

# ABBAS



a verse play by colin john holcombe: ocaseo press 2014

# Abbas

by

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2014

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by Colin John Holcombe

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## HISTORICAL NOTE

*Abbas* opens in 1593 at Qazvin, the early Safavid capital of Iran, where the three-day puppet king, enthroned to evade an astrological prediction, was deposed and shot. Thereafter the scene shifts between the courts of Iran, Spain, Hungary and England, to close in 1658, when the widow of Sir Robert Sherley has the remains of her husband removed from Iran and interred in the church of Santa Maria della Scala in Rome.

Abbas I, rightly called the Great, was the most successful ruler of the Iranian Safavid dynasty. He recovered the territories lost to the Ottomans and the Uzbek Khans, strengthened the throne by curbing the powers of the Qizilbash chieftains, bound the monarchy closer to Shi'ite orthodoxy, built a splendid new capital at Isfahan, and left the country with a prosperity that even the complacent administrations of his successors could not wholly undo.

The gains were achieved against intimidating difficulties. The Safavids were an alliance between local Qizilbash (Turkoman) tribes and the Islamic clergy, which were here Shi'ite rather than Sunni, and suffused moreover with a strong Sufi element of piety, equality and social justice. A fairer society had indeed been promised by the first shah, but gradually left unfulfilled as successive rulers struggled to maintain their ascendancy over rebellious Qizilbash chieftains, divisive Shi'ite sects, and the ever-threatening regional powers. The throne came to Abbas' father by default: a weak man with poor eyesight, he was the compromise figurehead as chieftains battled for power. Abbas was his third son. As ward of a local chieftain, he survived the internecine warfare that murdered his mother and older brother, and caused the death of the second son in mysterious circumstances. Abbas was placed the throne by Murshid Quli Khan, but soon seized power for himself, murdering the kingmaker and imposing more aggressive policies. Many rivals to power, secular and clerical, were despatched as Abbas gradually strengthened his hold on the country, building up an army of ghulam (i.e. Islam converts) soldiers and administrators that were fiercely loyal to him rather than the local powers. Immense patience, training and strong leadership enabled Abbas to defeat the Ottomans in 1605, to subdue the

turncoat provinces of Azerbaijan and wrest control from the Uzbek Khans who had captured Mashad and eastern parts of the country. Abbas modernized his army with new techniques and advisers, often from Europe, and continually sought alliances against the regional powers: with Spain, Moscovy and Italy against the Ottomans, and with the Mughals against the Uzbek Khans. All players were unfortunately as wily as Abbas was himself, and success was only provisional and intermittent.

The dark side of these shining achievements was the shah's oppressive rule. Abbas was a man of unprepossessing appearance, slight in stature but energetic, with arms, as many noticed, more becoming of an artisan than the ruler of the proud Safavid dynasty of Persia. Indeed Abbas often wore plain clothes to mix with the populace, happily sharing in their pursuits and interests, yet he was not a man of the people, but an absolute ruler. Tradesmen who short-changed their disguised shah came to an unpleasant end, as did nobles who imagined derogatory remarks made in the privacy of their homes went unreported. There was no appeal against the shah's decisions, and the governor who hesitated to execute his son at the shah's command would be executed by his son, or retribution would fall on both. Abbas never felt secure. He kept his sons away from power, and even then, on the flimsiest of pretexts, largely imaginary, he had his eldest son executed and in turn the other two blinded and rendered incapable of rule. His choice for successor fell on his grandson, Prince Safi, a cruel and introverted character, and the older pattern repeated itself. Nonetheless, the country was ably administered by ghulam, Tajik and Qizilbash officials, who kept the country prosperous till its capital fell to invading Afghans in 1722.

Abbas never found the successor he wanted, however, and his territorial gains were soon undone. Qandahar was handed back to the Mughals, and the Euphrates provinces reincorporated in the Ottoman empire. The Sufi movements continued to plague the administration, and numerous uprisings were savagely repressed. Indeed all the characters, including Mir Damad, die disappointed of their larger hopes, and even the splendid Shah Jehan ended his days a prisoner of the usurping Aurangzeb. The play, then, is not about success but faith, what drives the protagonists to look beyond what is given us in this earthly existence.

My material is drawn from David Blow's popular *Shah Abbas: The Ruthless King Who Became an Iranian Legend*, and the more academic *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* by Andrew J. Newman (both I.B. Tauris, 2009). Neither was quite sufficient for my purposes and I apologise for any factual shortcomings in this recreation (most notably in Pietro della Valle's son and Muslim theology). Readers drawn to the creative genius of a fascinating country will find the bibliographies in both books provide suggestions for much fruitful reading.

More accessible for the background are *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes* by Tamim Ansary (Public Affairs, 2010), *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* by Titus Burckhardt (World of Islam Festival, 1976), *Atlas of the Islamic World Since 1500* by Francis Robinson (Phaidon, 1982) and *Islam: Art and Architecture* by Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Könemann, 2004).



# CHARACTERS

Shah Abbas: Shah of Persia 1588-1629.

Prince Safi: Son to Abbas: executed 1614.

Prince Muhammad: Son to Abbas: blinded 1621.

Vizier to Shah Abbas.

Zainab Begum: Aunt to Abbas.

Yusufi Tarkishduz: Quiver-maker to Abbas: shot 1593.

Sheikh Bahai: Theologian, architect and astrologer: 1546-1621.

Mir Damad. Sufi theologian: died 1631.

Aqa Riza: Court painter and calligrapher.

Iskandar Beg Munshi: Governor and court chronicler.

Zainal Beg: Iranian ambassador to Europe and then to Mughals.

Sir Anthony Sherley: English adventurer: 1565-1635.

Sir Robert Sherley: English adventurer: 1581-1628.

Lady Teresa Sherley: Circassian wife (m. 1608) of Sir Robert Sherley.

Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor: reigned 1576-1612.

King Charles I of England: reigned 1625-1649.

Pietro della Valle: Italian traveller to the middle east and Persia: 1586-1652.

Sir Thomas Herbert. Accompanied English embassy in 1628.

Sir Dodmore Cotton: English ambassador to Persia: died 1628.



Dick Williams: interpreter in Sir Robert Sherley's entourage.

Shah Jehan: Mughal emperor: ruled India 1627-58.

Miguel della Valle: son of the Italian traveller Pietro.

Church Usher.

Officer

Shah's attendants.

# ACT ONE

## Scene One

Shah Abbas, Yusufi Tarkishduz, Vizier: Qazvin 1593

SHAH ABBAS

So tell us how this three-day rule has been,  
with nothing missing from a lavish scene  
of revelry, I hope, where favours sought  
at once with smiling rectitude were brought.

YUSUFI TARKISHDUZ

I answer to my sovereign: well enough.

SHAH ABBAS

Is that our thanks, this all too paltry stuff  
when you, our quiver-maker, decked in silk  
and suchlike jewels and finery should milk  
the heavens of praises.

VIZIER

Lest the want reflect  
10. a lack of courtesy and fond respect.

YUSUFI TARKISHDUZ

I served my purpose and would meet my end  
appropriately, whatever fate may send.

SHAH ABBAS

So what is that, you think? Should you be blessed  
as surly commoner above the rest?

*(Looks at Yusufi, who says nothing.)*

So nothing comes to you at this event?  
Your Sufi master was more eloquent.

*(Again looks at Yusufi, who still says nothing.)*

I could have you tortured till your groans  
should melt the rough-hewn heart of stones.

YUSUFI TARKISHDUZ

No doubt, your majesty. We are but men  
20. who come back likewise to the earth again.

VIZIER

Then tell us of that threatening astral chart  
your Dawash Kusraw cast. Is that the part  
that you espouse, an understudy's role  
to have the prophecy still rendered whole?

YUSUFI TARKISHDUZ

The truth is always further on than thought.

VIZIER

But see: the episode has come to naught:  
unfathomable prophecies the shah would die  
were falsehood only, an unfounded lie.

