

Hasht Bihisht and Haft Akhtar

A Comparative Study in Literary History

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One of the little known poets of the Safavid period in Iran who belongs to the circle of Khamsa writers, is Khwaja Zayn al-'Abidin 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-Mu'min Shirazi, known by his pen name 'Abdi Big or Navidi as he used to be called in his earlier years.

'Abdi Big was born in 921/1515 in Tabriz and died in 988/1580 in Ardabil. Thus the period of his poetic creativity coincides entirely with the reign of Shah Tahmasb who ruled for 52 years from 931/1524 until 984/1576.

Our scanty knowledge of 'Abdi Big's life includes a few pieces of information gathered from the fragmentary reports of a few old Tadhkiras and occasional references found in his own poems.¹ He was still young, only fifteen years of age, when his father died and he therefore was forced to quit his studies and enter the court service as a scribe and accountant for which he was skilled and already known. The job at the court which he continued to occupy through nearly the end of his life, afforded him the possibility of traveling to a number of places, among them Georgia and Van in Turkey. After Tabriz, when the Safavid capital moved to Qazvin, 'Abdi Big spent many years in that city. Some of his works appear among the richest sources about the history of Qazvin and offer detailed descriptions of that city's palaces and gardens in the early Safavid years.² He then traveled to Ardabil, then back again to Qazvin where he stayed over six years before moving for the final time to Ardabil. Travels and court occupations did not stop him from developing his poetic inclination and writings for which fate had endowed him with good taste and great ability. Early in his life 'Abdi Big had started composing poems. His first major *mathnavi*, the Jam-i Jamshidi, was already finished when he was only 22 years old. Instead of restricting himself to panegyrical and lyrical poetry and composing more volumes of *ghazals* and *qasidas*, as so many other poets had done before him, 'Abdi Big was possessed of a fascination for Nizami and Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, and strove to follow in the footsteps of those two great masters.

¹ Traditional Tadhkiras offer only a fare minimum of information about him. The fullest account of his life and work to this day is provided by Abu'l-Fadl Rahimov in his introduction to the Majnun-o Leyli edition, Moscow 1967, pp. iii-xxx. His knowledge is based on pieces of biographical references scattered in the poet's different books. See also Zabihollah Safa, *Tarikh-i Adabiyat dar Iran*, Vol. 5, Part 2, Tehran 1363/1984, pp. 746-54; Ahmad Golchin-i Ma'ani, "Navidi Shirazi" (article), *Mahnamih-i Vahid*, vol. 3/1345/pp. 340-46.

² Three volumes of his third Khamsa, published together in one volume, Moscow 1979, are devoted to Qazvin. They are *Jannat al-Athmar*, *Zinat al-Awraq*, and *Sahifat al-Ikhlās*.

The extant manuscripts of his works and the information culled from biographical sources indicate that he wrote at least 2 books in prose,³ composed 3 divans or collections of lyrical poems totaling 10,000 couplets,⁴ a strife poem called *Munazira-yi Rayahin va Vard*,⁵ and more importantly, 15 *mathnavi* volumes, divided into 3 quintets, the first one being an imitation of Nizami's *Khamsa*.⁶ These *mathnavis* have survived the vicissitudes of time and exist scattered in Iran, the Soviet Union, England, France, and perhaps elsewhere.⁷

Of these 15 volumes, 10 have so far been published during the last 20 years by the Soviet scholar Abu'l-Fadl Hashim Ughli Rahimov.⁸ As we know, 'Abdi Big was not the first poet attracted by the idea of writing poems in the style of Nizami. A number of other poets were tempted by the same desire before and after 'Abdi Big. Some tried to create a full set of *Khamsa*, while others composed only one or two *mathnavis* in that style. Some were strict in their imitations and composed romantic epics, others followed the master's example in matters of structure and style alone and devoted their thoughts to mystical and didactic subjects. Most of these works have never been published and therefore I am unable to assess 'Abdi Big's dependence on and borrowings from his predecessors in this study. We do know, however, that he was fascinated by Amir Khusrau just as strongly or perhaps even more than he was taken by the charm of the poems of Nizami. The impact of these two masters was strong enough to make him disregard the other competitors and enter the race with his eyes fixed on the two early and original models.

Haft Akhtar which I propose to examine, though only partly, in the following, may be considered as the best case for a comparative study of 'Abdi Big's own creativity as a poet and as a narrator. *Haft Akhtar*, "The Seven Planets", published in 1974, is the second volume of 'Abdi Big's first *Khamsa*. He composed it in Tabriz within seven months in 947/1540 when he was 25 years old. Unlike the *Leyli-o Majnun* story which

³ *Takmilat al-Akhbar* on history, and *Sarih al-Milk*, a record, with descriptions of Waqf monuments, buildings and other estates in Ardabil. See Z. Safa, op. cit., p. 751; Rahimov, op. cit., p. xvi and *Haft Akhtar*, Moscow 1974, footnote, p. 5.

