“With the Eye of Its Heart:” Painted inscriptions of *Khusraw and Shirin* in the *Shah Tahmasp Khamsa*

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“The tales of this picture are long
And its secrets to me belong
Everything I know, one by one, from beginning to end,
I shall tell you if the place is vacant”

Shapur, of Khusraw’s portrait

In order to take his rightful throne after his father’s death, Sasanian king Khusraw II had to leave Armenia and come to Iran at an inopportune time. This, according to a rendition of the story by Nizami Ganjavi, the great twelfth-century Persian poet, who wrote *Khusraw and Shirin* (1175—1191), a fictionalized romance of the historical Khusraw and his Armenian lover, Shirin. The young prince Khusraw hears of Shirin’s beauty from his painter friend, Shapur; Shirin falls in love with Khusraw when Shapur plants a portrait of Khusraw on her way. The love-struck youths each leave their respective lands to travel to the country of the other, missing each other. Realizing the mistake, Shapur sets off with Shirin for Armenia. Before the couple reunites, however, Khusraw hears of his father’s passing, and he leaves Armenia for Iran.

A sixteenth-century manuscript painting from Iran depicts the moment Khusraw is enthroned upon his arrival in his homeland (fig. 1). The painting “Khusraw Enthroned” comes from the British Library Or. 2265, a manuscript copy of Nizami’s *Khamsa* (a quintet of five of the author’s narrative verses, of which one is *Khusraw and Shirin*). Nizami’s verses on the

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1 حكاياتهای این صورت دراز است / وزن صورت مرا در پرده راز است / یکاییک هر چه می دانم سر و پای / یگویم با نور خالی بود جای

Nizami Ganjavi, *Khusraw wa Shirin* (Ganjoor). All subsequent references to Nizami’s text are from this online source.
painting loud Khusraw’s decision and fortitude: “Although his heart was stricken with Shirin / It
was a mistake to abandon the affairs of the state.”² The painting depicts Khusraw seated in his
throne, surrounded by his courtiers. In this painting, the building in which Khusraw is seated
bears a painted inscription, which names the patron of the manuscript: “O Lord, protect the
sovereignty of the mighty Sultan, the just Khaqan, the most just and most noble Sultan, the son
of a Sultan, the victorious Sultan Shah Tahmasp al-Husayni al-Safavi Bahadur Khan, may Allah
perpetuate his kingship and sovereignty for ever.”³ Making the connection between Khusraw II
and Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576) of Safavid Iran even more conspicuous, the name “Tahmasp”
falls directly above Khusraw’s head.

This chapter is about this and other inscriptions incorporated into the story of Khusraw
and Shirin in this Khamsa manuscript made for Shah Tahmasp (British Library Or. 2265).⁴ Of
the fourteen Shah Tahmasp-era paintings in the manuscript, five have at least one form of
inscription; four of these paintings illustrate the story of Khusraw and Shirin. The inscriptions,
which have hitherto escaped scholarly attention, not only enrich the literary texture of the
manuscript as a whole, but they also provide a commentary on the social and political
atmosphere of Shah Tahmasp’s reign as it played out in court culture.⁵ On the whole, the

² دلش گر چه به شیرین مبتلا بود / به ترک مملکت گفتند خطا بود
³ Translation without attribution; from the records of BL.
⁴ Here and henceforth, by inscription I refer to any type of writing in a manuscript painting that
is a representational part of the painting. This includes, for instance, a verse written on a rug as if
the words were woven onto the tapestry, but not an attribution written on the painting. Similarly,
I exclude Nizami’s text from my working definition of “inscription” because text boxes, even
though they are frequently placed within the painting in Persian manuscript tradition and are
often hermeneutically indispensable, are not part of the representational world of the paintings.
⁵ While they are not incorporated into analysis, some manuscripts’ painted inscriptions are at
least documented. On their monograph of the Freer Jami, Mariana Shreve Simpson and
Massumeh Farhad translate the painted inscriptions of the manuscript. Mariana Shreve Simpson
and Massumeh Farhad, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s Haft Awrang: A Princely Manuscript from
inscriptions in the sixteenth-century paintings of the Shah Tahmasp Khamsa compel us to reconsider how we understand artist and patron relations during the reign of Shah Tahmasp.

In the context of Safavid Iran, manuscripts with numerous paintings present a methodological challenge. For instance, the dispersed Shah Tahmasp Shahnama (1520-40), a comparable manuscript made for the same patron, has over three hundred paintings that were originally bound in the same codex, and finding meaningfully constrained units of study of this work depends at times on subjective judgments of quality of the final product. This approach can be misleading because a painting important to the initial design of a manuscript may not be fully or perfectly realized by the time the book changes hands. Ada Adamova provided a useful intervention to the field in this regard. In her study she shows that Timurid manuscripts feature a range of painting subjects: some compositions whose iconography has been long established—to demonstrate the artists’ familiarity with and mastery of past works of art, and some compositions that are more rare, for which there exists little iconographic precedent. She argues that it is these unusual paintings that often signal the book’s ambitions. Within the Khusraw and Shirin cycle, for instance, “Khusraw Sees Shirin Bathing” (53v) (fig. 2) has the same iconography that is recognizeable from manuscripts, wall tiles, and textiles; moreover, this is the choice scene in

_Sixteenth-century Iran_ (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press [in association with Freer Gallery of Art], 1997). In addition, incomplete translations of the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp have been published as an appendix; see Dickson and Welch, _The Houghton Shahnama_ vol. 1, 539-42. Welch has also published translations of some of the inscriptions of the Shah Tahmasp Khamsa, in a rendition that matches the tradition Orientalist translations of Persian poetry better than the Persian originals.

6 In the case of the Shah Tahmasp Khamsa, some paintings of the Haft Awrang cycle has been redone in the seventeenth century, excluding the works from most considerations of the work that focuses on the sixteenth century cycle.

manuscripts of *Khusraw and Shirin* with only one painting. This painting pays homage to previous works of art rather than being a vessel of expression for the manuscript’s artistic or political ambitions.

Shah Tahmasp’s *Khamsa* teaches us that an additional signifier of importance to which scholars should pay attention is painted inscriptions. Much has been written about text-and-image relations in Persian painting as a key feature of the art form.\(^8\) This chapter, in addition to situating the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa* within its artistic milieu, offers the analysis of painted inscriptions as a useful tool to other scholars of Islamic manuscript painting.

**Nizami’s Khusraw as a Model of Kingship**

Associating Shah Tahmasp with the Khusraw of *Khusraw and Shirin* is more than a commonplace form of an homage to a patron. While it is a recognizable practice in Persian painting to associate a patron with a hero from the manuscript he or she has commissioned, Khusraw is not an obvious choice for a hero, especially in Nizami’s rendition of the story. The significance of this association is heightened because evidently “Khusraw Enthroned” that depicts this particular moment is a painting unique to the *Khamsa* of Shah Tahmasp.\(^9\) Examples below from Safavid period as well as earlier copies of the *Khamsa* illustrate this point.

Other than the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa*, two additional manuscripts incorporate Shah


\(^9\) In Soucek’s survey of *Khamsa* manuscripts from between 1386-1482, there is no finding of this scene. It is similarly not included in a copiously illustrated *Khamsa* made for Emperor Akbar, the Timurid BL Or. 2265. A survey of Topkapi *Khamsa* manuscripts similarly did not yield another illustration of this scene. Priscilla P. Soucek, “Illustrated Manuscripts of Nizami’s *Khamseh*, 1386–1482.” (Ph.D Diss., New York University, 1994), xii-xvi; and Barbara Brend, *The Emperor Akbar’s Khamsa of Niẓāmī* (London: British Library, 1995), 12-25.
Tahmasp’s name into a painting. The visual language of “Khusraw Enthroned” — that of spatially aligning the inscribed name of the patron with the hero of the illustrated story — is repeated in these two manuscripts prepared for Shah Tahmasp. One instance occurs in a Safavid copy of History of Immaculate Imams, where an architectural inscription praising Shah Tahmasp adorns a depiction of Hasan ibn ‘Ali’s first sermon (fig. 3). The name of Tahmasp falls directly above the haloed and veiled head of the Prophet’s grandson, which communicates the contemporary ruler’s identification with the historical figure. This amounts to a “suggestive” portrait that favors depicting ruler’s attributes over his physical likeness.\(^\text{10}\) Equated with Hasan, Tahmasp gains an aura of spiritual authority.