YUSUFI TARKISHDUZ

God knows our purposes and gives His peace  
30. when all these strivings in this place will cease.  
A world of feints and shadows: no one knows  
how goodness flourishes, or where it goes,  
but yet it blesses hearts and we believe  
persists beyond what court and mosque perceive.

VIZIER

And there we have it, plainly, from the first:

so is the Sufi by his own tongue cursed.

SHAH ABBAS

Have him taken out and cleanly shot  
that no such heresies besmirch this spot.

*(Yusufi marched out.)*

Arrange that Dawish Khusraw's vaults  
40. be found thick-stuffed with wine, and for these faults  
he be condemned, and by a rough-roped thong  
is by the camel slowly dragged along  
until that scrap of shredded body fill  
with horror those who would defy our will.

Scene Two

Shah Abbas, Prince Safi, Sir Anthony and Sir Robert Sherley:  
Isfahan 1598.

SHAH ABBAS

In this you're welcome, both of you, but we  
would know the purpose of this embassy,  
if such it is. You have no papers, nor  
a royal seal for what you prattle for.  
It's vague talk, gentlemen, of arms and trade,  
50. of specious understandings you have made,  
or could have made perhaps with sovereign kings  
of Spain and Italy and England — things  
that seem but premises of blustering plumes.  
Your overture is welcome to us, but assumes  
we do not know how grasping Spain as been  
or how perfidious your English queen.  
How many times have we some treaty made  
to find good offices have been betrayed,  
and for the smallest, temporary advance  
60. your kings have thrown away the greater chance.

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

Your majesty but speaks the sorry truth.  
Our kings so often in their headstrong youth  
have abrogated each new promise made  
and chosen peace within the doubtful shade.  
The Ottomans, however, have no birth  
unlike all other on this startled earth.  
Your royal lands will see them ere too long,  
should you placate them or be strong.

SHAH ABBAS

We've soothed them up till now, and won't provoke  
70. such ugly, warlike and intemperate folk.  
Who'd meet the tiger with mere sticks and stone  
must find good refuge or should leave alone.

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

The Turks are powerful, true, and organized,  
have taken Rum and Athens and that most prized  
of islands, home of our great Templar knights.  
Though he who crosses them with giants fights  
they're not invincible, as you have shown;  
and what you beat them with is what you own.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

It is a world now waiting, majesty,  
80. and if the levelled towns of Hungary  
are not rebuilt, and wasted fields may yet  
appear with whitewashed mosque and minaret,  
the Habsburg house of Austria has since  
picked up the challenge, and its warlike prince  
has made reconquest of his eastern lands  
his binding word. For him ten thousand hands  
pull hard on galley oars across a sea  
that yet regains its Christian sovereignty.  
The Turk is vigorous but can't afford

90. the stalwart actions of a two-edged sword.  
When threatened east and west he must make peace.

SHAH ABBAS

And who's fund this sudden, vast increase  
of men and weaponry? What do we say  
to all our ministers who'd urge delay?

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

It's not more men you need, or weaponry,  
or even ships if you don't hold the sea,  
but all used wisely, soldiers drilled and trained  
in opportunities those arms have gained.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Assuredly it is a knowledge learned  
100. in constant battle, and with hardship earned.

SHAH ABBAS

So ask my eldest son here what he'd do,  
for he's the hostage wanted, held in lieu  
for our abiding by the treaties made  
we can't accommodate nor yet evade.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

What does your gracious highness see as best  
since on your shoulders must the hard yoke rest?

PRINCE SAFI

If there be years where I must pine away  
from country, kinsfolk and the warmth of day,  
that will I do, and gladly, that the king  
110. may find me circumspect in everything.

SHAH ABBAS

Circumspect be dammed. We want your views.  
Comply or fight the Ottomans: you choose.

PRINCE SAFI

My sovereign father, there's another course  
that's neither harmony nor yet divorce.  
Some other person could be sent, and in my place  
present a vaguely similar and specious face.  
What few ambassadors recall could be  
an actor groomed to look and act like me.

SHAH ABBAS

By all the prophets, what a fool I've got.  
120. We want no subterfuges. Go or not?

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

Some illness could be feigned, your majesty,  
a year or two, no more, but then we'd see  
if Emperor or Rome, or courts of Spain  
might yet agree.

SHAH ABBAS

To what? What is the gain  
in such alliances? They want no cause  
for yet more costly and exhausting wars.  
Indeed our messengers received short shrift  
130. whatever promises, or royal gift.

PRINCE SAFI

Our court considers wars, however made,  
130. should be affordable and well repaid.

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

You have your silks, I think, that more than pay  
for armaments if there were not delay  
and confiscations at each Turkish port



that trebles prices more than taxes ought.  
But silks conveyed within a foreign ship  
would hurt the enemy.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

And also strip  
the European powers of reason why  
they'd not agree.

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

In short, it would deny  
important profits to a foreknown foe.  
140. Bohemian enterprise still needs to flow  
though much impeded by the Turk's blockade,  
and Venice certainly relies on trade.  
I say to you, and to your upright son,  
that all is possible. It could be done.

SHAH ABBAS

By whom? By you, the rash adventurer  
as ministers have called you?

SIR ANTHONY SHERLEY

I defer  
to your high majesty's good sense, and hope  
your ministers allow us further scope  
to meet with them, to talk, discuss and pledge  
150. ourselves beyond what easy words allege.

SHAH ABBAS

We ourselves will talk with them, and choose  
the right path through these different views.

Scene Three

Sir Robert Sherley, Lady Teresa Sherley: Isfahan 1608

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

The Shah has now pronounced. My turn to go  
and urge that promises be more than show,  
to fabricate against the Ottomans  
the ties with infidels that Islam bans.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Robert, my new-wed husband, take some care  
of foreign embassies whose flattering air  
must shift and alter what it would be for  
160. as tidings echo back from each new war.  
How firm were pledges of renewed attacks  
but peace came sidling out behind our backs.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

From Emperor, true, but not the Hapsburg court  
where now my brother serves.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

As you have fought  
for Persia here against the Turkish threat,  
and have been gravely wounded, twice, and yet  
he keeps you fretting like a wild horse reined  
with nothing ventured on, and nothing gained.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

That is my brother's doing, vast pretence  
170. that acts contentiously at our expense.  
Outrageously, he makes such puffed-up claims  
that Abbas comes to hate our very names.  
If once he kept me hostage, now it's you  
and my assurances that have to sue.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

You came adventuring, Robert, to this court  
of silks and opulence because it brought,  
the two of you, you said, a larger cause  
that could be found in Europe's misted shores.  
And to this end your brother claimed  
180. wide cognisance of warfare, which he named  
as France and Flanders and the choppy breeze  
that blows across the Caribbean seas.  
Of course such prospects pleased a royal ear  
hemmed in by stalemate wars and rivals here.  
How well he met you with his armoured horse;  
the thousands of warriors, that show of force,  
the crowds, the courtesans, who, sat astride,  
went whooping and cheering on that victory ride.  
I know the shah, and saw that each event  
190. he made to welcome you was also meant  
to further his complicities abroad  
by trade, by common interests, and sword.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Yes, once entangled in my brother's cast,  
you see how dangerously it holds us fast.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

At least you leave a kingdom bound by fear  
where every doorway grows a listening ear.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

In that I think of you, and why we talk  
alone and pausing on this cypress walk  
where no pressed wretch can make his sly report  
200. on wind-blown tattle of our dangerous thought.  
Say naught to family or friends or maid,  
for all, you understand me, can be made  
as treasonous by torture or by lies:  
one hint to fasten on, and future dies.