⁴ Of these three volumes no traces have been found so far.

⁵ Z. Safa, op. cit., p. 750. This work has been mentioned nowhere else.

⁶ Rahimov, op. cit., p. vii ff. The second and third of these three quintets are inspired by the historical events of 'Abdi Big's time and are to be valued as important historical documents. Also in size they are mostly small poems. *Anwar-i Tajalli* for example, consists of only 1200 distiches (Rahimov, P. xiv).

⁷ Charles Rieu, *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London 1895, pp. 195-97; E. Blochet, *Catalogue des Manuscrits Persans*, Vol. 3, Paris 1928, p. 351; M. T. Danishpazhuh, *Fihrist-i Kitabkhanih-i Markazi-yi Danish-gal-i Tehran*, vol. 9, Tehran 1340/1961, pp. 1077-1078. On *Sarih al-Milk* see Baba Safari, *Ardabil dar Gudhargah-i Tarikh*, vol. 2, Tehran 1353/1974, pp. 211-13, 282-87.

⁸ Apart from *Haft Akhtar* and the three titles given above (n.2), they are *Dawhat al-Azhar* and *Rawdat al Sifat*, both belonging to the third quintet; *Majnun-o Leyli*, *A'in-i Iskandari*, and *Mazhar al-Asrar* from the first quintet, and *Jowhar-i Fard* of the second quintet.

has a fixed frame of narrative and leaves no room for the poets' own imagination to invent a new plot or influence the outcome, the Haft Peykar of Nizami affords the imitator the freedom of altering any details, inserting new elements, dropping whole sections, or/and creating totally new stories of his own imagination. Haft Peykar had earlier served Amir Khusrau in designing his superb Hasht Bihisht in which the Indian master managed to keep a perfect balance between the original model and his independence of creative writing.

'Abdi Big thus had access to two perfect models, Haft Peykar and Hasht Bihisht, and has borrowed from both, though more from the latter. His closer dependence on Amir Khusrau is a fact supported by numerous evidences of structure, style and the central stories of the two works.

Structurally, Haft Akhtar is the exact copy of the Hasht Bihisht. Like Hasht Bihisht, it drops the semi-historical parts of the Haft Peykar which deal with the early life and upbringing of the poem's protagonist, the Sasanian King Bahram-i Gur (420-438), and his attempts later in his reign at establishing justice in his kingdom. These portions claim substantial space before and after the seven core tales in Nizami's Haft Peykar. Their deletion has resulted in a simplification of the poem, stripping it from two essential stages in the natural development of the prince, designed by Nizami with the purpose of demonstrating the rise and fall of all worldly power.⁹ Like Amir Khusrau, 'Abdi Big intends to write a purely fictitious romance without feeling relevant to frame it with a pseudo-historical narrative. The length of the two poems, if we detract the 76 lines of Amir Khusrau's admonition addressed to his daughter 'Afifa, is almost exactly equal: Hasht Bihisht consists of 3268 couplets, Haft Akhtar of 3270 couplets.¹⁰

'Abdi Big expresses his particular attachment to Amir Khusrau in several occasions. He does mention the name of Nizami along with Amir Khusrau a number of times.¹¹ As for their works he mentions the Hasht Bihisht, but not the Haft Peykar.¹² The following statement made in his A 'in-i Iskandari, reveals the extent of his dependence on Amir Khusrau as well as the kind of material he is eager to borrow:

[If you want to hear a summary of his (Alexander's) deeds],
This was just a listing of news about him.
But if you want to hear the story in details,
Read the noble poem of Nizami.

⁹ Haft Peykar, ed. by Hellmut Ritter and Jan Rypka, Istanbul 1934, pp. 2-111 and 263-303.

¹⁰ For Hasht Bihisht the references are to Maulana Sayyid Sulayman Ashraf edition, Aligarh 1918. For Haft Akhtar, Rahimov edition, Moscom 1974, has been used. I have greatly benefited from Rahimov's introduction. Line 3265 'Abdi Big says that his poem is 3544 distiches long, but the manuscript used for the edition contains 3270 distiches.

¹¹ Haft Akhtar, lines 285, 3155, and 3164.

¹² Ibid., line 3242. Only in his short prose introduction in which he talks about the meter of his poem, does he mention Haft Peykar twice by name.