The other instance comes from the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp. In this manuscript, the only painting that bears the patron’s name is “Isfandiyar Slays Arjasp and Takes the Brazen Hold” (the former f. 442v) (fig. 4). This emotionally charged painting depicts the story of how Isfandiyar, a king blessed by the prophet Zarathustra, infiltrates into a castle, frees his sisters, and finally captures and beheads their Turanian captor, Arjasp. In the Tahmasp Shahnama, historical conflict between Iran and the fictional lands of Turan became a stand-in for the Safavids’ ongoing conflict with the Ottomans—with scenes of Iranians’ battle with Turanians given more space for illustrations.\(^\text{11}\) On the foreground, separated from the commotion of the background are Isfandiyar and Arjasp, framed by a doorway, frozen at the moment of Arjasp’s death. It is over this vignette that Shah Tahmasp’s name is inscribed, which contributes to the manuscript’s


militaristic tenor. Depicted thus, Shah Tahmasp’s suggestive portrait gives him the aspect of military might and unforgiving justice. In these two instances, Shah Tahmasp is rendered with signs of temporal and spiritual authority that are based on cultural signifiers relevant to Safavid Iran.

Associating Shah Tahmasp with Nizami’s Khusraw is a less obvious choice. Given divergent representations of this historical figure, it is worthwhile to tease out different traditions around Khusraw to understand the implications of associating Tahmasp with Nizami’s Khusraw. To be sure, the historical figure of Khusraw II (590-628) has an exulted status within the Persianate tradition. The last great king of the Sasanian dynasty and a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad, Khusraw II had a benefactor in the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, who helped Khusraw II regain his throne from his usurper, Bahram Chubin. Upon Maurice’s death, Khusraw II launched a lengthy war against Byzantium and for a period captured vast expanses of land in the Middle East. The True Cross he captured after invading Jerusalem, in 614, remained in Ctesiphon as a token of Khusraw’s religious tolerance to counter Byzantine propaganda.  

Khusraw’s extensive military gains in the war of 602-628 were overturned before his death, but their legacy endured in Iran. Khusraw’s distinguished status in Persianate tradition is owing, in addition to his military accomplishments, to the cultural memory of his extraordinary royal ceremonies: his throne became a literary trope and an ornate shorthand to designate (sometimes wishfully) historically significant and auspicious sovereignty. This literary trope is everywhere

13 James Howard-Johnston, “Pride and Fall: Khusro II and His Regime, 626-628,” in La Persia e Bisanzio, Atti dei convegni lincei 201 (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 2004), 94-95. For a description of the throne, see: Phyllis Ackerman, "The Throne Of Khusraw (The ‘Takht-i-
from fictional stories to court chronicles. For instance, an early seventeenth-century account of Tahmasp’s reign begins, “Of the sons of Shah Isma’il, Tahmasp, his eldest son, was most fit to succeed him on the throne of Kosrow and Kay-Qobad.”

Cementing Khusraw’s place in the Persianate tradition is the Persian poet Ferdowsi (940-1019 or 1025), who included an account Khusraw’s reign in his poetic masterpiece Shahnama (The Book of Kings). In Ferdowsi’s account, the military troubles of the later years of Khusraw’s reign are suppressed for the sake of a narrative of peacetime merrymaking. In the Shahnama, after the long process of securing his realm, Khusraw becomes tyrannical without a reason. This suppression is significant from a historical point of view, but the fate of losing one’s divinely ordained right to rule, farr, befalls numerous respected kings in the Shahnama, so it does not represent an enigma within the textual world of the Shahnama.

It is the Khusraw of Ferdowsi that led one scholar to note the possible relevance of Khusraw to Shah Tahmasp-era Iran. In a detached painting that may have belonged to the original Khamsa of Shah Tahmasp, Khusraw’s war against the usurper of his throne is depicted in an anachronistically Safavid idiom, with Khusraw’s soldiers bearing banners of Shi’ism.

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16 It is Khusraw’s later wars with the Romans that are left out of Khusraw’s account. The likely reasons for this have to do with the rivalry of Ferdowsi’s patrons with Byzantine forces. James Howard-Johnston, “Khosrow II,” El. Last Updated: March 15, 2010 http://wwwiranicaonlineorg/articles/khosrow-ii
According to this analysis, Khusraw’s bid for his rightful throne is equivalent to Tahmasp’s early struggles for power. The extent to which such anachronisms are meaningful is somewhat debateable; in the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp, there are ten paintings that depict pre-Islamic warriors with Shi’i banners, with no more ideological weight given to one hero over another. It is more likely that anachronistic banners are a staple of the genre in this context, in the same way that Safavid hats adorn fictional and historical figures indiscriminately in the painting of this period. Moreover, in the article, the view of Khusraw as a Safavid champion is predicated on Khusraw’s depiction in the *Shahnama* (despite the fact that the page comes from a Nizami manuscript), where his character and actions are much less questionable; therefore it provides an easier model for kingship.

Nizami’s treatment of Khusraw departs from that of Ferdowsi. Almost two centuries after *Shahnama*’s composition, Nizami acknowledges Ferdowsi’s work as a source of *Khusraw and Shirin*, and adds humbly that, since Ferdowsi recounts the military history of Khusraw so well, he ventures to cover only Khusraw’s romance in greater detail. The background details of Khusraw’s usurped throne are in Nizami’s story, but the main plotline of the story is about Khusraw’s romance with Shirin, with the details of his reign and wars pushed to the background.

In Nizami’s rendition of *Khusraw and Shirin*, Khusraw is an imperfect, pleasure-seeking young king, and he is an unsteady lover. Before uniting with Shirin, he marries two other women—

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18 The *Shahnama* paintings are 58v, 98v, 291r, 342v, 343v, 360v, 496r, 519r, 735r, 745v.

19 Though his nonchalant attitude towards Shirin, and the ease with which she become his concubine rather than his wife had political motivations. Paola Orsatti, “Kosrow-o-Shirin,” *EI*, online edition; available at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kosrow-o-sirin.
Byzantine princess Maryam and Shakar of Isfahan, women who are dispensible to the plot until the son Maryam bears comes of age. Khusraw’s inability to perfect his moral character manifests itself in courtship and kingship alike. In Julie Meisami’s astute observation, Khusraw’s failure as a lover figures his failure as a king; the qualities that mar his courtship of Shirin—willfulness, self-interest, and a mistaken and delusive self-image—ensure that he will sow the seeds of his own downfall. With the exception of the final brief period of his reign, Khusraw’s kingship exemplified kingship by will, and his governance is determined by caprice or expediency rather than by principle; his is the rule of might, rather than of law.20

This view of Khusraw is a departure from his depiction in the Shahnama. In summary, Khusraw’s legacy in Iran is not uniform. His name by itself connotes glory and wealth, but source material also matters: in Ferdowsi’s account, Khusraw is a picture of military accomplishment, whereas in Nizami’s account, Khusraw is a fickle lover and an imperfect ruler.

Nizami’s story throws Khusraw’s careless and flippant attitude toward Shirin into sharp relief in the plotline of Farhad, who falls in love with Shirin, spurring Khusraw’s jealousy. Convinced of the impossibility of the task, Khusraw tells Farhad that he will give up Shirin if Farhad carves a passage through a mountain. Farhad, to Khusraw’s surprise, sets to work successfully, and Khusraw, alarmed, tricks Farhad into believing Shirin has died, which causes Farhad to die of grief himself. In this story, Khusraw is young and heedless, when Farhad is older and wise; where Khusraw seeks easy rewards, Farhad toils with mental and physical fortitude; and when Farhad labors with integrity, Khusraw is deceptive.21 Therefore, it is striking that in a manuscript of Khusraw and Shirin, rather than of the Shahnama, Shah Tahmasp becomes

20 Julie Scott Meisami, Medieval Persian Court Poetry, 197-198.
21 In fact, in the Turkish spinoffs of the story, the protoganists are Farhad and Shirin – Herbert Duda Ferhād und Schīrīn. Die literarische Geschichte eines persischen Sagenstoffes, Prague, 1933.
associated with Khusraw.