And when you write, remember all is read,  
so keep it chatter of a pretty head.  
What clothes you wore, what jewels you'll wear  
when next invited to an audience there.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

I have some memory of harem walls  
210. where smiles are bought, and each advancement calls  
on short longevities. I from my birth  
have felt the shah's high shadow here on earth.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

And so with that I take a sad farewell  
of this intoxicating Persian spell  
importunate the more with your blest head.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

As I will hold to all the words you've said,  
and hope a child may yet eventuate  
from our two lives that seem so separate  
by diverse customs that we're hardly one.  
220. Let's pray we live to have a little son:  
my looks, your bravery, so best in both.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

In that, Teresa, I'd be nothing loath,  
but let us wait until events foretell  
which paths are closed to us, and which bode well.

## Scene Four

Shah Abbas, Vizier, Mir Damad and Sheikh Bahai: Isfahan  
1610.

SHAH ABBAS

We thank you for attendances today  
when needs of statecraft kept us much away.  
My friends, my learned friends, whose pondered thoughts  
go on, imperishable, when kings and courts,  
the skilled contrivances of craftsmen's hands,  
230. become as sun-dried mounds in desert sands,  
we view with some concern the unclean souls  
that now are surfacing as fattened voles  
when autumn deluges will flood them out.

SHEIKH BAHAI

The great majority are still devout.

MIR DAMAD

We clerics can advise and lead the way  
but holy scriptures give them words to say.  
(*Abbas glares him.*)

SHEIKH BAHAI

Of course there may be some, a few, who stray  
from one respected, thought-on, narrow way —  
despite our words, to fashion poor attires  
240. as grows the dog-rose into thorny briars.

SHAH ABBAS

Good taxes go to you, you scholars live  
upon our stipend that we gladly give  
that scholarship be free of pressing cares.  
Beyond some mention in the Friday prayers  
we do not trouble you: no torturer's tongs  
that must too often bind this world of wrongs  
to what's permitted, what the holy law  
acknowledges the sovereign must be for.

*(Pause: clerics look horrified.)*

SHEIKH BAHAI

Enhance both person and the state, abound  
250. with honest qualities the Prophet found  
commendable though somewhat far to seek:  
to curb the mighty and support the weak,  
to oversee the taxes, law-courts, camp,  
make all that governable and bear the stamp  
of God's high mercy.

VIZIER

Then?

MIR DAMAD

It is to me  
the question is addressed. Your majesty  
will know a thousand grief-stained years have passed  
yet still our practices have failed to last.  
You build a capital as boldly planned  
260. and beautiful as ever Baghdad spanned  
the shining Tigris and the vaulted sky  
beyond what even richest sunsets dye,  
true sovereign majesty, a faithful lease  
of quiet piety and shaded peace.

SHEIKH BAHAI

But if our Jews and Christians also view  
contemptuously ethereal domes of blue,  
or worse, such heresies are left to dwell  
among the dull but faithful here as well  
what matter is it faithful workmen build  
270. such vast constructions if the action spilled  
a drop of that from which all faiths must start:  
an honest, kindly and perceiving heart?

VIZIER

You verge on heresy, his royal grace  
affords authority and each his place.

MIR DAMAD

Our lives are forfeit to the shah's good will,  
were ever given him, and are so still.  
I taught at colleges and then withdrew  
as your high power required it, paid my due  
to town and village, and with simple folk;  
280. have tasted poverty and bitter smoke  
that blackens hovels and pot-hung roof:  
a token, majesty, if not a proof.

VIZIER

So is an innocence that all the while  
will feed its followers with poisonous guile.

SHAH ABBAS

Sheik Bahai, you'd have us forcibly convert  
all Jews and Christians where that most would hurt  
our trade and reputation, just those ties  
to far-off sea-lanes where our fortune lies?  
You need a prudence more, a modest life  
290. which now I see contains Sir Robert's wife:  
that dark-eyed beauty with imperious airs  
and impudence and striking bald-faced stares,  
on whom no wish of ours has yet prevailed,  
is now obsequious and goes as veiled.  
Yes, so we've noticed, and will make that seed  
of new affection prove defining need.  
Our spies are on her, always: be assured  
that no one blusters more than times afford.

(Exeunt Shah Abbas and Vizier)



## SHEIKH BAHAI

How purposeless our missions have become,  
300. so set aside for wealth, for some such sum  
of small advancements and of riches won  
where all's beholding to this rising sun  
of Persia's greatness — not the Prophet's lands  
of quiet obedience, but as one man stands  
the great progenitor of our new state,  
a glowering ogre that confounds all fate.  
Where is the compact that our fathers made  
that shahs protect us, and their greatness shade  
the depths of quiet an honest, upright mind  
310. in pillared centuries of thinking find?  
Where is that brooding on the One above  
that fills this common ground with warmth and love?

## MIR DAMAD

That's far from our great ruler's thoughts  
of conquest, spectacle and splendid courts.  
How hard it is to feel and know again  
the time when Ismail was our hope of men.

## SHEIKH BAHAI

Yes, but tell him that, or intimate  
that he's the slave as much as shah to it,  
both bound by ends and duties, brightly made  
320. as is the execution's glittering blade  
to act, deliver, punish, but not decide  
what rightness is, and there has died  
another swathe of Sufis, honest men  
who try to act as simple citizen.  
The poet Amri on a word from him  
quite literally was torn from limb to limb.  
All hideous, unconscionable: the Prophet's way  
is only as the full-occasioned heart can say.

MIR DAMAD

We must continue in the ways of peace  
330. by which alone our angry troubles cease,  
when men will find again their brotherhood  
innate within them while in prayer they stood  
in shimmering mosques upon this soil of Fars  
beyond all circuits of those doubtful stars.

SHEIKH BAHAI

The stars foretold it and the scriptures too.

MIR DAMAD

The scriptures only as were read by you,  
without authority, when holy books  
have been discounted, which then overlooks  
the earnest centuries of thought and prayer  
340. to what is known but never fully there.

SHEIKH BAHAI

Those stars hang menacing, and nothing we  
can do will darken their ascendancy.  
Hard roads now wait for us, and only strength  
and rectitude will see us through that length  
of snares and pitfalls, where each small hope  
is flared by heresy and hangman's rope.

## Scene Five

Shah Abbas and Aqa Rizzi: Isfahan 1610.

AQA RIZI

But all derive from one man's energy.

The shah is here, then there, and soon we see,  
beside a new mosque built or battle fought,  
350. our sovereign honouring another court,  
where wine, forbidden those not now in power  
will flow continually, a frothing shower  
bewitching tongues and wits — which go astray,  
with fearful consequences, for words betray  
what sins may hide beneath but not evade  
the executioner's wet-gleaming blade.

SHAH ABBAS

You should note that such a looked-for place  
another ill-bred scribe can shortly grace.

AQA RIZI

They can't, not quite: whatever dreams are born  
360. in my good sovereign's head, I have them worn  
in shape and substance: only this rough hand  
can spin the fantasies none understand  
which does not dwell in careful pen and glaze  
the more than you're misled by guarded ways  
of one who flatters, or obstructs, or stoops  
to calumny and then applies for troops,  
what learned, stiff-apparelled, great divine  
through well-trimmed beard still quietly quaffs his wine,  
and even Mir Damad, for all his Sufi views,  
370. I see, is someone whom you now will use  
since thoughts confined to decorated page  
will stir no action of the sunlit stage.

And so the quarrels of each jealous sect  
you fan and deprecate but do not check.

The Circassians want a church, and you agree,  
Likewise the Armenians, Jews, until you see  
a thousand obstacles to each one planned.

SHAH ABBAS

When everyone has shown their ungloved hand.  
Of course, and any scribe or tavern fool  
380. will know in abstract how a shah must rule.  
But what of character, the stamp of power  
that instigates, achieves and will endower  
the meekest citizen with means to do  
when others quietly puff at hookahs through?  
For nothing lasts in this hard land until  
made whole by mortar of the sovereign will.