[As for myself, I am pleased with Amir Khusrau's style;
It has set fire to my heart].¹³

Other evidences of 'Abdi Big's close leaning on Amir Khusrau are very similar statements found in parallel places of the two poems. An obvious example is the following line:

*Kunam awwal bi nuktaha-yi gharib
fasl fasl in kitab-ra tartib,*¹⁴

which differs from the following line of Amir Khusrau in the change of only one word:

*Kunam awwal bi harfha-yi gharib
nuktaha-yi kitab-ra tartib.*¹⁵

As for the tales told by the seven ladies which form the core and essential part of all three works, there is no doubt that 'Abdi Big has relied more on Amir Khusrau and derived more from the Hasht Bihisht than from the Haft Peykar. But there are also tales or motives of tales in Haft Akhtar which are either the creations of 'Abdi Big's own imagination or perhaps borrowed from other sources not yet investigated. In the following analysis the focus is mainly on his borrowings from the Hasht Bihisht with only occasional inclusion of the Haft Peykar.

Before the seven central tales begin, all three poets cite the famous episode of Bahram and his beloved slave girl on a hunting trip. It is actually due to its inclusion that Amir Khusrau felt justified substituting Hasht (=eight) for Haft (=seven) in the title. This is the only story which originates in the Shahnamih. Azadih, as Firdowsi calls the girl, asks Bahram, who is eager to demonstrate his skill in archery, to turn a male deer into a female one, a female deer into a male one and then to pin with an arrow the former's hoof through his ear to his head.¹⁶ Nizami and Amir Khusrau both borrow this tale from Firdowsi. Fitna in Haft Peykar and Dilaram in Hasht Bihisht each ask Bahram for only one part of the same performance. Fitna wants Bahram to pin an on ager's hoof and ear to its head with an arrow, whereas Dilaram goes for the second part of the feat, that is, the transformation of the male deer into a female one and visa versa. 'Abdi Big, however, has changed the motif into a new one: in his poem Nahid challenges Bahram first to shoot a bird in flight and then send the dead body high up in the air with a second arrow before

¹³ *Bi ijmal agar bishnovi kar-i u
hamin ast fihrist-i akhbar-i u
Bi tafsil agar khwahi in dastan
zi nazm-i sharif-i Nizami bikhwan.
Mara tarz-i Khusrow khosh uftada ast.
az an dar dilam atash uftada ast.*

A'in-i Iskandari, Moscow 1977, lines 711-13

¹⁴ Haft Akhtar, p. 52, l. 340.

¹⁵ Hasht Bihisht, p. 24, l. 14.

¹⁶ Shahnameh, Beroukhim edition, vol. 7, Tehran 1314/1935, pp. 2085-87.

it hits the ground. Azadih, representing, one is tempted to say, the straight character of Firdowski himself, calls Bahram's performance cruel and the infliction of such pain on the innocent deer inhumane.¹⁷ For this honesty she pays with her life on the spot. In the three later works the girl escapes the death punishment and later regains the favor of the King through an unusual feat of her own. The anecdote of Nizami, illustrated in countless Persian miniatures, describing how the girl, through daily exercise, has gained the skill and strength for lifting and carrying an ox over 60 steps up to the tower room of the house, shows a touch of humor.¹⁸ In *Hasht Bihisht* the exercise of musical miracles by the girl who has learned to put desert beasts to sleep and to awaken them with the help of different melodies, reveals Amir Khusrau's well-known knowledge of music.¹⁹ The scheme devised by 'Abdi Big is based on a mechanical trick. By making use of magnetic power, Nahid causes an idol to bow before Bahram who otherwise is used to pay it a daily visit and homage.²⁰ 'Abdi Big's device may imply a mocking hint at King Bahram's non-Islamic religion, but still lacks the charm of Amir Khusrau's very romantic design which, moreover, indirectly expresses affection for the wild animal and condemns the hunter's cruelty.

The poets next describe events which lead to the marriage of Bahram with the seven princesses. According to *Haft Peykar*, Bahram has seen their portraits earlier in his life painted in the niches of a chamber which must remain locked to everyone but the young prince. Thus Bahram, as a king, has long since anticipated the occasion at which he himself would initiate steps to find and marry them.²¹ Amir Khusrau and 'Abdi Big both demystify the story by presenting Bahram as totally unaware of the existence of the seven ladies and being exclusively given to hunting pleasures. They present the construction of the seven domes and the courting of the seven ladies for Bahram as an stratagem planned by his minister Nu'man and executed behind his back with the purpose of luring him away from constant hunting and attracting him back to the life in court.²² The *Haft Peykar* version is provided with a deeper philosophical concern according to Nizami, Bahram is in search of a way out of the dead end of the physical life. Every element in the structural frame of the seven stories, including the original lands of the seven ladies, the choice of each dome with its specific color for each one of them, the day of the week on which Bahram pays visit to each one, and the correspondence of the clime and the day and the color of their respective planets, all are calculated towards the goal of achieving a cosmic harmony among the interrelated causes of corruption and decay which would exclude the possibility of any discord from the elemental world and would consequently render human life eternal. Nizami closes his masterpiece with a powerful demonstration of the futility of such struggles against God's cosmic order. One day,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2087, 1.194. "This is not a human deed, she replied. You are no man; you have the spirit of a demon." *The Epic of the Kings*, transl. by Reuben Levy, London 1973, p. 300.