Farhad’s superiority over Khusraw is reflected in the iconography of other copies of Nizami’s *Khusraw and Shirin*. Another manuscript copy of the *Khamsa* from 1494-95 (some four decades before Shah Tahmasp’s *Khamsa*), depicts the scene of Farhad’s visit to Shirin’s palace (British Library Or. 6810, f. 62v). An architectural inscription names the patron, Amīr ʿAlī Fārsī Barlās, in this painting of Farhad. (fig. 5) The verses on the painting enumerate Farhad’s accomplishments as an architect and sculptor, and as a learned man. Given these verses, the patron’s desire to be associated with Farhad is likely and understandable. Indeed, Farhad sits much more easily as a model to be emulated than Khusraw.

Beyond the story of *Khusraw and Shirin*, Nizami’s *Khamsa*, a collection of five narrative poems, offers other heroes that are more frequently and easily associated with manuscript patrons or their political ambitions. *Iskandarnama*, Nizami’s take on the Alexander romance, offers a wide range of chronological leaps in its iconography. In the same *Khamsa* manuscript made for the Timurid Amīr ʿAlī Fārsī Barlās, the *Iskandarnama* painting cycle consistently depicts Iskandar/Alexander as Sultan Husayn Bayqara, in whose court the patron served. The distinguished iconographic status of Nizami’s Iskandar is also evident in a Timurid copy of *Khamsa* that was refurbished in the Safavid workshop of Shah Ismail, Shah Tahmasp’s father (Topkapi H. 757). Penned in 1494-95, the manuscript evidently had empty spaces for intended

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24 Zeren Tanındı, “Additions to Illustrated Manuscripts in Ottoman Workshops,” *Muqarnas* 17 (2000), p. 160, n. 29. This copy of *Khamsa* was taken to Tabriz from Herat at the turn of the
paintings, some of which were filled in Safavid court. When the book was in Safavid hands, the iconographic priority was given to the *Iskandarnama* cycle, with Iskandar depicted in Safavid gear and his face veiled (fig. 6). For Shah Isma’il and Amīr ‘Alī Fārsī Barlās alike, the story of *Iskandar* provides a more consistently dignified model for political association than Khusraw—a tendency that the iconographic tradition of Persian manuscript painting reflects at large.

In fact, a reluctance to accept a deliberate association between Tahmasp and Nizami’s *Khusraw* persists in modern scholarship. In an overview of the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa*, one scholar suggests that a painting that illustrates *Haft Paykar* depicts the story’s hero, Bahram Gur, as Shah Tahmasp. Bahram Gur, like Iskandar, improves himself thoroughly and embodies

The sixteenth century, when Muhammad Mu’min Marvarid, a Timurid clerk to the treasury bookkeeper, and his father entered into the service of Shah Isma’il: Zeren Tanindı reads the date of the copy differently, as 1499-1500. See ibid. A majority of these spaces were filled with paintings after 1581, in Istanbul, when the book was given as a wedding gift to an Ottoman official. Beyond these, the manuscript has an interesting history and three colophons, one of which has been covered up with an uneven application of gold. The last colophon (f. 288a), written in a beautiful hand with gold, gives the Safavid history of the manuscript, and names Behzad as one of the painters, which Tanindı finds dubious (ibid.). Without engaging in inconclusive connoisseurship, it is still possible to say that the tender manner with which the terror of the battle has been transplanted on the faces of animals in fig. 7 suggests skill and talent, even when one might be reluctant to accept the accuracy of the manuscript’s colophon. Mawlana-Yari, a goldsmith in Shah Isma’il’s workshop, illuminated the book and produced its intricate covers, which feature scenes and verses in gold. The final colophon in gold may securely be assumed to be his work, which would make him a contemporary of the artist Bihzad at the time of the illumination (1510-11).

Norah Titley, *Persian Miniature Painting and Its Influence on the Art of Turkey and India: The British Library Collections* (London: British Library, 1983), 84. This suggestion is based on a resemblance between Bahram’s face in this painting and another face on a Safavid playing card preserved in an Ottoman album currently in Vienna. Titley takes the likeness on the playing card to be a portrait of Tahmasp; whereas Duda and Diba separately argue that it is the face of Tahmasp’s brother. See D. Duda, “Die Lackbilder in Album Murad III aus kunsthistorischer Sicht,” in *Spielkarten-Bilder in persischen Lackmalereien* (Vienna: Platnik, 1981), 16-17; and
temporal and spiritual kingship. However, this painting does not depict Bahram in any
distinguished way, which is consistent with the Safavid fashion of depicting faces of the time.
Therefore, the picture of Bahram is no more a portrait of Tahmasp than any other figure is in the
manuscript. Perhaps if one thinks of this generic face as a portrait, the strangeness of associating
the manuscript’s patron with Khusraw becomes subdued.

If Nizami’s Khusraw offers—beyond historical connotations of opulence and power—
neither an ideal model for kingship nor an exemplary story of moral edification to be emulated,
then why would the Shah Tahmasp Khamsa insistently associate this character with the book’s
patron? One possible explanation comes from the themes of Khusraw and Shirin. The literary
machinery that fuels the romance of Khusraw and Shirin is that of movement and displacement,
of replacement and deception. The romance of Khusraw and Shirin continues to develop as long
as the two are not in Khusraw’s palace together. This displacement is dramatized initially in the
couple’s inability to meet each other, each setting off from their respective lands for the other,
and missing one another twice. Further on, their encounters take place away from Khusraw’s
palace, first because Khusraw’s Byzantine wife forbids Khusraw from seeing Shirin, and then
because Shirin is reluctant to be with Khusraw.

This machinery of displacement would be at odds with the book’s ethos if we were to
read this romance as a mirror for princes. This is because Khusraw’s story could have been over
upon marrying Maryam and using this politically expedient marriage to regain his throne, that is,
achieving felicity politically and domestically. Instead, we find out at the end of Khusraw and

Layla Diba, “Lacquerwork of Safavid Persia and Its Relationship to Persian Painting,” (Ph.D
28 Julie Scott Meisami, Medieval Persian Court Poetry, 233-34.
Shirin that Khusraw’s alliance with Maryam was an ultimately inauspicious one—since it is at the hands of the son Maryam has with Khusraw that Khusraw is killed. This son, Shiruy, wants to replace his father both as a king and as a lover to Shirin, just as Shirin wanted to replace Maryam as Khusraw’s wife. Major epistemological and ethical questions in Nizami’s *Khusraw and Shirin*, then, are whether someone’s claim is truthful, whether people are what they appear to be or whether they are in disguise, and whether they actually deserve their position in the world. These questions get even more complicated when we have a potentially undeserving king in Khusraw, who may or may not have harmed his own father to gain power.

This significant theme of unsettlement and uncertainty parallels Safavid conceptualization of the period that immediately preceded the production of the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa*. Shah Tahmasp was too young to govern during the first years of his reign, having been crowned shah at the age of ten. The power vacuum of his first years as shah resulted in an intense struggle among various *qizilbash* tribes (the prominent members of which were connected to Safavid royals through marriages). The very Turkoman families that were crucial in the founding of the Safavid dynasty were now in a civil war. The end of the civil war and Shah Tahmasp’s consolidation of power, in modern scholarship and in contemporary chronicles alike, have been seen as a turning point in early Safavid history. Shah Tahmasp characterizes his own position throughout this turbulent period as watchful patience; he writes, “I waited patiently through this period in order to see what the wishes of the Almighty are.”29 As his teachers and relatives, mentors and statesmen warred in ever-changing formations of alliance, Shah Tahmasp’s own

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account of this period acknowledges the fear of making the wrong alliance, of finding oneself on the wrong side once the dust settles. Shah Tahmasp’s characterization of this turbulent period echoes a prominent theme in Nizami’s *Khusraw and Shirin*, rendering the story relevant for the context.

