SELLING TO THE COURT: LATE-SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION IN SHIRAZ

In modern scholarship, the adjective most frequently attached to sixteenth-century manuscript production in Shiraz is “commercial,” a label thought to be justified by the sheer number of extant Shiraz manuscripts lacking a patron’s name, suggesting that they were made to be sold on the open market.¹ The label, however, should not also be used to imply a mass production of indifferent quality, for that is a judgment that cannot be applied to the luxuriously produced examples from sixteenth-century Shiraz.²

That deluxe Shiraz manuscripts were deliberately made to resemble the royal manuscripts produced in the reign of Shah Tahmasp and intended for consumption by courtly circles will be argued here. I will also demonstrate that both the Safavid and Ottoman courtly elites sought them and, by placing them in the historical context of their production, propose a possible group of supporters for the Shiraz workshops.

Around the end of the 1560’s, Shiraz manuscripts began to display a degree of richness that reached its zenith in the 1580’s.³ During this decade a remarkable number of illustrated manuscripts were made, incorporating all the outward trappings of sumptuous court production. To this end, Shiraz workshops spared no expense in the use of costly materials and the appropriation of the courtly style of painting, its fashions, and its architectural settings. The imitation of courtly models combined with lavish decoration was meant to enhance the book’s value and establish its status as a “luxury” object.

A comparison between the individual features of luxurious Shiraz manuscripts produced between the end of the 1570’s and the 1580’s with corresponding royal manuscripts from the reign of Shah Tahmasp (1524–74) reveals close parallels.⁴ Both were written on heavily sized, gold-flecked paper and began with a number of decorated bifolios. All had a double-folio frontispiece, which in the Shiraz examples often depicted Solomon and Bilqis enthroned,⁵ always followed by an illuminated bifolio at the beginning of the text. Some would have still another bifolio of illuminated medallions, increasing to three the number of decorated bifolios before the text proper began. Manuscripts which comprised several poems, such as Nizami’s Khamsa or Jami’s Haft Awrang, were given additional illuminated bifolios for section headings. These could total as many as seven to eight per manuscript (fig. 1). Shāhnāma copies did not have these additional illuminated folios, since it was one continuous text, but they had an additional double-folio illustration of an enthronement with illuminated borders midway through the text, which showed Luhrasp enthroned. The manuscripts would then end with a double-folio finissipe. Deluxe Shiraz manuscripts also had numerous illustrations which covered the entire page, just as the illustrations of the courtly examples did, often with marginal decoration of gold floral scrolls and animals.

In their outside appearance Shiraz manuscripts looked even more like their courtly counterparts. One reason was that the size of the manuscripts was considerably increased: some equaled the size of the Shāhnāma of Shah Tahmasp, which was forty-seven centimeters high;⁶ some were even larger. One Shiraz Shāhnāma of Firdawsi from circa 1585, now in Istanbul, measured an astonishing fifty-three centimeters in height.⁷ A second practice that gave them a courtly appearance was their lacquered bindings, which shared stylistic features with those on courtly manuscripts. Comparing the binding of an anthology from circa 1550-70, probably produced at Qazvin (fig. 2) with that of a Shiraz copy of the Haft Awrang of Jami from circa 1575 (fig. 3) makes this obvious.⁸ Each binding has an outdoor courtly entertainment scene with a black background framed by borders of gold floral designs on black grounds. In each, a princely figure is seated in the center of the composition surrounded by seated and standing courtiers, while musicians perform and attendants serve food.

When viewed on a shelf, a Shiraz manuscript with

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A lacquered binding cannot be differentiated from a courtly one. Once their outer covers are opened, however, they display significant variation in their quality of workmanship and style of illustration. The doublures on Shiraz bindings also constitute an additional important difference. During the second half of the sixteenth century, all Shiraz bindings, whether they were leather or lacquer, had identical leather doublures similar to those of the Shiraz Haft Awrang from circa 1575 (fig. 4). The bindings of the courtly manuscripts with lacquered bindings, such as the anthology from circa 1550–70, however, often have lacquered doublures as well (fig. 5). A juxtaposition of a Shiraz-style leather doublure with a lacquered binding was in fact used so consistently that it became a sort of a trademark for attributing lacquered bindings to Shiraz.

The single known exception of a Shiraz manuscript with a lacquered binding and partly lacquered doublures is a magnificent copy of the Koran dated 1572–86. Its binding has floral designs and crushed mother-of-pearl worked into the lacquer. Two conspicuous lines of crushed mother-of-pearl run horizontally across the top and the bottom of the binding, providing additional decoration (fig. 6). Its unusual lacquered doublures were not modeled on the lacquered doublures of courtly manuscripts (fig. 7). Instead, they were closely modeled on a gold block-stamped leather outer cover of a Shiraz binding, like that on a copy of the Shāhnāma of Firdawsi dated 982.