## ACT TWO

### Scene One

Sir Robert and Lady Teresa Sherley: Madrid 1610.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Two endless winter snows have passed, that bring  
the lush, importunate, brief Persian spring  
to vast intensities of cloudless skies  
390. that hurt, oppress and blind our sun-stung eyes.  
How avidly I've watched the torrents pour  
their ice-melt waters out, the desert floor  
rise thick with thorn-bush blossomings, the day  
spread life about us in some gladder way,  
when full of sap the flourishing poplar trees  
reclote in leafy avenues what summer sees,  
reminding us that sun-blessed, humid breaths  
must bring us one year closer to our deaths.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I see we're coming back to what we spoke  
of last.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

400. Of course the seasons must evoke  
how soon we pass.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

We'll have a son, of course,  
when no more fecklessness of times enforce  
these widowed, rough and stolen hours  
on us. We'll live and feast our powers  
of love and procreation on the soft-piled bed  
of golden promises that ring a sovereign's head:  
A luxury where little cupids seed

the paths where love's voluptuaries must lead.  
Have faith, my dearest wife: our prospects climb  
410. as Abbas comes into his own, and time  
will drop us manna from that distant sky.  
The shah has let you go, though none knows why.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

No change of heart is there. A favoured one  
who bore the shah a much-blessed son  
prevailed upon his grace, and so you see  
the newest embassy that brings a me  
as proof mere argument cannot perceive  
what fragrant loveliness may yet achieve.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

So let me look at you – more lovely yet  
420. than shades of love's sweet torpor can beget,  
that flash of dark brown eyes, that golden smile –  
how many nights alone have I the while  
but thought and dreamt on, counting hours  
to blind day's advent, which the light endows  
with hurt and emptiness; a gorgeous view  
of court and spectacle but never you.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

But still I've come as our good shah commands,  
as you'd expect with newly wrought demands  
for recompense for all the silks he's sent  
430. which are for purchase now, not simply lent.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

So still more treacheries. The king disdains  
to grant us audience, and there remains  
my brother Anthony, who, to our cost,  
has claimed the treasure chests reported lost.  
And now comes Denzig Beg with silk to sell,

or maybe give away: the road to hell  
is paved with such confusions, and the king  
is rightfully disposed to laughing fling  
our purposes back in our faces, say:  
440. Which one amongst us has the words to weigh?

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

But can't your brother speak?

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

On his account  
he grows more helpless as his fortunes mount.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Well, so he may do at an idle court,  
but we are by a dozen issues caught,  
great hopes entangle us, and so remain  
when we must navigate this shah's domain.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

It may be time to cut the line, return  
to former enterprises, ones which earn  
a modest standing in the world's good sight,  
450. give food and pleasure, and sound sleep at night.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Then I, who am your lawful, loving wife  
and unaccustomed to the soldier's life,  
to camps in movement at the break of day  
where blear-eyed dawn reveals the merest grey,  
without her jewels and caskets, serving maids,  
or pomp of dressing, or the bright brocades,  
must tramp the roads and in some far-off town  
adopt the mud-daubed sheets who once had down?  
Where is the glittering future promised me  
460. who comes from rich and noble family?



Where is our offspring in a little child  
of ours to think that threatening fortune smiled  
on us, a little maybe, blessed hard ways  
while we're still subject to our sovereign's gaze?

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

What can we do? Without agreement here  
return would bring extinction all too near.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Delays must place my sponsor under threat  
of high displeasure, where the etiquette  
of court affairs would ask, indeed require,  
470. from all such audience she must retire.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

But she's the laughing favourite of wives,  
and so, whatever happens, she survives.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

You do not understand the shah, who sees  
all Persians subjects bound by his decrees.  
No intercessions, ameliorations: none.  
By death, and speedily, are ties undone.  
The shah is never one to hesitate  
a moment at some threat to him or state.  
Protector Murshid Quli Khan he killed  
480. most treacherously, and anyone who willed  
to be a hair's breadth different from his word.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I thought but rarely had such things occurred.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

My dear new husband, I have watched the man  
grow up from man to monster, one who can

become as tempests on the tranquil sea,  
implacable, of dark hostility

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Then what?

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Go elsewhere, husband, on this quest.  
For trade and promissory it may be best  
to try in Prague or Rome, or where the skies  
490. of England brighten over enterprise.

## Scene Two

Emperor Rudolf II and Sir Robert Sherley: Prague 1610

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

You may be seated now, ambassador,  
and tell us what our realms should now infer  
from such a voluntary, long pilgrimage.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Prague is surely one important stage  
on which the fate of empires may be played.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

We may dispense with pleasantries. You stayed  
a long time with our cousin's court in Spain,  
and know the hopes and consolations of his reign.  
They are at peace now with the Turkish host  
500. as threats are curfewed on that threatening coast.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I see your holiness is well informed  
on purposes.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

We have not wholly warmed  
to what we hear of Englishmen abroad  
as quarrelsome as is the half-drawn sword.  
Our country does not need your costly wares,  
still less ourselves.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

But, holiness, how fares  
the Christian at such Saracens who rape  
and murder, pillage, turn that distant shape  
of lands where our good lord came down to us  
510. as something disavowed and cancerous.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

For thirteen years we fed that simmering pot,  
had lands clean stripped of income, and begot  
but famines, altercations, armed revolt:  
What was our duty here became our fault.  
Bohemia was lost, and Hungary  
despoiled far worse than wars with Turks would see.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

But surely eminence would lend support  
to sundry others then, a battle fought  
by all the western powers restores the right  
520. of lands in Christendom to Christian light.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

All worlds are shadowy, my good ambassador.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Indeed, you majesty. Must we infer  
these daily miracles before our eyes  
are insubstantial, have some other guise

than given to more enquiring, lofty minds?

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

If thought can liberate, it also binds.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

But all that's wanted is an end to peace  
and certainty within our soul's surcease.  
An instant in infinity, a fleeting trace  
530. within our Lord's abounding, certain grace.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

That, my dear ambassador, lies far  
beyond the thought of you and us and shah,  
with specious reasonings that need not be.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

*(Confused.)* Is that for Shah Abbas, your majesty?

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

For this short interval we have to live.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Who knows what threatening futures have to give,  
indeed?

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

I know my ending to the hour,  
and yours as well, ambassador. Such power  
have those who draw down knowledge from the stars,  
540. as do the court officials of your shah's.  
Of course that's known to us, and is to him  
who sends you packing on this fruitless whim.  
He knows the future, yes, but will not hear

as none of us will do till death draws near,  
and jewels and trappings of the gilded room  
retire to shadows and the sombre tomb.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I would not ask for me, but for my wife.

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

She will enjoy a long, eventful life,  
or so our ministers assure us. They  
550. as well advise you that you should not stay  
too long in service to those bloodied hands  
or you will die in those far desert lands.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Teresa will outlast me, come what may?

EMPEROR RUDOLF II

Ambassador, we send you on your way  
with marks of favour that the shah, your king,  
will take some comfort from adventuring.  
Go on a count now of this court, and take  
good wishes for the shah, that he will make  
some absolution for his sins, and some  
560. long penances for yet more deaths to come.

### Scene Three

Mir Damad and Sheikh Bahai. Qazvin 1613

SHEIKH BAHAI

Beyond that restless mind he's always had,  
our shah grows troubled if not half-ways mad.

MIR DAMAD

He'll hear Prince Safi as he will not us:  
a son who's wise and generous.  
Indeed is known for it, for nothing sways  
a ruler more than subjects' smiling gaze.

SHEIKH BAHAI

Popularity is no such prize  
when deep suspicions darken that man's eyes.

MIR DAMAD

So tell me where we have some other choice.  
570. There's not another here who'll raise his voice.

SHEIKH BAHAI

I'd still advise against it, Mir Davad,  
however well intentioned, conscience clad:  
provoke the shah in this and all will pay.