If Nizami’s story of Khusraw and Shirin provides a setting broadly parallel to Shah Tahmasp’s period of displacement and ambiguity as an inexperienced prince, one specific painting from the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa* gives it a material form. The *Khusraw and Shirin* verses written on “Khusraw Enthoned,” the same painting that inscribes Tahmasp’s name right above Khusraw’s head, are, “Although his heart was stricken with Shirin / It was a mistake to abandon the affairs of the state.” The significance of singling out this scene of enthronement and the moment of assuming one’s responsibilities upon the passing of a father, by putting on the court on full display—with falconers and courtiers, servants and attendants—becomes evident when we consider the historical background of the period preceding the production of this manuscript.

Contemporary scholarly consensus is that the decisive coming-of-age of Shah Tahmasp occurred in 1533, when he had the statesman Husayn Khan Shamlu executed for his support for Tahmasp’s rebelling brother. 1532 is also the year of Tahmasp’s edict relegating some of his religious authority to the Shi’i clerk Karaki. This year is cited as a turning point in many reference texts, from *The Cambridge History of Iran* to the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, but it is a

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30 For an overview of the significance of this, see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, political order, and societal change in Shi’ite Iran from the beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 133-34.
modern consensus, rather than the early modern characterization of the events. While the chronicle of Hasan Beg Rumlu, who travelled with Shah Tahmasp on his military campaigns later in Tahmasp’s reign, is silent on the point of Tahmasp’s transformation, an undated transformation is alluded to in a later Safavid chronicle prepared for Shah Tahmasp’s grandson, Shah ‘Abbas. In his chronicle completed in 1628-29, Iskandar Beg Munshi writes,

When the stripling [that is Tahmasp I] grew tall and flourished, and reached the age of maturity and discretion, with God’s help, and through the strength of his own judgment and by virtue of his abundant knowledge and perfect wisdom, he removed from the scene, by means of skillful policies, ambitious emirs and proud and arrogant men, and himself took charge of the business of government and the administration of the state. The enemies of the state, who lurked in ambush, were destroyed by the flashing stroke of his flaming sword, and his aspiration to rule and to govern was brought to fruition, as was right and proper. He achieved such authority and independence of rule that no one had the opportunity to oppose his commands, to which obedience was obligatory.

Iskandar Munshi praises in equal measure Tahmasp’s diplomacy and the “flashing stroke of his flaming sword.” However, by Tahmasp’s characterization, his transformation occurred both earlier (in 1528) and without any violence to mark the occasion. After a sentence about two qizilbash elite who died while at war with one another, Tahmasp writes, “In Qazvin at this time I

33 Iskandar Beg Munshi, History of Shah ‘Abbas the Great, 76-77.
truly became padshah.”34 By way of an explanation, Tahmasp lists his actions: moving various offices and high ranking posts away from families that traditionally held them, with the prospect of undermining their power diplomatically.

The part that is missing from Tahmasp’s account, however, is that immediately preceding the time he says he became a true ruler, he had his guards publically murder Div Sultan Rumlu, his tutor, who, in effect, ruled in his stead while Tahmasp was a minor, and whose struggle to retain his power was responsible for no small part of the civil war of Tahmasp’s first years.35 However much Tahmasp subdues the violence of the act and focuses on his diplomatic moves, his coming to his own is intrinsically predicated on the death of the father, or at least a version of a father. This is evident in the way he fashions himself as the picture of restraint and sobriety—in contrast with his father, who was driven to crushing military defeat when he was led to fight a war with an entirely inebriated army. Like Khusraw, Tahmasp’s coming of age depends on his distancing himself from his father figures.36

In the Shahnama, the question of Khusraw’s involvement in maiming his own father so as to make him unfit to be the ruler is relegated to the realm of gossip — even though patricide is

34 Tahmasp Safavi, Tazkira, 9
35 Hasan Beg Rumlu again refrains from commenting on this matter extensively. He notes that Div Sultan was murdered at the provocation of Cuha Sultan, but does not provide further circumstances. Pp. 460.
36 Kathryn Babayan writes that in his memoirs, Tahmasp distances himself from the messianic claims of his father, and reinvents himself as a humble servant of God, as an agent who prepares the conditions for the arrival of the Messiah rather than his reincarnation. Babayan’s characterization of the shifts in Safavid historiography in referring to Shah Isma’il as padishah seems a stretch, but she also notes the curious absence of Isma’il as a revered and prominent father figure in Tahmasp’s Tazkira. This role is instead relegated to ‘Ali. Kathryn Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural landscape of early modern Iran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 297-319.
a theme that runs throughout the epic. In Nizami’s *Khusraw and Shirin*, the same question is scratched off as libel and enemy propaganda; even then, patricide lurks in the crevices of the romance. In an uncanny parallel, just as Ferdowsi and Nizami suppress Khusraw’s potential patricide, Tahmasp also glosses over his killing of his own tutor. In art and in life, assumption of power—not nominally but in reality—happens through violence, the memory of which is suppressed and displaced later. Once settled, it becomes it case that “it was a mistake to abandon the affairs of the state.”

**The Book’s Eyes**

Seen against the backdrop of Tahmasp’s early reign, “Khusraw Enthroned” provides an unexpected political commentary and suggests how Nizami’s *Khusraw and Shirin* may have been received in the early Safavid period. So far, however, we have circumvented the question of agency: was it Shah Tahmasp who insisted on this iconography? Does Khusraw fully embody how Tahmasp wanted to represent himself to his court? Were there other voices negotiating how the end product would look? Some answers to these questions are well-rehearsed in modern scholarship: Tahmasp was a capable painter and had discriminating taste, but, even though court works were subject to his approval, the head of the workshop was in charge. Other answers, however, are also of little consequence: when the work of art does not reflect it, the unrealized

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37 Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 772.
38 Martin Bernard Dickson and Stuart Cary Welch assign a appreciative role to Tahmasp and fancy, “Only a lively, fun-loving, and young patron could have appreciated the full range of the Houghton manuscript.” Martin Bernard Dickson, *The Houghton Shahnamah*, 40. Unlike in Renaissance Italy, in Safavid Iran the workshop belonged to a ruler or a house, not the artist. For an overview of the Safavid workshop, see Marianna Shreve Simpson, “The Making of Manuscripts and the Workings of the Kitab-khana in Safavid Iran” *Studies in History of Art* 38 (1993): 104-121.
intentions of the patron are of lesser import, especially when the intentions of the patron can only be speculated about.\(^{39}\)

Painted inscriptions of the *Khusraw and Shirin* cycle do more than associating Tahmasp with Khusraw: they help conceptualize the manuscript as a self-aware work of art. Conceptualized thus, the work of art is an active agent within a network of the patron, artists, and the socio-political context—and rather than merely reflecting this network, it aspires to shape it as well. In the section that follows, I focus on two other paintings from the *Khusraw and Shirin* cycle that bear painted inscriptions, and show how they interact with court life and how they conceptualize themselves and the manuscript.

One painting from this cycle is “Khusraw and Shirin listening to stories told by Shirin’s maidens,” on folio 66b (Fig. 7). This painting invites the viewer in and grants some agency to the book itself in the process. Early in the narrative, Khusraw happily whiles away his days drinking and speaking with Shirin. The sexual tension between the pair, meanwhile, increases as Shirin struggles to keep her promise to her queen aunt not to sleep with Khusraw before they are married—a tension which will end imminently when Khusraw, in frustration, leaves Shirin and

\(^{39}\) It is clear that if one were to pursue this line of reasoning, the terms would shift so that the patron would take on Foucault’s author function (especially because a royal patron provides a cohesive entity with which to limit meaning in a context where a single artistic entity is produced through a diffused system—the workshop—of artistic initiative.) Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected essays and interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138. Oleg Grabar noted the academically difficult position of having to establish context at a time when humanists were cutting their teeth on deconstruction. Oleg Grabar, “Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting,” in *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100-1800, Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 229. Indeed, the landmark study on Shah Tahmasp-era painting, *The Houghton Shahnameh*, which spends a great deal of space establishing the connoisseurial quirks of Painters A-F, came out five years after Barthes published his essay “The Death of the Author.”
marries the Byzantine princess, Maryam. Before their separation, however, the couple spends
their night listening to and telling brief, couplet-long stories, and folio 66b depicts this night of
storytelling.