¹⁸ *Haft Peykar*, pp. 87-99.

¹⁹ *Hasht Bihisht*, pp. 33-48.

²⁰ *Haft Akhtar*, pp. 55-66.

²¹ *Haft Peykar*, pp. 59-62.

²² *Hasht Bihisht*, pp. 48-55; *Haft Akhtar*, pp. 67-69.

while forcefully chasing an onager, King Bahram suddenly disappears from the summit of power into the abyss of death by entering into a cave in which none of his companions is able to find even a trace of his body.²³ Amir Khusrau and 'Abdi Big likewise close their poems with a brief account of Bahram's sudden disappearance in the cave. But in spite of the nearly identical ending, their versions are less serious and gloomy in the impression they impart. Their versions do not reduce the enormous pleasure produced by the tales of the seven princesses who are filled with accounts of sensual love, colorful descriptions of spring time and music, and the joys of youth. The tragic death of Bahram follows, in their poems, almost immediately upon the seventh and last tale, King Bahram's life and reign in themselves are of no interest to them. This lack of substance and depth may be also the reason for altering Nizami's choice of climes which in Haft Peykar are loaded with astrological implications. 'Abdi Big feels a particular freedom in abandoning the climes which Nizami had carefully borrowed from the old geographical system. The native countries of the girls in Hasht Bihisht correspond to those of Haft Peykar. They are Iranian, Indian, Chinese, Khwarazmian, Arabian, Byzantine and Slavic. 'Abdi Big opts for only three non-Iranian lands of Kashmir, China, and Byzantine, plus the Iranian cities of Samarqand, Shiraz and Isfahan, and the Iranian province of Khurasan.

As for the stories themselves, a careful examination of the 21 tales narrated by the three poets reveals that Amir Khusrau has borrowed his Wednesday tale, after changing it to suit his own taste by dropping some elements and adding or altering a few others, from Nizami's Saturday tale. For the background and origin of his other six tales a search will have to be made particularly in Indian folk tales and legends. As for 'Abdi Big, three of his seven tales owe their general skeleton plus a large amount of scattered details to the Hasht Bihisht, with one important element from the Haft Peykar appearing in only one of them. These three stories will be discussed at some length later in this article. A fourth story of 'Abdi Big is partly his own, partly borrowed from the Haft Peykar.²⁴ Of the remaining three stories two are only thinly linked with the Haft Peykar and Hasht Bihisht,²⁵ and one of them, that of "The Day-thief and the Night-thief," told by the princess of Kashmir of Saturday, is entirely his own with no parallel in either the Haft Peykar or the Hasht Bihisht.²⁶ In this tale a series of fast moving, humorous little acts are

²³ Nizami closes the first part of the Haft Peykar, before the central part begins, with the following lines:

*Gar-chih zin guna bar-kashid hisar
Jan naburd az ajal bi akhir-i kar.
Ey Nizami zi gulshani bugriz
kih gulash khar gasht o kharash tiz.
Bi chunin mulk az in du ruzih maqam
'aqibat bin chin-guna shud Bahram.*

Heft Peiker, p. 120, ls. 24-26.

²⁴ The Friday story, Haft Akhtar, pp. 190-210; Wednesday story, Heft Peiker, pp. 196-221.

²⁵ They are the Tuesday story, Hasht Bihisht, pp. 117-136, and the Wednesday story, Haft Akhtar, pp. 140-162.

²⁶ Haft Akhtar, pp. 214-233.

connected in a delightful plot which serves the purpose of displaying the poet's inventiveness and narrative style. The stage is removed from the enchanting surroundings of the majority of stories and is placed rather in the 16th century bazaars and homes of the Safavid Persia.

In the following an analysis of those tales of the Haft Akhtar which originate in the Hasht Bihisht and an appraisal of his success or failure in this literary enterprise will be offered.