MIR DAMAD

May Allah guide us and divine the way

Scene Four

Mir Damad and Prince Safi. Qazvin 1613

PRINCE SAFI

But for the faithful my good father cares  
and so is ever prompt in their affairs.  
Whatever renegades he's put to sword  
he acted as their sole and rightful lord,  
who should be honoured and at once obeyed.  
580. Yet he to Ottomans was then betrayed,  
for when the Georgian princes, apostate,  
renounced their fealty to the Persian state,  
and fled en mass to treasonous Turkish arms:

the state was left to unrest and to wild alarms.

MIR DAMAD

Though what you say is true, beyond all doubt,  
I'd ask your gracious highness hear me out.  
The faithful were not party to these wars,  
but lived in harmony, with theirs and yours.  
Armenian, Christian, Jew locked no one out  
590. and in their way were learned and devout.  
The rest were simple folk who left to God  
to bless or curse them for the ways they trod.

PRINCE SAFI

Your depth of learning, Damad, is well known,  
and is so recognized by this, our throne.  
You spend your days in long and pious thought,  
removed from market bustle, camp or court.  
Why not preserve the thought of quiet ways  
and in your writings guide our later days?

MIR DAMAD

It's not theology of which I speak,  
600. but of the poor, the helpless and the weak,  
to which all Muslim help falls ever due,  
for only in good acts is faith made true.

PRINCE SAFI

The deportation serves a larger good,  
and all will find a safer livelihood  
in Ashraf or Farahabad. They weave  
a better fabric with the shah's good leave.  
Around new Isfahan he has averred  
to have them settled and preferred.

MIR DAMAD

There is no shipment here of future wealth

610. with care for industry or better health.  
The war's become an overwhelming flood  
of fire and butchery and infant's blood.  
Not a town's untouched, and by the score  
are houses burnt and pillaged. Thousands more  
escaping soldiery's fierce scourging breath  
are left on crop-stripped ground to starve to death.  
Long roads are choked with them, and auctions see  
thousands on thousands sold to slavery,  
or any respite that the hour directs.

620. They may be infidels or other sects  
but still are Persian countrymen the same.  
For what within the Prophet's land will tame  
our habitation in this world of sin  
if not some kindness where we may win  
some recognition from our Lord above:  
the Just and Merciful is also love.  
I beg you on your own and future soul,  
as far as possible, as you control  
some access to your father's thoughts, be brave  
630. enough to speak to him, that may he save  
our ancient reputation, and withstand  
this desecration of the Prophet's land.

PRINCE SAFI

I give no answer now, but will assay  
perhaps some mediating, common way  
to answer to our greater country's need.

DAMAD

And shah's perhaps. I ask your highness heed  
that still the northern provinces may be  
the source of wealth and new prosperity  
in walnuts groves and thick pistachios,  
640. wide fields where honest tillage grows  
rich grapes and melons, figs and apricot,



with wealth of wheat-land also.

SAFI

Like as not.

DAMAD

They were, your gracious highness, but are now reduced to blackened fields. I know not how to tell you of the wholesale damage done 740. to crops and local industries – and one I fear not over-easy to repair for all the shah has built new townships there, and sumptuous palaces, or so I'm told.

SAFI

650. He has his state and person to uphold.

DAMAD

Of course, and palaces need many trades and local industries, for fine things made result from long traditions handed down through families to workshops, guilds and town. Should not these things be strengthened now? Could not some levies of the stricken towns be got to work and prosper in our shah's domain? Would not the crafts now threatened best remain retrenched, replanted, given flowering shoots 660. instead as being hacked at from the roots?

SAFI

They could be, doubtless, if the shah would hear of new ways to extend his power. I fear what counsels I could give would be in vain.

DAMAD

Advice, your sovereign highness, is the bane

of modern rulership, but just a word  
or two might count, and be the way preferred  
if done with nonchalance and smiling grace.

SAFI

You may be sure this highness knows his place.

## Scene Five

Shah Abbas and Iskandar Beg Munshi. On campaign in northern  
Iran: 1614

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Whoever wears the truth goes warmly clad.  
670. What has this simple governor now to add?

SHAH ABBAS

The what you may have heard of court affairs,  
where tittle-tattle runs like dogs at hares.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

There was some embassy of peace he made,  
or rather mercy, or was so portrayed.  
I sent the matter on.

SHAH ABBAS

Our wretched son  
who lurks at home although he's much the one  
to benefit from these campaigns, has sued  
for peace?

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

He feels they have been badly used,  
or some such matter, but of course a tale-

680. tell tongue is venomous and like the autumn gale  
goes back and forth between the battered town  
till every cupola and wall be down.

SHAH ABBAS

But peace?

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

More, I think, for clemency  
towards your Georgian subjects.

SHAH ABBAS

Dear God, we see  
how lame and pitiful a son we've bred,  
such addled softness in a princely head.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

I've never heard your first-born mean or say  
a word derogatory, nor yet delay  
the slightest moment paying his respects  
to your high majesty.

SHAH ABBAS

690. So it would vex  
you should we strike him down?

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Should sword-arm slow  
the ordered, unforgiving, fatal blow?  
All that you have gained in these hard northern lands  
are but as Allah willed it, as there stands  
an army drilled and loyal, trained to give  
its utmost for the country, or to live  
but poorly afterwards, in outcast ways  
as will the stray dog, pining, end its days.

SHAH ABBAS

He fears me more than loves me, that I know,  
700. but his manoeuvrings have made it so  
required of us, who must be Persia's king.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Perhaps agreement was a shameful thing,  
to cede the territories they stole from us:  
Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, the Caucasus.  
And yet that treaty gave us breathing space  
to pause, amalgamate, and better face  
the enemies that mount on every side.  
Through Tabaristan the lurid tide  
of insurrection has been stemmed, Mashad  
710. the beautiful returned, what Herat had  
in mosque and learning is now fresh renewed,  
and by the Mughal court is so construed.

SHAH ABBAS

So I have made it, had a kingdom tilled  
by hard obedience till it's filled  
with flowered magnificence, the best that be —  
indomitably loyal, a guarantee  
that when I'm gone from here my words will reign,  
and all this blood has not been shed in vain.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

There are the monuments, the shimmering vault  
720. of Isfahan, whose floating domes assault  
the widespread wonder of the sky.

SHAH ABBAS

They gaze  
on truth, but Safi with his smiling ways,  
his train of courtiers and the harem scents

is good for industry and hard events?

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

He campaigned sturdily, I heard, and sought  
out foes wherever battle could be fought.  
Safi's is not a warlike nature, true,  
but to your wishes fully paid its due.

SHAH ABBAS

He has. That limp, and wavering course he spun  
730. has by my express orders been undone.

*(Pause. Munshi horrified.)*

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Your majesty, I am most sad to hear  
the death of one the populace held dear.

SHAH ABBAS

Yet from faintest smoke a fire will hatch.  
Secrecy was needed, and a fast dispatch.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Let Allah then who knows our sins' dark sums  
be merciful in turn when our time comes.

Scene Six

Sheikh Bahai, Davad: Isfahan 1614

SHEIKH BAHAI

The blade sweeps ever closer, and all should fear  
extinction if they will not pause and hear.  
The clergy do but what they've ever done  
740. to overlook the murder of a son,  
and as for riots when the act was known

they have more silent and perfidious grown.  
What are these countrymen that will not do  
a thing to save themselves — as will not you.

MIR DAMAD

More bloodshed only bloodshed breeds. We need  
a quieter, kindlier way that all may heed.

SHEIKH BAHAI

What gentleness will stay the blood-edged blade  
or plead an execution be delayed?

MIR DAMAD

The Sufi sees his course in everything,  
750. in song of birds and passing air that bring  
the smell of mud, of ordure and of leaves,  
in how the sunset falling light bereaves  
the land of what we'll never see again,  
or not the particularity as then.  
In traceries the leaving shadows thin  
to what is far above us, and within.  
What other course is possible, unless  
we scourge our grasping natures, and profess  
a hard indifference, which like the stone  
760. that's strong and unremarkable, does not condone  
the royal indulgences that should be shamed  
though for accepting them we're no doubt blamed.