The composition of the painting follows the narrative closely. As the story suggests,
Khusraw is seated with Shirin on the throne, next to his friend Shapur, who set up the couple.
The central group is surrounded by young servants standing on one side, and Shirin’s entourage
of ten attractive women seated on the other. Candles and fire illuminate the evening scene. The
painting enters into the book as Shapur tells his story:

Happiness opened up its arms to luck
Jupiter met with Venus in one house
When it was Shapur’s turn to speak
He rendered discourse fresh with the prism of love

*Picture break*

[And he said] that Shirin was honey in a cup
Finally the king became its butter.40

Shapur’s words join the text with the mise-en-scene of the painting, since the group is
surrounded by food trays—a detail extraneous to Nizami’s narrative, but one that connects the
imagery of Nizami’s poem with the picture. But we may ask, of the ten stories Shirin’s maidens
tell and an additional three by Shapur, Khusraw, and Shirin, why are Shapur’s words given this
privileged treatment? One explanation is Shapur’s importance to the story. Shapur is the
narrative locomotive, the agent that brings Khusraw and Shirin together and ushers their romance
onward, a fact Shirin also credits him for: “Though falling in love was fate, it was Shapur who

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40 سعادت بر گشاد آقابال رادست / قرآن مشتري در زهره پيوست / چو آمد در سخن نوبت به شابور/ سخن را تازه کرد از
عشق منشور/ كه شيرين انگيني بود در جام/ شهره روغن و شد سرانجام
inscribed this destiny.” In the text, Shapur becomes an author-substitute, and in the painting, he similarly welcomes the viewer into his machination with his gesturing hand; the painting opens up to the pair’s love and a rare moment of contented stillness.

Yet the world into which the viewer is invited is not just the text of Nizami; the painted inscriptions in “Khusraw and Shirin listening to stories” expand the literary world of the manuscript beyond the text of Nizami. Written in two cartouches on the wall above Khusraw and Shirin’s throne are the opening verses of a ghazal by Hafiz (1315-1390):

The opening of the view of my eye is your nest
Show magnificence and alight! for this is your house.41

These lines by Hafiz connote a royal invitation in other Shah Tahmasp manuscripts.

Even though this ghazal is not a typical inscription in manuscripts from Iran, it occurs four times in the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp.42 In each case, the inscription adds a sense of greeting—as in “Sam and Zal Welcomed into Kabul” (89v), wherein the royal father-son pair is welcomed into a palace with trays of gems and incense (fig. 8). The inscription constitutes an invitation also to fighting. In “Isfandiyar Slays Arjasp and Takes the Brazen Hold,” in addition to the inscription that names Shah Tahmasp, the couplet from Hafiz runs along the top of a wall in the background (fig. 4). Stuart and Welch see these inscriptions as quiet, unrelated, and ultimately merely ornamental witnesses to the scenes they adorn.43 But the inclusion of the verses along with Tahmasp’s name suggests the choice was deliberate. Here as in the Shah Tahmasp Shahnama,

41 The first words, “the opening of the view of my eye” admittedly sound awkward in translation, but shorter formulations, such as Steingass’ “the pupil of my eye” subtracts from Hafiz’s unusual turn of phrase.
42 65v, 89v, 221r, and 442v.
43 Stuart and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, 2:541.
the painted Hafiz verses constitute a humble invitation into the painting alongside Shapur.

This invitation is further affirmed with the throne upon which Khusraw and Shirin are seated. Two sets of painted inscriptions adorn this throne, one rhyming couplet written within enclosed cartouches behind the heads of Khusraw and Shirin, and the other couplet at the base of the throne. The base inscription reads, “Oh our ruler whose throne is like that of Jamshid / May the entire world be like ants at your threshold.” This supplicant evocation is not part of Nizami’s text, but it connects well with the illustrated verses: Jamshid is known for his cup, and Nizami likens Shirin and Khusraw to butter and honey contained in a cup. With this verse, Nizami’s lines come to life cleverly: the cup that holds the lovers (butter and honey) is now a throne, which brings the romance into an imperial fold.

The second inscription concludes the imperial theme. The heads of Khusraw and Shirin obscure this second couplet, higher on the throne, with only “Khusraw’s throne” clearly legible beside Shirin’s head. Despite the obstruction it is possible to make out what the verses are: “Under an auspicious sign and with a fresh ornament / Stood the royal throne of Khusraw.” These lines come from a later episode in Nizami’s Khusraw and Shirin, which takes place later than the present scene. The evocation of Jamshid and Khusraw’s thrones on this particular throne separates this painting from the fictional scene it depicts, and gives the painting the status of a literary trope — the same trope that allowed Iskandar Beg Munshi to say Shah Tahmasp was

Welch gives an incomplete translation of the partial words, but, unaided by digital search, was unable to recognize the entire verse. Stuart C. Welch, Wonders of the Age: Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501-1576 (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, 1979).

The emphasis on Khusraw’s throne in a scene that depicts a gathering hosted by Shirin subtracts from Shirin’s authority. This and other instances of temporal collapse are the subject of Chapter 4.
the most worthy of the throne of Khusraw and Kay-Qobad.47 When the throne that rightfully belongs to Shirin is inscribed with the names of Khusraw and Jamshid, it loses its particularity and its quality as pictorially representative of Shirin’s throne. Instead, it becomes an idea of a throne, a metonym for the divine right to rule that is passed down throughout history. Thus, the invitation from the painting becomes double: it invites at once Khusraw and the viewer.

The question of whose invitation this is, on the other hand, is somewhat complicated. The storytelling sequence takes place in Shirin’s native Armenia. Considering this, one could read the couplet inscribed on the wall as Shirin’s generous invitation to Khusraw to share her kingdom and her throne (“for this is your house”). However, the partially obscured words on the throne spell out Khusraw’s name. Even without being able to recognize the obscured verses, the viewer is able to identify the throne as Khusraw’s, not that of Shirin.48 In effect, the painting does not allow even a transitory moment of authority to Shirin. From the first, in this painting, the throne is not Shirin’s to share.

If it is not Shirin who willingly shares her own throne, the question arises of who the speaker is of “The opening of the view of my eye is your nest,” and who is to alight and settle in their nest. The word “opening” (ravāq) in “the opening of the view of my eye” may refer both to a portico and to the curtain entrance of a tent stretched on a pole, the kind of which occurs frequently in Persian manuscript painting. With either meaning, the word carries a sense of an opening and extension before the eye. The opening and closing of one’s eyelid to reveal and hide a view that the poem evokes is also embodied in the physical act of opening and closing a book

47 Iskandar Beg Munshi, History of Shah ‘Abbas the Great, 75.
to reveal an image. Seen this way, the lines of poetry are an invitation to enter into the world of the book—vertically (as in “alight!”) rather than horizontally, as one would expect from chronologically reading a book by flipping through the pages. Therefore, the “I” of Hafiz’s verses, freed from a reference to Shirin with the inscriptions on the throne, becomes a reference to the book and the court scene depicted therein. The invitation comes not from Shirin, but from the book itself.

The privileged status of Shapur in the painting becomes meaningful in this context as well: in his author/instigator capacity, it is Shapur who prepares this setting, and it is his likeness that mediates between the space of the viewer and the painting. The court scene, complete with stories, attendants, a beloved and a throne, is ready; all that is needed is for Khusraw/the viewer to descend onto the scene and mix within it, as butter does with honey. In the world this picture embodies lies an invitation to the patron—first a banal one: this is your world; enter into it. And then an unexpected one: the view of my eye is your nest; enter into my perception; lend yourself to my sight.