The first tale common to both poems is the story of a goldsmith who falls prey to the temptation of wealth and is unwittingly betrayed by his wife. In the version of the Hasht Bihisht he constructs a golden elephant for the king and in the process steals 100 men's weight of gold from what has been entrusted to him for this work of art. Jealous rivals are eager to prove his lack of honesty, but are not able to produce the necessary evidence. They need to know how to lift and measure the weight of the elephant in order to show that it is lighter than the alleged weight by 100 men. Finally, by fooling the artist's wife through a cunning woman, they unlock the secret method which they persuade the king to employ. As a result the goldsmith is found guilty and imprisoned by the ruler in the inaccessible top chamber of a tower where he is expected to starve. However, by using some tricks and mechanical devices the clever goldsmith succeeds to pull up his wife into the cell while simultaneously he himself gets down and escapes. The king learns about this skillful manipulation and forgives both him and his wife.²⁷ 'Abdi Big's corresponding tale is different in a number of decisive points. His goldsmith is honest, but not quite as clever as his counterpart in Hasht Bihisht. His wife instead is not a fool like the former woman. Here the goldsmith entrusts the amount of gold which he has received as compensation for his work, to a money changer to be kept as savings for their old days. Having become old and blind, he one day sends his wife to the money changer to retrieve their gold. The money changer denies their claim and instead suggests to enter into a love affair with her. She promises him her favors and invites him to her house for the next morning. She then goes to seek the help of the Shaykh al-Islam, receives a declaration of love from him and invites him for the next morning as well. The same demand is put to her by the Qadi, the Mufti, and the police chief, shahna, all of whom she promises the desired love affair next morning at her own place. Next morning the lovers one by one start to appear. With the arrival of each new guest she hides the former one in a closet. The last one to arrive is the money changer whom she cleverly leads into a confession about the gold. The four other men hear the confession and minutes later must appear as witnesses before the ruler who in the meantime has been informed about the whole affair, and receive their due punishment.²⁸

²⁷ Hasht Bihisht, pp. 75-94.

²⁸ Haft Akhtar, pp. 72-90. Hypocrisy, dishonesty, and other immoral practices were not a novelty in 16. century Persia, of course. Evidence of all sorts of corruption abounds in literary works of every people and at all times. Persian Poetry is certainly replete with reports, complaints, and satirical comments about such foul practices.

As you see, the story of 'Abdi Big is a satirical comedy involving three representatives of the religious establishment, the head of the city police, and a businessman, all confronting a spirited and witty woman who is determined to disclose their falsehood and evil aspirations. The five scenes at the homes of the five reputable men who pretend to observe the laws of Shari'a to the last letter but declare to be dying for a married woman, are depicted extremely well with a genuine sense of humor. The original version of the *Hasht Bihisht* has also humorous moments, particularly when the goldsmith's wife finds herself being pulled up into the prison cell while her husband, the prisoner, glides down, reaches the ground and is free. 'Abdi Big's scandalizing the hypocritical defenders of religion is likely to be based on realistic conditions of the society in which the poet was living which he in his way as ridiculed and criticized. Nevertheless, a number of the motifs used in this story like, for example, the hiding of an unlawful lover somewhere in the house at a critical moment, are quite old and widespread in many literary traditions.

The second tale which 'Abdi Big has borrowed from Amir Khusrau is the Tuesday story told by the Chinese princess. It is about a young prince who travels to Bengal in the company of four devoted friends: a merchant, a carpenter, a gardener, and a canal-digger. In Bengal he falls in love with a girl whom the king is keeping hidden away from the glance of longing eyes. The four friends use their money and practical skills and succeed in fulfilling the prince's desire. The first contact between the lovers is established by the gardener with the help of a woman flower seller who delivers flowers to the girl and thus has access to her. The next step is to contrive a way for lovers to meet each other. The canal-digger cuts an underground canal which connects the dwelling of the prince to the residence of the girl and leading up to the top room of the tower where she is guarded as in a cage. The final stage before the take-off is to invent the means for conducting her down from the tower room without being noticed. For this purpose the carpenter designs some special, complicated mechanics. When all preparations have been made and they are ready to steal the girl and leave the kingdom, they decide to play a final, very amusing trick on the jealous king. By a display of their appetizing riches they entice him into attending a lavish banquet in their quarters. Among the beauties serving him at the feast the king finds his own mistress and, unable to believe the reassurances of his host that the suspected girl is a different person, he rushes to her chamber only to find her deeply asleep in her bed. By the time he reaches the banquet the girl, having used the secret canal, is, of course already there. This bizarre comedy is repeated for seven nights. And when the hosts finally inform the king of their intention to confide their girls and riches to his good care before imparting on a risky sea voyage, he is more than eager to accept the charge. Only too late does he realize how they have fooled him and taken off with the girl and their sumptuous possessions.²⁹ The seven nights of feasting, with the conceited king being humiliated and mocked, are the highlights of Amir Khusrau's narrative style. His descriptions of the riches and the dazzling beauty of the attending women are extremely elaborate and testify, perhaps, to personal observations he may have made at some royal celebrations of the time.