SHEIKH BAHAI

And rightly so. Why should the shah, exulting, build  
his royal palaces if he has killed  
abominably so many guiltless men,  
the faithful, quiet and honest citizen.  
What use are splendid palaces and thrones  
if built on servitude and poor men's groans?

## MIR DAMAD

Our God may help or not protect us. He  
770. may give our daily food, but equally  
may make our end be loathsome torments, fire  
or knout or rope or rack, when we retire  
a pitiful and howling, blood-drenched wraith  
beyond all cognizance of truth and faith.  
But God is ever further, and our trust  
is not in what must ever fray to dust.  
What's true in faith our faith makes always true,  
and so is tested in what wise men do.  
To those who would revile us, let our ways  
780. of quietism be continual praise.

## ACT THREE

### Scene One

Pietro della Valle and Shah Abbas: Isfahan 1619

SHAH ABBAS

It is a goodly prospect, you'd concede?

PIETRO DELLA VALLE

Most beautiful, your majesty, indeed  
a paradise in which the eye delights  
in myriads of shifting, flame-lit sights  
or arch and minaret and merchant stall  
all answering to their sovereign's call  
for food and merriment on this warm night.

SHAH ABBAS

And can your country boast so brave a sight?

PIETRO DELLA VALLE

We have our festivals and holy days,  
790. prescribed by custom, which our king obeys,  
but not the multitudes that jostle here,  
where dome and ornate sepulchre cohere  
to one consuming, glittering whole  
that dazzles eyesight and enlists the soul.

SHAH ABBAS

To what, my valiant traveller? Would you  
submit to what I know you only view  
as bloody conquests that are never done.

PIETRO DELLA VALLE

A traveller, your majesty, is one  
who hears his sovereign and will say his prayers,



800. but otherwise not wonder how it fares,  
this hard world round him and its hidden powers:  
there's much to ponder on in silent hours.

SHAH ABBAS

So let us stop you there, and have you shown  
what poets and great divines have always known.  
*(Picks up book and reads.)*

Vain are wine and art, not built on stone  
unless are visionary, to God foreknown.

If the heart's own troubles are from heaven hidden,  
what hurt has any wise man's knot unsewn?

The world in wonder on its axis turned  
810. is in a thousand recollections strown.

Now brood on Solomon and take his bowl:  
your skull in this is also Bahman's bone.

Kai and Kawus to the winds are gone:  
and where is Solomon's high-splendoured throne?

Hear the harp, Hafiz, its silken strain  
in wine's deep happiness to you is known.

PIETRO DELLA VALLE

Sublime, your majesty, a subtle strain  
of phantasy to vex and charm the brain.  
Am I to take it that such thought has led  
820. to deep conjectures in that royal head?

SHAH ABBAS

Conjecture maybe, but conversion no.  
For all, my traveller, it may be so,  
that your good counsels have the greater claim  
790. on men's affections, faith, for what in name  
will serve religion in these ancient lands  
of rich extravagance and desert sands.

With veil and abstinence and daily prayers  
our folk sup holiness in homely wares.  
But we're as you are, only simple men  
830. beset by hopes and wickedness, who say amen  
to what we cannot know, and earn respect  
of priests and councillors, the Lord's elect.

PIETRO DELLA VALLE

It's true your majesty has sent us wines  
and victuals when the calendar defines  
the month for prayer and Muslim abstinence  
when all rejoicing should be banished hence.  
I'd ask, if your high grace would sanction it,  
more books be sent to you, and such as fit  
to fine embellish what our Pope will find  
840. to be an upright, lofty and enquiring mind.

SHAH ABBAS

By all means have such books and manuals sent  
that our brief leisure hours be not misspent,  
but for the present, go, and make our case  
before their majesties and heaven's high grace.

## Scene Two

Shah Abbas and Zainab Begum: Harem, Isfahan 1621.

ZAINAB BEGUM

Beyond, and sheltering from the midday heat.  
No tongues are here reporting why we meet.

SHAH ABBAS

There's nothing untoward, but I would know  
how generally our harem matters go.

ZAINAB BEGUM

Your majesty has but to ask, each pretty face  
850. will answer promptly from the current place  
she is allotted in her sovereign's smile  
though all be pout and posture yet the while.

SHAH ABBAS

It is Muhammad that concerns us most.

ZAINAB BEGUM

He visits regularly, his listening post  
for all the discontents these walls must breed.

SHAH ABBAS

It's hidden purposes we have to heed:  
We've see him traipse about, how at each sleeve  
a dozen wait to take their silent leave.

ZAINAB BEGUM

The prince is circumspect, but yet he's still  
860. attendant scrupulously to your high will.

SHAH ABBAS

It is the turncoat courtier I have bred  
that smiles and fawns on latest nonsense said.  
Where are the purposes that need to build  
on reputations that our forebears filled?  
He has no inner strength that weighs each choice  
but smiles and panders to the public's voice.

ZAINAB BEGUM

My dearest nephew, there are many ways

to win both merit and men's fickle gaze.  
Yours is power, the press to get things done  
870. where others coax and charm, as does your son.

SHAH ABBAS

So did my father, whom I have deposed.

ZAINAB BEGUM

True, but all who knew him have supposed  
he was much glad to leave the throne behind,  
being tired, and weak in spirit, nearly blind.  
Whatever this short audience may be for,  
I'd counsel patience till you're nine-tenths sure.

SHAH ABBAS

What we're sure of is our son's intent  
to undermine our rule with weak consent,  
to fraternize with Sufis, humble folk  
880. who do not understand the ruler's yoke:  
how he must hector, urge and ever flog  
his weary people on, and like a dog  
yap at their heels sometimes, and if that fail,  
most bloodily ensure his rule prevail.  
So are the Sufis who would seek to claim  
pre-eminence.

ZAINAB BEGUM

If in the shah's good name?

SHAH ABBAS

The evil one himself for all I care.  
I must be ruler here.

ZAINAB BEGUM

Well, I would spare  
the priesthood for the present, and your son,

890. if something much more lasting would be won.

SHAH ABBAS

The damned succession.

ZAINAB BEGUM

Damned indeed if you  
do not assign him worthy things to do.  
A governorship. Or captaincy. Or part  
of government where he may learn and start  
to be the sort of son you're hoping for.

SHAH ABBAS

To be the gathering point of each conspirator,  
to head up factions and to sow dissent  
that even I may not at last prevent?  
Better hang oneself, or abdicate  
900. than share our favour with a faith-run state.  
Indeed the reason why I ended Safi's run.

ZAINAB BEGUM

Who was a diligent, most worthy son.  
My dear Abbas, your majesty, why must  
you vacillate and worry, fear to trust  
the heaven's own starry circuits, how the sun  
will rise the morrow when the dark night's done.  
But men are frangible, a summer's flower  
that heedlessly springs up to waste its power  
on things in prospect. Yet the bright sun pales  
910. as, so I hear, your own strength fails.  
Why not, your majesty, pronounce, evade  
the bloodshed certain if no choice be made.

SHAH ABBAS

Time will make its own occasions, like as not,

and bring propriety to what it's got.

### Scene Three

Sheikh Bahai, Prince Muhammad: Isfahan 1621.

SHEIKH BAHAI

The shah is ill, most certainly, but may  
as yet recover.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

Yes, but why delay  
a moment to accede to what is right,  
your acclamation, in the clergy's sight?

SHEIKH BAHAI

Because, your gracious highness, such a name  
would be precipitous, and rashly claim  
upon the treasury of state affairs,  
injurious to customs, yours and theirs.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

So you decline to pledge support to us?

SHEIKH BAHAI

Not so, your highness, but it's dangerous  
to count the chickens till they're hatched.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

Such saws  
evade a blessing needed for our cause,  
nor are they worthy of so great a mind,  
but something hostile to us, so we find,  
however given us or much disguised.