The book’s representation of its own agency through the sense of sight assumes a historically specific message in the cycle’s last painting, “Khusraw listens to Bārbud playing the lute” (77v) (fig. 9). Dejected after having been separated from Shirin, Khusraw hears of the passing of his enemy Bahram Chubin, who formerly usurped Khusraw’s throne. The news leaves Khusraw contemplative of the transience of life; and he takes the opportunity to address the elders surrounding him on the importance of moderation and of humility in finding fault in others. Astonishingly, Khusraw then mourns his enemy for three days. On the fourth day, he
starts another court gathering, showers this courtiers with gifts, and invites his musician friend, Barbud, to play the lute. Folio 77b depicts this day of celebration, at the moment when Barbud plays the last of his thirty songs. In what follows, I discuss this painting and its painted inscriptions in two layers: as a glorification of court celebration, and as a warning.

**Animating the Court**

In “Khusraw Listens to Barbud,” Khusraw is seated, off center, on a carpet in a pavilion; he reaches for a plate of fruit an attendant brings. To Khusraw’s right, in the honored seat of the gathering, Barbud plays his lute, while Shapur, Khusraw’s artist friend, sits to Khusraw’s left. In the foreground, crowding around the fountain, are courtiers, some drinking, some exchanging remarks, others bringing Khusraw hunting articles. This court scene, in short, features all the requisite splendor of a Persianate king on whom the fortune smiles: rows of attendants, a beautiful fountain, containers upon containers of fruits, drinks, and food, a bewitching palace, luxury carpets, and the prospect of a hunt.

The two inscriptions—one architectural on Khusraw’s pavilion, the other on the carpet he is seated on—add a textual dimension to the glory of this idealized majlis. The architectural inscription reads,

O may this feast majlis be the envy of the rose garden  
And be illuminated with the radiance of the Shah’s countenance  
His rosette seal reaching the heavens  
May the majlis be sealed and adorned with the Shah’s presence.  

This ruba’i was likely composed for this painting, considering how well it ties to both the setting and the message of the painting.

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49 این مجلس بزم رشک گلشن بادا / وز پرتو روى شاه روشن بادا / بر طاق سهر تا بود شمسه مهر/ مجلس به وجود شه مزین بادا
The inscription in the original Persian begins with the phrase “this majlis,” and the painting places these first words in the upper right corner, as if the inscription were a title for this very scene. There is a playful clash between the durability of an architectural inscription, and the fleeting nature of a majlis: the food may be consumed, the last musical note may be played, and the courtiers may retire, but the good wishes of the inscription will remain even after there is no “this majlis” to speak of—and so will the glory of Khusraw’s majlis live on.

The respectful good wishes on the architectural inscriptions on 77b in the Shah Tahmasp *Khamsa* are echoed further with the carpet inscriptions, this time with a game. In their entirety, the verses quoted on the carpet are,

My two eyes are the carpet of that house where you build a bridal chamber (where you make the world)
I buried on the path there every place I want to set foot on (I want to be on its way)
The jealousy of us, the resplendent majlis of friends is such a lovely feast
[But] my dark fate does not lighten up there.  

The painting, however, does not spell out the verses fully: the first two lines are written legibly and frontally along the long edge of the carpet; the third follows the short edge and is partially obscured by Khusraw’s hand and a fruit plate, while the last line is altogether missing. Focusing on this third line (and setting aside the complicated imagery evoked in the first line for the time being) will show how the painting encourages its viewers to replicate in the non-diegetic space what is depicted in the pictorial space.

In the third line, Khusraw blocks the words “[it is] the feast, the resplendent majlis of friends” (*bazm-ast rangīn majlīs-i jānān*) as he picks up a pear from a fruit plate an attendant

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50 چشم فرم آن منزل که سازی جلوه گام انجا / بهر چجا یا نهی خواهم که کردم خاک راه انجا / چه خوش برزمیست رنگین مجلس جانان حسوداما / که تنوان شد سفید از شومی بخت سیاه انجا
holds. The obstruction constitutes a pictorial word replacement: instead of the word “feast,” we see the moment food is offered. This is the second instance of obscured but recognizable verses in the manuscript; the first being “Khusraw and Shīrīn listening to stories told by Shīrīn’s maidens,” on folio 66b. In effect, the blocking of some words of an inscription amounts to a game: will the viewer be able to recognize the entire line from its first and last words? Will the guessed words fit well in the cartouche? How might the calligrapher have stacked the words so that they fit? This game, then, extends to the space of the viewer. A Persianate court is, among others, a site where one shows off one’s wit and gains social standing in exchange.\(^5\)

In fact, the Safavid reception of the lines inscribed on the carpet emphasizes this self-congratulatory celebration of the court. The inscribed verses are by Ahlī Khorasani (d. 1527/8), a Timurid poet who served in the courts of both Sultan Husayn Bayqara and his son, Faridun Husayn Mirza.\(^5\) Sām Mīrzā, a brother of Shah Tahmasp, recounts the life and works of the poet in *Tuhfah-i Sāmī*, his collection of biographical notices on poets, allowing us a glimpse into how the work of Ahlī was received in Safavid court.

Sām Mīrzā quotes the four verses, three of which are inscribed on the carpet underneath Khusraw. The Safavid prince’s introduction to the poem repeats a biographical trope about the poem’s composition: Ahlī sought audience with the Timurid prince Faridun Husayn Mirza, with whom he was smitten. However, a black servant named Bakht was charged with keeping

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51 This is not unique to Safavid court culture, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. Maria Subtelny, “Scenes from the Literary Life of Timurid Herat,” in Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens, ed. Roger M. Savory, et al. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 137-55.
52 His work is mentioned in Dawlatshah b. Ala al-Dawla’s 1487 treatise on poets, *Tazkira al-Shu‘ara*, and in *Baburnama*, the memoirs of the Mughal emperor, which covers the events between 1494-1529.
everyone out of the garden. A lovesick and despondent Ahlī composed the poem on a piece of paper, which included in the last line a wordplay about the servant’s name, and he placed the paper inside candlewax and cast it down a small stream that watered Faridun Mirza’s garden. Faridun Mirza found the verses and, moved, immediately admitted Khorasani into his court.\footnote{Sām Mīrzā-yi Ṣafavī, Tuḥfah-i Sāmī; bā taštīḥ va muqābilah-i Vahīd Dastgirdī, Tehran: Maṭbaʻah-i Armaghān, 1314 [1935], 108.}

The poem from its inception, then, is associated with seeking access to a court through one’s artistic ability. In the imagination of the Safavid elite, it appears that this poem was affiliated with yearning for access from a humble position. Looking at the pictorial space of Khusraw’s court, for any Safavid courtier who has access to a manuscript of the Shah, a reminder of eager and envious outsiders must surely have been flattering and status affirming. This connection is evident to a learned group who was able to recognize the whole poem from its fragments—in itself a marker of exclusivity — and a connection to the non-diegetic world of the courtiers of Shah Tahmasb.

In addition to the poem’s Safavid reception, the act of serving food is also significant for this context. However mundane it may seem to a modern viewer, serving food represented an important aspect of court affairs. The royal workshops in the Safavid period included a department devoted specifically to procurement of fruits (mīvah-khānah), and the superintendent of the royal workshops (nāẓir-i buyūtāt), a high ranking official in the court (an amīr) also in charge of the book ateliers, was personally responsible for inspecting the quality of the food served from the royal kitchens.\footnote{Vladimir Minorsky, trans., Tadhkirat Al-mulk, a Manual of Ṣafavid Administration (circa 1137/1725) Persian Text in Facsimile (B. M. Or. 9496) (London: Luzac & Co., 1943), 50. In fact, the male figures crowding the gate, who are depicted in dignified but undistinguished ways, can be tied to various offices in the royal Safavid court: the head of hunting (amīr-shikār-bāshī)
Safavid Iran: the first Iranian cookbook was written for an artistocrat, in 1521, and the recipes specified therein are for large gatherings. The feast is a canonical part of Persianate kingship tradition (two complimentary pursuits of feasting and fighting), and it is similarly codified in Safavid court life.