²⁹ *Hasht Bihisht*, pp. 111-137.

In his Monday story 'Abdi Big has taken the early part of the above story with several alterations in the initial part. The four companions of the prince, who is forced to flee his land, are a glassmaker, a painter, a sailor, and a carpenter. The choice of these artisans instead of the former ones is prompted by the difference of tricks they are going to play in order to steal the girl. The ruler, instead of being the girl's lover, is her father. For the sake of mediation between the prince and the girl the poet uses the unlikely and unrealistically the services of a parrot. 'Abdi Big's story ends with the prince returning home and leading a battle against an intruder who had driven him and his father into exile. Before reaching his homeland, however, he has the experience of being made the ruler of another place, an episode which 'Abdi Big has borrowed from Amir Khusrau's Wednesday tale and clumsily inserted here.³⁰ 'Abdi Big's version, in contrast to his model, is lacking in a unifying theme. Neither the first portion of the story nor its closing third portion have a logical relevance to the central part. It does not develop a linear progression of the events and misses the climax which Amir Khusrau has achieved in the amusing final banquets and the king's dying of jealousy and grief. Technically speaking, the substitution of the father for the lover is already a severe mistake which makes the reader think that 'Abdi Big is likely to have missed the point, for it is absolutely abnormal for a father to virtually imprison his daughter and treat her in that fashion. In 'Abdi Big's version the minor pieces are not linked cohesively either. There is no originality and little indeed, if any, charm in it. The stylistic competence of 'Abdi Big, however, in terms of vocabulary, rhetorical devices, and elegant expressions can provoke the admiration of only those who are able to enjoy the beauty of his verse in its original Persian.³¹

The failure of 'Abdi Big to reach the level of excellence set by Amir Khusrau appears even more drastically in his Thursday story by the lady from Isfahan which is, in its overall frame, an imitation of the Hasht Bihisht Thursday story by the Arabian lady. 'Abdi Big makes an almost identical start, then changes its turns and twists in the middle, and closes with a happy end similar but far inferior to his model. Noteworthy in 'Abdi Big's version is the inclusion of several anecdotal elements and motifs taken from the Haft Peykar.

It is the story of a simple minded king betrayed by his wife and his minister who have an affair with each other. The king's son from a deceased wife learns about the affair. The minister and the woman accuse the son, as in many older stories, to have attempted a love affair with his step-mother. They succeed in arousing the anger of the king who decides to banish the prince without even giving him a chance to see his father and defend himself. After a series of adventurous experiences, he returns incognito and the second part of the story consisting of several amusing acts aiming at disclosing the treachery of the step-mother and her lover starts.

Like with the previous story also in this imitation 'Abdi Big has completely missed the target. A cursory glance at the main sections of his story reveals both lack of imagination and inability to organize the borrowed material in a logically coherent and

³⁰ Haft Akhtar, ls. 1274-1290; Hasht Bihisht, pp. 160-161. 'Abdi Big has used this episode a second time in the Tuesday story, pp. 133-34, ls. 1635-1643.

³¹ Haft Akhtar, pp. 94-114.

harmonious whole. According to both Nizami and Amir Khusrau, Thursday is governed by Jupiter and the color assigned to it is the sandal color. 'Abdi Big opts for ash grey and accordingly names the prince in question "Sanjab" which actually means a (grey) squirrel. For seven nights in a row Sanjab dreams of a beautiful girl lying in grey ashes. He sends a messenger to a hermit for interpretation of the dream and advice. The hermit knows that the girl is the daughter of a ruler, loves squirrel furs, "Sanjab", and lives in a fortress the barriers and gates of which may be broken and opened by using a certain magic formula. The messenger of Sanjab, instead of conveying the Hermit's directive to his master, decides to try his own fortune with the legendary beauty. He loads an elephant with squirrel furs, hiding among them the written instruction of the hermit for removing the obstacles and entering the castle of the girl. Fate, however, intervenes and provides for a storm which drowns him in the sea. But the elephant, as by a miracle, reaches the shore, even his load undamaged. At this point in the plot Sanjab discovers the love affair between his step-mother and the minister and is driven out of his homeland. However, unlike the poet who presents the adulterers as responsible for Sanjab's banishment - and indeed they are the apparent instruments of his fate - Sanjab himself is happy and determined to leave and pursue the object of his dreams. According to the poet:

The desire to travel had robbed his heart,
Moment for moment joy increased in his heart.³²