SHEIKH BAHAI

930. (*Nettled.*) I think the celebrations may be ill-advised.  
Why not remain the contrite, grieving son  
beside the bedside till the course be run,  
and if, as none will hope, our sovereign die,  
his last and long-considered, faltering sigh  
will then appoint you as his rightful heir,  
whatever others think or so declare.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

Such prudent counsels, Sheik Bahai,  
speak more of courtliness and so belie  
the undertakings given Persia's kings:  
940. the pledged support that faithful counsel brings.

SHEIKH BAHAI

I rather think an Isfahan subdued  
by early curfew and then sombre hued  
would much more benefit than riotous blaze  
and all the merriment of these last days,  
the torch-lit fetes and endless feasts by night  
and tavern lewdness that affronts the sight  
of many pilgrims who frequent our shrines  
to make their penances, wherever shines  
the sanctity inherent in the sainted bones.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

950. Given the restless nature of our thrones,  
a broad assent is what we must be for.

SHEIKH BAHAI

True worth, your highness, may be needed more.

*(Enter shah's officers)*

OFFICER

Highness, our respects. The state requires  
you come immediately.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

Our shah expires  
as must the great ones when the sun goes down.  
No king so worthily adorned the crown.

OFFICER

The shah is very much alive, your highness: these  
are his.

*(Shows him the warrant. Muhammad shocked.)*

SHEIKH BAHAI

I'd see those warrants, if you please,  
the signature and usual seal of power.

*(Examines the warrants, and turns away in dismay.)*

OFFICER

960. It is the warrant made upon the hour.

SHEIKH BAHAI

*(Addressing Muhammad)*

It is a world of darkness now you face.  
May God grant patience to us, and His grace.

OFFICER

Be your highness pleased to come this way.  
Dire pains are better met without delay.

Scene Four

Mir Damad, Sheikh Bahai: Isfahan 1621.



SHEIKH BAHAI

So one more useful man has gone his way  
to darken daylight in this fading play  
of gloom and shadow through this land of ours.  
Where does it end? I'd hoped these failing powers  
of mine would see a change, but I go out  
970. with still the future left in gloom and doubt.  
Muhammad's only blinded partially  
it seems, and still can somewhat see.

MIR DAMAD

Suppose they spirit him away, suppose  
some ruler helps Muhammad, overthrows  
the tyrant that our shah's become, suppose  
so many things, the Mughals will oppose  
the independence of a Shi'a state.

SHEIKH BAHAI

Muhammad could assert, however late,  
the heritage of his high royal line  
980. and not so feebly to his fate decline.

MIR DAMAD

Imprisonment and threatened torture blunts  
the smiling fortitude that he had once:  
he is a shadow now, a broken reed  
that drink-soaked Jahangir could hardly need.

SHEIKH BAHAI

Then who or what can purge the Prophet's land  
of such indignities, and with a steady hand  
restore our privileges, and let the muminin  
lead back the erring from the path of sin.  
We both of us accept the shah is mad,  
990. and what escape there may be must be had  
immediately, while still men recognize

the truth within their daily outraged eyes.

MIR DAMAD

But anyone displaying such a trait  
would meet immediately Prince Safi's fate.  
Patience, great cunning, and an iron will  
are made obligatory if any fill  
their father's rulership and yet survive.

SHEIKH BAHAI

But yet my good Damad we ought to strive  
at this auspicious hour, I think, and place  
1000. some check upon our sovereign's power, in case  
Muhammad does indeed make his escape  
and in the Mughal courts a kindlier shape  
appears.

MIR DAMAD

It's more, I think, obedience  
we need, to that beyond.

SHEIKH BAHAI

*(Smiling)* Where I go hence,  
into another world, I hope, where we  
may serve a more accomplished sovereignty.

Scene Five

Prince Muhammad, Vizier, Shah Abbas, attendants: Isfahan 1621.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

I feel the warmth of sunlight on the skin,  
indeed a little colour seeps within  
to show me outlines of the world I knew

1010. if in a watery and dusky hue.

VIZIER

So at this moment do not stay alone  
in some dark place but seize the splendid throne.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

What can you offer me I don't possess  
in full, dull measure and contentedness ?  
True, I'm subject to another's whim  
and owe my long continuing to him,  
but what is power to one who'll never be  
of warm sincerity like you and me?

VIZIER

But you can bring what protocol you will  
1020. as country's potentate and ruler still.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

I doubt it when the office of a shah's  
must bind that paradise in iron bars,  
and what abundance has that sumptuous wealth  
if man must stay the jailor of himself?

VIZIER

But highness, if the shah has many cares  
the courtiers here will handle such affairs.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

I've lived too long, I think, in these dark lairs  
of fetid secrets and of breathed affairs,  
where future's but a favourite's languid pout  
1030. that like a candle flame is soon snuffed out.

VIZIER

Your gracious highness, it is all too late  
to smile and modestly prevaricate.  
How many hopes are unfulfilled,  
the simple wants of people he has killed  
by wars, taxation, arbitrary arrests,  
where deportation even now attests  
how savagely are craftsmen fleeced and pressed  
and by their contribution still assessed  
for palaces and luxury the Prophet's writ  
1040. has never sanctioned, not one page of it.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

What would you have me do, my grand vizier,  
who am near impotent, and must adhere  
to court and custom and my father's word?

VIZIER

I hoped to hear your majesty preferred  
the wealth of sunlight to these gloomy cells  
where scented lassitude forever quells  
the upright fortitude that makes a man.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

And so I do, as much as subject can.

VIZIER

You are prepared to leave and take your flight  
1050. to Mughal Delhi under shade of night,  
to pledge your service to a foreign throne  
till time and circumstance restore your own?

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

What can I say? I am the shah's own son.  
His reckless, ever ruthless blood must run  
a little in these veins of mine. I've been  
admittedly a shadow on the scene

of swelling majesty in great affairs;  
with smiling deference that prudence wears  
when close around the snarling tiger roars  
1060. or opens silently its hungry jaws.  
All these are phantoms in my father's mind.  
No sons oppose him, and no armies wind  
with bristling weaponry across the Caucasus,  
and all he meets with is but strictly us,  
his Persian countryman, that turbaned force  
of Quizilbash with fiercely stirruped horse  
that over all this land had sovereignty,  
when none disputed it, and all were free.

VIZIER

But now the kingdom is already made,  
1070. and those who profit from it are obeyed.

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

But not so wantonly. This land needs peace,  
and not these victories that never cease.

VIZIER

Are you prepared to charge and start anew  
in ways that help the many, not the few?

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

I am.

VIZIER

You pledge it so?

PRINCE MUHAMMAD

I do.

*(Enter Abbas with officers.)*

SHAH ABBAS

A frank avowal that seems overdue.  
So have our young prince blinded properly,  
and then conveyed to Alamut. And be  
apprised, my grand vizier, that we have seen  
1080. how close and eloquent your words have been.

VIZIER

It was as you instructed, majesty.

SHAH ABBAS

Oh, let us have no blushing modesty:  
there was true depth and fervour in that voice.

VIZIER.

Indeed, your majesty, though not by choice.

SHAH ABBAS

By too much substance is a thought betrayed.  
Have him to the executioner conveyed.

Scene Six

Sir Dodmore Cotton, Sir Thomas Herbert, Sir Robert Sherley, Lady  
Teresa Sherley and King Charles I: London 1626.

KING CHARLES

Let's make an end to all confusions here  
and simply say it beckons as a brave idea,  
however each may see it or construe.

SIR THOMAS HERBERT

1090. But yet, your majesty, suppose we do,  
convey these gentlemen in our good ships  
and add more bunting to these pleasure trips,

they trade effectively in our good name  
and any settlement must make its claim —

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Your majesty, the embassies we brought  
were sole and self-sufficient, nor have fought  
but with such titles as were falsely lent—

SIR THOMAS HERBERT

Why not, your majesty, let each event—

CHARLES

Dear God, how much our subjects err if they  
1100. expect to profit from this vile affray.  
Dodmore Cotton, forward. Kneel, and we  
perhaps may see an end to anarchy.