The significance of serving food in the court is recorded not just in manuals in text, but by Shah Tahmasb himself, in image. Two separate pictures Shah Tahmasb has made, one a painting, the other a drawing, both preserved in the album of Tahmasb’s brother Bahram Mirza, attest to this (Figs. 10, 11). Both works depict the same person, a Safavid courtier named Qarpūz Sultan the ashīk-āqāsī (Melon Sultan, a master of the threshold). In the drawing he is shown carrying a plate of fruit; in the painting, he is seated among other courtiers who enjoy refreshments. In the drawing, there is some uncertainty as to how the nose should appear: Tahmasb seems to have walked back the initial, hooked appearance of the nose, with two options for the nose simultaneously visible. By the time Qarpuz Sultan reaches the majlis and his form is committed into the painting, not only is he more composed in his dress, but his face also becomes more youthful and idealized: his eyebrows meet in the middle; his nose is more dainty.

Ashīk-āqāsī in Safavid court was a post reserved for the sons of high ranking dignitaries, and the ashīk-āqāsī would serve during public ceremonies. More pertinently, they served between the public place of the majlis and the private space of the harem. As Qarpūz Sultan passes from the kitchen into the court, he loses some of the appetite legible in his face, but gains dignity and

56 The name is likely a joke, and the painting may be seen loosely as a caricature. David Roxburgh, The Persian Album, 248-49.
idealized beauty in the way he is rendered. The act of bearing fruit admits him into the majlis, and being in the majlis elevates his rendition.

This game of hiding a poem that celebrates an exclusive court animates in its turn more courtly activity, and thus turns the painting on folio 77b into a performative painting that both affirms court life and propagates it.

*Memento Mori; Memento Mei*

Folio 77b, then, on one level, functions as a celebration of the court: while purportedly demonstrating Nizami’s narration of the Sasanian king, it also provides an occasion for contemporary audience to see its own reflection in the painting; it encourages the viewer to mimic and replicate the painted scene in real life. Still, this reading explains only part of the painting. What are we to make of the domestic scene—a mother-baby pair, along with a second child—in the upper left corner of the painting?

Folio 77b does not depict Khusraw in mourning; rather, it is the domestic vignette on the left balcony that conveys the text’s lesson on transience. In this vignette, architecturally separated from the space of the gathering, is Khusraw’s Byzantine wife, Maryam. She shares a tender moment with the couple’s son, Shiruy. This will not be revealed to the reader until the end of the story of *Khusraw and Shirin*, but it is at the hands of this son that Khusraw will be murdered. The inclusion of the mother-son pair is a reminder of Khusraw’s death. This vignette is connected to the space of Khusraw: even though the path from the son’s balcony to the father’s pavilion is crowded, there is an unexpected connection between the two spaces, dramatized in the arrow that a young boy shoots from the balcony towards an unsuspecting bird.
To drive the point about death home, the painting also places an hourglass, rendered in a highly visible green against the white background, into a wall niche behind Khusraw for good measure. By placing the mother-son pair in a courtly entertainment scene, the painting embodies a wisdom that is temporally withheld from this point in the narrative.

The figure of the boy with the arrow, extraneous to the narrative and not engaged with anyone in the painting, ushers in the other lessons the painting has to teach. What is he looking at? His arrow is directed slightly upwards, at a bird on the tree, but his eyes do not follow this line. They instead look straight ahead, at the architectural inscription above Khusraw’s pavilion. Within the spatial logic of the painting, this is an implausible line of sight, since the balcony is behind the pavilion. However, this seeming inconsistency only works to emphasize the importance of the inscription. The painting’s piercing lessons are pointed towards the inscription that twice writes in gold the word Shah. This slightly threatening tenor is an important context to understand the rest of the inscriptions of the painting.

Returning to the architectural inscription at which the boy’s arrow is pointed—what makes this inscription remarkable is its reference to the book itself. The seal in “His rosette seal reaching the heavens” refers specifically to illuminated shamsa ownership seals placed at beginnings of manuscripts. Thus, the inscription takes on a dual meaning: just as the majlis can only be complete when the shah graces it with his presence, so too can the book only be whole with the shah’s patronage.57

57 Monumental inscriptions of this kind were commonplace in Safavid palatial architecture. The palace Shah Tahmasp commissioned in Qazvin, which was later to become the empire’s capital, bore verses from Hafiz and Husam al-Din Maddah. More common than classical poetry,
The painted inscriptions, therefore, recognize their own setting as a book, and they ask for the continued patronage of the medium in which they exist. It follows that this site for patronage advocacy is the very place where the artist placed his own signature, one of only two signatures among the sixteenth-century paintings of the codex. Right between the cartouches enclosing verses two and three, is his name, Naqqash ‘Ali. This painting, like others in the manuscript, bears an attribution on the lower left corner, “the work of master Mirza ‘Ali,” from a date later than that of the painting (based on the relatively messy handwriting). This attribution has been accepted as correct, but the signature itself has escaped scholars’ attention. The signature, however, appears to be contemporary with the painting because part of the letter ی of ‘Ali has been covered up with gold. (Since gold was expensive, it was usually added the last.)

Naqqash ‘Ali, better known as Mirza ‘Ali, was the son of the celebrated court painter Sultan-Muhammad, who was known for his depictions of the deportment of the Qizilbash elite. Mirza ‘Ali grew up in the kitabkhana of Shah Tahmasp, where his father, Sultan Muammad, however, were verses composed specifically for the site, honoring the patron, the Prophet and the Imams, describing the circumstances of the building, or the building’s uses and significance. The verses inscribed in the Shah Tahmasb Khamsa provide an interesting commentary on the conventions of this genre of monumental epigraphy: they mention a generic patron and express good wishes for him, and they include a reference to the physical setting of the majlis, i.e., the purpose of the building. Sussan Babaie, “Epigraphy iv. Safavid and Later Inscriptions,” Encyclopedia Iranica, online ed. (2011); available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/epigraphy-iv.

58 The other signature is on 15v, illustrating a story from Makhzan al-Asrar.

59 This signature suggests that the practice of hiding signatures may have been prevalent in Tabriz, in addition to Shiraz. Mariana Shreve Simpson, “Who is Hiding Here?: Artists and Their Signatures in Timurid and Safavid Manuscripts,” in Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Muslim Empires: New Studies in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Art and Culture, ed. Kishwar Rizvi (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 60.

60 In fact, every reference I have been able to track to this painting refers to its painter as an attribution and there is no mention of the signature.

61 Minorsky, Calligraphers and Painters, 181.
also worked.\textsuperscript{62} In addition to the present signed painting, there is another work attributed to the artist in the Shah Tahmasp \textit{Khamsa}.\textsuperscript{63} All other works attributed to him are attributed on the basis of these two paintings. There is not much textual evidence for the later life of the artist, who, based on his father’s active years, must have been rather young when he worked on the Tahmasp \textit{Khamsa}. Scholars have speculated on stylistic grounds about the later career of the artist. Dickon and Welch attribute several paintings prepared for Tahmasp’s nephew, Ibrahim Mirza (1540-1577), to Mirza ‘Ali, which would indicate that the artist left the capital for Mashhad.\textsuperscript{64} Barbara Brend argues instead that Mirza ‘Ali joined Humayun’s court in India under a new name, ‘Abd al-Samad.\textsuperscript{65} Both studies attempt to establish authorship through stylistic similarities on the one hand, and account for change and development over time on the other, which results in an ontologically messy predicament of arbitrating which details are the essence of style, and which are diffused quirks unique to a workshop. This difficulty notwithstanding, it remains the consensus that Mirza ‘Ali did not remain in Tahmasp’s workshop for long after the completion of the \textit{Khamsa}.

