defined by immutable Persian texts and techniques, but that it was their transregional circulation and its reciprocal effects which were “Persianate” and “cosmopolitan.”

Conclusion

Esfezārī was not alone in pursuing a transregional reception of his literary creations. At least one of his more famous contemporaries, Jāmī, likewise intended his texts to travel and consciously made them appealing to a transregional audience. Moreover, Jāmī cultivated deliberately the image of being a respected authority throughout the Persianate world in his writings (d’Hubert and Papas, 11–14). As elaborated upon above, this probably assured late-Timurid authors of several rewards, such as a transregional network that could be mobilized in case one’s local situation became precarious, an increase in wealth through gifts from patrons abroad, or a higher reputation in Herat itself. Esfezārī’s maktub-e movashshah elucidates the existence of such concerns in relation

18 The other way around, i.e., that he adapted the size of the paper to the text, is in theory also possible, but paper size was not without meaning. Like many textual elements, it reflected the status that was accorded to the correspondent. Consider in this respect Dekkiche, 200–1, which discusses the rules on paper size in the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517/648–922). Comparable principles were possibly observed in contemporary Persian chanceries as well. Therefore, Esfezārī could not experiment endlessly.
to the correspondence between Herat’s *literati* and Gāvān. It thereby remedies some earlier imbalances in the available source materials, which might otherwise overemphasize the Indian side’s aspirations to connect to Iranian and Central Asian forms of Persianate culture and the people who represented them. Indeed, the extremely laudatory content of Esfezārī’s letter and the author’s cries for recognition complicate a picture of (unreciprocated) Bahmani admiration for Timurid examples.

At the same time, transregional personal communications do not necessarily equate with dynamics between regions and dynasties on a macrolevel. The difference in standing between the Timurid secretary and the Bahmani vizier places Esfezārī in the soliciting position towards the person of Gāvān, but not automatically towards his Bahmani environment. Esfezārī’s letter suggests that he preferred the possibility of long-distance patronage over a relocation to the Deccan. Even so, that does not imply that the importance of migration as a central dynamic of the Persian cosmopolis in this period has been overestimated. Long-distance patronage was complementary to migration, not contradictory. The mentioned letter from an associate of Khvāja Ahrār to Jámi preserved in the *Majmuʿa-ye morāsalāt* attests that Gāvān himself had a direct share in the organization of travel from Herat to the Bahmani sultanate, probably within a stone’s throw of where Esfezārī was working. Also, communication via letter did invariably entail the moving around of people, though not necessarily (and almost logically) the sender or the recipient. Like many letters found in *enshāʾ* collections, Esfezārī’s letter to Gāvān mentions (2019/1398, 164–65) that there was a “carrier of the petition (*hāmel-e ʿariz*).” Merchants, diplomats, itinerant scholars, pilgrims, and adventurers who traversed the vast lands and seas of the Islamic world and beyond would deliver letters on their journeys. When certain *literati* decided not to migrate, then, it might have been precisely because others did, and because the frequent comings and goings of travelers and good epistolary networks enabled the option of long-distance patronage.

Thinking about Gāvān’s and Esfezārī’s correspondence as fruits of a Persian cosmopolis, then, is helpful here because it softens the edges of regional boundaries, while leaving room for local variety. In Esfezārī’s letter, political and geographical boundaries disappear completely in his emphasis on Gāvān’s importance to “all people.” Further, Esfezārī and Gāvān’s *enshāʾ* works show a common interest in creating an œuvre of Persian letters and in sharing them with a learned transregional audience. But even as there were similarities in literary and cultural ideas and practices across the courts of the Persianate world, local and transregional audiences did not always desire the same. Esfezārī’s letter to Gāvān reflects some of this tension. While the choice of an acrostic
is quintessentially fifteenth/ninth-century Timurid, the acrostic’s letter-form makes it stand out, visually even, in the Majles manuscript no. 318. It is in these kind of historical microlevel balancing acts between local expectations and transregional aspirations, physical separation and human relations, and regional cultivated fashions and a shared contact language steeped in history, that the idea of a Persian cosmopolis becomes tangible.

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