After wandering for a while the helpless prince reaches a town and meets a hunter who knows about the fur loving girl and encourages him with both money and good guidance to continue his travel. Sanjab follows the well - wisher's advice and in the course, small wonder, somehow gets hold of the elephant and heads toward the fortress. With no effort and no achievement of his own, in labor or intelligence, he reaches the destination, removes the magical obstacles and enters the castle. Overjoyed by the bribe of an elephant of squirrel furs, the girl and her father accept Sanjab to become her husband. The conclusion of the tale is now obvious: Sanjab marries the princess and after a while succeeds her father to the throne. He then leads a campaign against the territory of his father, lays siege on the town, discloses the scandalous affair before the surprised eyes of his father, and happily reveals his own identity. By dropping the fantastic comedy at the end of the original story, 'Abdi Big has sealed his defeat in the contest. The episode of the girl in the fortress who tests the skill and intelligence of her suitors, is a very poor replica of Nizami's Tuesday tale, stripped of its hard, challenging riddles which, after nearly 800 years, have tempted at least two European Scholars to try to solve.³³ In no other story has 'Abdi Big fared so poorly. By contrast, the second part of the tale in *Hasht Bihisht* presents, at least in my judgment, the masterpiece of the entire work and certainly deserves to be summarized at this point.

³² Haft Akhtar, p. 172, l. 2210 :

*Arezu-yi safar rubudih dilash,
Dam bi dam khurrami fuzudih dilash*

³³ Albert Wesselsky, "Quellen und Nachwirkungen der Haft Paikar", *Der Islam*, 22, pp. 106-119; Fritz Meier, "Turandot in Persien", *ZDMG*, 95, pp. 1-27, and "Nachtrag", *Ibid.*, pp. 415-421.

The prince protagonist of *Hasht Bihisht*, Ram, after being banished from the court, makes the acquaintance of three men who feel sympathy for his plight and offer him three gifts. First a collyrium, which, if applied to the eyes, turns the person invisible to others. Second, a magic formula with the help of which Ram will be able to put to sleep anyone he wants to. These two gifts, i.e., the drug and the magic formula, are known from many folktales. The third gift is the services of a benevolent demon that Ram secures through a year long concentrated effort from the engraved picture on a stone in Egypt. On the shoulders of this demon he instantly flies back to the town where his father rules. Up to this point the events serve to prepare the stage for a marvelous comedy well suited for an operatic performance. By a series of successive disasters inflicted upon the treacherous minister and turning life upside down at the court, the invisible Ram tries to persuade him, the minister, to repent and change his immoral behavior. At Ram's instruction the demon starts the operation by slapping the minister who cannot escape the blows of the invisible hand even in bed. Disguised as an old woman Ram approaches the minister and pretends to know the remedy. But the minister must submit to a humiliating condition: he must be branded on his bottom. After a while Ram starts invisibly visiting the harem girls in their beds. At first each one keeps the disgraceful secret to herself. But, soon it becomes public, and the minister turns for help to the old woman, alias Ram. He/she suggests that the intruder is using a collyrium which one may render neutral with smoke. At the doors of all bedrooms of the girls, he/she suggests, guards should be posted with the instruction to produce smoke as soon as they get aware of the thief's arrival, and arrest him. But the minister himself, recommends Ram, must stay away from the scene. That night it is the turn of the minister's own daughter to be visited. The instruction is followed and smoke produced. When Ram's face turns visible, his prey, that is the daughter of the minister, falls in love with him. Before getting arrested by the guards, Ram puts them to sleep with the help of the magic formula and shaves their beards and moustaches which is tantamount to masculine dishonourment. Following this tumultuous confusion, Ram expects to see a change in the minister's behavior. The latter, however, unmolested for a while, reassumes his affair. This time Ram carries off the minister's daughter to his own quarter and gives the terrified girl the assurance that he is a human prince and determined to marry her. Next day she is returned to her father. The next act is a punishment again to be inflicted upon the culprit himself. Ram encourages a tough ruffian to approach the king and on the evidence of the branded stamps on the bottom of the minister claim him as his own runaway slave. The entire fortune of the minister would then belong to him. The scandalous plot works and the minister helplessly gives in. But his embarrassed friends buy him back from the alleged owner and he is reinstated in his position by the king whose stupidity is matched by the incurable vice of his minister alone. The final recourse left for Ram is to produce the evidence of the crime before the eyes of the king. He puts the two lovers, while they are engaged with each other, to magic sleep and the demon carried the bed to the open court. Here the story ends with Ram revealing his true identity and his marriage with the daughter of the minister.³⁴

³⁴ *Hasht Bihisht*, pp. 168-191.