Besides the signature’s connoisseurial uses, the fact that Mirza ‘Ali signed this particular painting is telling. The specific \textit{Khusraw and Shirin} verses that the painting left the space for on

\begin{itemize}
\item Minorsky, \textit{Calligraphers and Painters}, 186.
\item The painting currently constitutes f. 48v and was assumed to depict “Shāpūr shows the portrait of Khusraw to Shīrīn.” However the painting originally depicted “Nūshāba Shows Iskandar his Portrait,” a scene from Nizami’s \textit{Iskandarnama}. Priscilla Soucek and Muhammad Isa Waley, “The Nizāmī manuscript of Shāh Tahmāsp: a reconstructed history.” In J.-C. Bürgel and C. van Ruymbeke (eds.), \textit{A Key to the Treasure of the Hakim: Artistic and humanistic aspects of Nizāmī Ganjāvī’s Khamsa} (Leiden 2011), 204.
\item Dickson and Welch, \textit{The Houghton Shahnama}, 141, 150.
\end{itemize}
the lower left corner describe how Khusraw gave away a pouch of gold with each “bravo.” (Though these lines are incomplete; I am able to identify what is to come from the lines that are written on the upper right corner.) This painting goes great lengths to illustrate a scene for which there is no set iconography, in order to provide a visual for rewarding one’s courtiers and bestowing gifts upon the artists who provide entertainment. The artist’s signature, nestled between painted verses that ask for the shah’s continued patronage, powerfully reminds the manuscript’s viewer: remember me.

This gesture is especially significant at a time when courtly patronage of illustrated manuscripts are believed to be waning. In 1544-45, Shah Tahmasp gave leave to some of his artists so they could practice their art elsewhere, and many ended up in India. Whether it is true that Naqqash ‘Ali is ‘Abd al-Samad, it remains the case that many artists left Tahmasp’s court for India less than a decade after this book was completed. Just as “Khusraw Enthroned” reminds the manuscript’s patron and its audience of the importance of attending to state business, this painting advocates against declining patronage, and reminds the viewer to emulate Khusraw’s generosity and remember the artist.

Lastly, the first line inscribed on the carpet, “My two eyes are the carpet of that house where you build a bridal chamber (where you make the world)” contributes to the manuscript’s theme of visuality. When regarded cursorily, the choice of verses may not seem discriminating beyond a superficial match between the fictional support, the carpet and a word that occurs early on in the line. However, the particular verses included here further engage with the themes of seeing and visuality that were so prominent in the previous painting, “Khusraw and Shīrīn

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listening to stories told by Shīrīn’s maidens.”

The term “bridal chamber” mentioned in the first line is, in fact, an approximation for what is designated by jalvagāh. Jalvagāh is the room where the bride first reveals her face to her new husband at the end of a ritual of being asked to open her veil, rejecting, and being coaxed with gifts. That the speaker in the poem should cast his/her eyes down as a carpet for the jalvagāh of the ruler may seem like a humble act at first: an eye is a precious and dearly guarded organ, and the speaker expresses willingness to part from it for a slight increase in the comfort of the ruler. However, if the addressee of the poem is already making jalvagāh in the house, the eyes of the speaker are truly extraneous and intrusive to the scene. There is even a sense of transgression in the whole affair.

On the carpet and on a wall, we encounter the eyes of the manuscript, at once observing boldly and awaiting subserviently. And even though modern scholarship has glossed over it, the manuscript’s discerning eyes have been part of how its contemporaries understood it from the beginning:

[Mir Musavvir and Aqa Mirak] in the royal library have mixed such colors and painted such faces—especially in the royal Shahnama and the Khamsa of Nizami—that if I begin to speak of them, not only would it take too long, but the pen would also be incapable of describing them. Among [the things they did] for the ornamentation of a jamkhana for the sun of the royal celest, the bouquet of kingly garden, not even a whiff of which could be adequately described, they made two siphars arched like the infatuating bowed eye brows of beauties and unrivaled in the gallery of the world. Oh what a jamkhana! Were I to call it a world-revealing mirror, it would not be out of place. Its mirrors have broken the splendor of the azure celest, the master who made it has shackled the hands of the craftsmen of the world. It is a heaven adorned with stars, a place decorated with the likenesses of people. It is a paradise without shortcoming, an Eden resplendent with serving-boys and houris. Its carpet would dazzle the eyes of the great; its threshold is kissed by the almighty. Like the hearts of the enlightened it gazes with the eye of its heart in every direction, and people of its insight are amazed and astounded by
Attributing the sense of sight to a work of art has intriguing implications. Priscilla Soucek described the use of the imagination (khiyyāl) in activating the meaning of a work of art. On a similar vein, Gülru Necipoğlu explored the relationship between sight and insight in Islamic tradition, and how the corporeal transition from the former into the latter is essential to an aesthetic experience. Following the Neoplatonic tradition, in the Safavid context, beholding unworthy sights could corrupt one’s soul. According to this tradition, as a blind object, the

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70 To be sure, theoretical writings on vision have a longer history in the Islamic world. It has been convincingly argued that visual aesthetics in Islamic art has been shaped not only by religion, but also by Neoplatonic and Aristotelian concepts that had a comparable relevance in Europe. The same classical past has partially informed the tenth-century Epistles by the Brethren of Purity (Rasā’il by Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’), where the authors argue that works of art are distilled mental images of God’s creation impressed on the artists’ minds; therefore, a work of art assimilates God’s wisdom. Ibn Sina (Avicenna; d. 1037) is known to have studied the Epistles of the Brethren, and his emphasis on the five inner senses later becomes of interest to Suhrawardi (d. 1191), whom Kāshīf cites indirectly in his Futuwwatnāma. Indeed, Kāshīf’s insistence that one divert his or her gaze from the immoral resonates with the Aristotelian perception, where “forms,” when perceived, create a likeness in the perceiving body. For an overview of vision in Islamic art, see Gülru Necipoğlu, The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture, Topkapı Palace Museum Library MS H.1956, With an Essay on the Geometry of the Muqarnas by Muhammad al-Asad (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995): 185-96. The philosophical stakes of the writings of the Brethren are discussed in Carmela Baffioni, "Ikhwān al-Safā’," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/ikhwan-al-safaa/. The Aristotelian notion of likenesses in the perceiving body is in Aristotle, On the Soul, trans. J. A. Smith, online edition (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2015), 2:5.
work of art is an expression of an artist’s mental image of God’s creation and a vessel for pondering the Almighty. However, as a seeing heart, the manuscript becomes a moral agent that itself needs to be sheltered from unworthy sights. In this way, the manuscript ceases being an index of Tahmasp’s court life, and becomes an active agent within it that urges certain types of behaviour (such as continued patronage) in the space of the court.

Conclusion

The iconographic cycle of Khusraw and Shirin in Shah Tahmasp’s Khamsa reflects and responds to the turbulent political environment of early Safavid period, especially in equating Shah Tahmasp with Khusraw—an unlikely association. At the same time the Shah Tahmasp Khamsa attempts to instigate an environment hospitable to its own existence. The manuscript at once is a product of its time and an agent in the court of Shah Tahmasp.

In accounts of Shah Tahmasp’s artistic patronage over his long reign, in the period following the completion of his Khamsa, his workshop is assumed to be quietly and indifferently dissolved. However, the Khusraw and Shirin cycle shows that the court artists were potentially attuned to changes in patronage patterns and wanted to alter the events’ course.

We have already noted that the Hafiz verses inscribed in the Khamsa also exist in the Shah Tahmasp Shahnama. None of these paintings have the same artist, and yet the lines remain a relevant iteration of what was expected of a manuscript painting of the period. For Safavid Iran, a context where manuscript paintings are products of artistic collaboration, and patrons alone cannot account for the entirety of the manuscript, the agency of the manuscript—and what the book does within its milieu—offers a promising unit of study. Painted inscriptions in Persian manuscripts are understudied, but they constitute an important body of evidence for such an
analysis beyond the present manuscript.