Before offering some closing remarks on 'Abdi Big's poetic achievement, I would like to emphasize that the subject, far from being exhausted, has been only opened for further analytical studies. There remains obviously a great deal to be said about the individual characters and about the background and quality of each story, and about the degree of success or failure of each poet. The present study has the limited scope of examining only one of 'Abdi Big's poems, the Haft Akhtar, in its relation to the Hasht Bihisht. It should be kept in mind that he is one of the stars in the orbit of Nizami, discovered only recently.

The above analysis of the three stories for which 'Abdi Big relies mainly on the Hasht Bihisht, demonstrates first of all that the Safavide poet is not a splendid imitator. Imitation by definition restrains the imitator from the free unfoldment of his own talents and can seldom surpass the quality of the work imitated. My second impression is that he is not at home in the fanciful world of demons, spirits, and magical transformations. It is in these sort of tales that he fails to display originality and ingenious maneuvering. His two successful stories, that of "The Day-thief and the Night-thief" and "The Goldsmith" which are excellently well planned and executed, derive their elements entirely from the realities of his environment and social life. He always gets lost in the complex of fanciful creatures and situations, but feels at home when dealing with human creations of his own imagination.

'Abdi Big himself seems to have been aware, or he may have heard others remarking, that his Haft Akhtar is inferior to the Hasht Bihisht. Near the end of the poem in a defensive tone he mildly states:

This edifice which is saturated with perfume
is not inferior to the edifice of the Hasht Bihisht.³⁵

'Abdi Big is very likely thinking in terms of linguistic perfection, the use of well-thought metaphors, similes, hyperboles, the graceful flow of elegant expressions, the captivating beauty of descriptions, the choice of both appropriate and poetically melodious words, and other rhetorical qualities of which his poet no doubt abounds.³⁶

³⁵ Haft Akhtar. p. 244, l. 3242 :

*In bina k-amadih 'abir-sirisht,
nist kam az bina-yi Hasht Bihisht.*

³⁶ Qasimi Gunabadi, a poet contemporary with 'Abdi Big (d. 982/1574), in his mathnavi called 'Umdat al Ash'ar, showers 'Abdi Big with expressions of highest praise :

*Kalamash-ra kih nazil z-asiman ast,
agar ilham khwanam ja-yi an ast.*

It is proper if I call revelation his words which have descended from Heaven.
See A. Gulchin-i Ma'ani, Mahnamih-i Vahid, 3/1345/p. 342.

However, he seems to be unaware of the technical requirements of a good story. In no manual of Persian poetics does he find definitions which have been known to Western poets since the days of Aristotle. Moreover, 'Abdi Big lived at a time when poetry was not in great demand in Iran. Many Iranian poets were seeking a new home in India. The closing chapter of the Haft Akhtar, 123 distiches long, offers valuable insight into the world of his feelings as a lonely poet who misses appreciation and support. It seems proper to quote a few lines of this complaint:

People have agreed among themselves
 That for poetry no fineness is being left.
 All that has been worth saying (old poets) have said,
 All (pearls) worth being pierced they have pierced.
 What should anyone say that pleases the hearts?
 Who has decided what meanings are worth of?
 No other poems will be famous
 As long as there are the poems of (Amir) Khusrau and Jami.
 (True) poetry is what Nizami has composed,
 Pearls of meaning just those which Jami has pierced...
 Living poets are of little value,
 A poet is he who is dead.
 As only past poets are valued (high)
 (Present) poets are happy to die.³⁷

Under such unfavorable conditions 'Abdi Big deserves sympathy as well as understanding. His modesty is a winning quality. The customary self-exalting expressions are infrequent and appear in self defense or in accordance with a routine convention. He only timidly asserts his rights to recognition by an audience that considers the poetic splendor sealed by classical poets of pre-Safavid times. His claim, justified or not, is certainly based on stylistic and linguistic qualities which supplied the traditional criteria for judging the quality of a poem. In this regard 'Abdi Big's poem, the Haft Akhtar, is an enjoyable work adding to the wealth of Persian Poetry and deserving separate, full studies.

³⁷ Haft Akhtar, p. 239, ls. 3160-64 and 3171-72 :

*Khalq ba khwish dada-and qarar
 kih sukhan-ra namanda ast 'ayar.
 Gufta-and an-chin gultani buda-st,
 sufta-and an-chih suftani buda-st.
 Kas chih guyad kih dil-pasand buvad ?
 Qadr-i ma'na kih gufta chand buvad ?
 Nabuvad shi'r-i digari nami
 ta buvad shi'r-i Khusrau-o Jami...
 Qimat-i sha'iran'i zinda kam ast,
 sha'ir an kas buvad kih dar 'adam ast.
 Hast chun qadr(-i ?) sha'ir-i madi,
 shuda sha'ir bi marg-i khud radi.*