*(Charles dubs Cotton.)*

Arise Sir Dodmore Cotton, you who are  
henceforth ambassador to Persia's shah.  
We trust your mission will be fruitful, bring  
rich trade to England and its new-crowned king.

*(Exeunt Charles and others)*

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Is that the patent that we hoped to gain?

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Troubles only, my dear wife and pain  
in prospect, and much worse when we again  
1110. return to that now angered tiger's den.  
What can we do? Across the continent  
we've traipsed from court to court, and each event  
has met with promises and greasy smiles

that put to shame the honest tradesmen's wiles.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

I long to see those shaded halls again  
and smell the peach and apple blossom when  
the spring comes in with intermittent showers  
that coax out mallow and the walnut flowers;  
with swallows chattering to build their nests,  
1120. when storks come back, and very air invests  
itself with sweetness and expectancy.

When from that lurching camel shall we see  
the swelling domes across the plain of Fars  
that bloom mysteriously beneath the stars,  
the unforgiving faith which is not ours  
but still attracts us in its forthright powers  
of abstinence and certain prescribed ways  
of dress and custom that it seems our gaze  
must go in need of them. Though far we roam  
1130. like tinkling sheep bells still they call us home.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I pledge that afterwards, when this is done,  
the counters called in and the takings won,  
we'll settle down, and, with our Sovereign's grace  
will raise a family in some such place.



# ACT FOUR

## Scene One

Shah Abbas, Sir William Herbert, Sir Dodmore Cotton, Sir Robert Sherley,  
Dick Williams: Ashraf 1628

SHAH ABBAS

You gentlemen are welcome to this court  
if come with trade agreements we have sought  
that are precise, and giving term by term  
what each is party to, as laws affirm.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

We've come these distances, vast distances,  
1140. to give your majesty what should be his:  
a wide esteem upon the larger scene  
where our good sovereign Charles has been  
the most desirous that there prompt be made  
the overtures required for friendly trade.

SHAH ABBAS

*(Testily)* What measures does your far-off king extend  
to Persian manufactures? We could send  
ten thousand bales of finest silk a year  
accepting English cloths in trade.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

I hear  
what your high majesty's good sense has won  
1150. and on return will show what can be done.

SHAH ABBAS

What, Sir William, does your king propose  
exactly, so an understanding goes

well armed with figures, deliveries and facts,  
the needs that business normally exacts.

SIR WILLIAM HERBERT

The what Sir Robert here might volunteer  
1120. has complicated what our majesty could hear.

SHAH ABBAS

Sir Robert indeed has safe returned to us,  
whom we have treated well.

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

Most generous,  
as always, majesty. Indeed our course  
1160. from port to capital has been a source  
of constant wonder to my countrymen.  
From Bandar Abbas to Lars and on again  
to Shiraz, Isfahan—each single name  
conveys the echo of that worldwide fame  
that Persia under Shah Abbas has gained.  
Vast crowds came out to meet us, never waned  
a moment in their whirling, dancing ways.  
State governors too. Beyond all praise  
were spectacles and entertainments we  
1170. encountered, honouring this embassy.  
Their very sumptuousness attests to that.  
In Imam Quli Khan's high shade were sat  
as hostages the sons of one-time foes,  
from Georgia, Uzbeks, Hormuz, such as shows  
how great the majesty of this new state  
that humbles sovereigns to a servile fate.

SHAH ABBAS

Each subject of this kingdom tries his best,  
and simple Muslim customs do the rest,  
for you, Sir Robert, know our ways, and fate

1180. is always active when the ledger's straight.

SIR WILLIAM HERBERT

Yes, Englishmen require a bill of sale where all is specified, and if that fail the penalties applying, where it states insurances and who authenticates.

SHAH ABBAS

All things are underwritten by our name.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

Yet still confusion happens all the same. Naqd Ali Beg you sent, and then arrived one Khwaja Shahsavar, when both contrived to have his majesty King Charles agree 1190. with all and none. Your gracious majesty, we come with earnest warrants from the king that all be set out clear in everything.

SHAH ABBAS

So tell us what these miscreants have said.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

I can record it, but they both are dead.

SHAH ABBAS

And so its reputations you'd attack?

SIR ROBERT SHERLEY

One died of opium on the voyage back and one in London from the winter chills. Indeed the enterprise was cursed with ills, continually has left its trail of death 1200. as though sent forth upon a poisoned breath.

Men died upon the voyage, landfalls, each  
wretch sent miserably beyond our reach.  
Most willingly I'd write a full report  
so not to try the goodwill of this court.

SHAH ABBAS

Where is the said authority you bring,  
Sir William? The royal warrant of your king.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

I gave your majesty the royal seal.

SHAH ABBAS

But these are only pleasantries, we feel:  
vague invitations that a king sends out  
1210. when all is dubious and wormed with doubt.  
We do not even see which one of you  
we should now favour with an interview.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

Either me or both, your majesty.

SHAH ABBAS

Then where's the seal and single name to see?

SIR WILLIAM HERBERT

We all, as vexed and vexing times afford,  
have dutifully tried to reach accord.

SHAH ABBAS

Such reasons have a pinched and pious air.  
We'll think more later on this strange affair.

SIR DODMORE COTTON

Then on your majesty our suit will wait

1220. in expectation, be it soon or late.

## Scene Two

Lady Teresa Sherley and Dick Williams: Isfahan: 1629.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

A long, long time it's been, and still no news,  
or nothing sensible that we could use  
to plan departure or a longer stay,  
just still more promises and more delay.  
Sir Robert now, so tell me: where is he?

DICK WILLIAMS

He holds you ever in his constancy.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

That I do not doubt, but what's the news?

DICK WILLIAMS

The worst that's possible: if you'll excuse  
this bluntness, madam: good Sir Robert's dead.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

What?

DICK WILLIAMS

1230. Think of him, your ladyship, as sped  
into the further world we all must go  
beyond the hurt and misery of things below.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Dear God! How? Why?

DICK WILLIAMS

May I explain  
1200. in brief at least? A long account of pain  
he was excused, although the others there  
were not so fortunate.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

So I prepare  
myself for things long inward known. So sit  
and we will have a full account of it,

DICK WILLIAMS

*(Seats himself.)* The journey on from Isfahan where he  
1240. had left you was continued. Constantly  
we were assailed by shifting sands in flight  
and desiccating winds, both day and night,  
that tired Sir Robert greatly, not now young.  
Beyond the great salt wastes the long road clung  
to rock-strewn defiles through the high Alburz  
that reached eventually the Ashraf courts.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

We had some news on that: the embassy  
was not received too well.

DICK WILLIAMS

Abbas could see  
no help beyond the usual pleasantries. And so  
1250. he left them in their lodging rooms to go  
to Qazvin while they sweltered in the heat  
and flies that even plague the shah's retreat.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

But he acknowledged Robert as his sovereign choice,  
his sole ambassador and single voice?

DICK WILLIAMS

Not so, my lady. Much was left unsaid,  
and so they followed after him. This led  
up dizzy mountain tracks where all fell ill  
from food or water or the rain and chill,  
and then back down to desert haze and heat.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

1260. The whole affair was one prolonged deceit.

DICK WILLIAMS

The shah's rule here has ever been that way,  
deployed through sects and factions where he'll play  
whatever small advantage suits him best:  
from such aggrandizement he'll never rest.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

But of my husband who has served the shah  
devotedly these twenty years?

DICK WILLIAMS

Things are  
not easy to explain, but slowly he  
succumbed to doubt, despair and dysentery.  
The shah himself is ailing, as you know:  
1270. beneath the great events strong currents flow  
for change, to count less on the Christian powers.  
But so your husband died, though his last hours  
were spent commending all his love to you.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Dear God.

DICK WILLIAMS

Sir Dodmore died, and others too,  
on long rides south. Your gallant spouse  
was solemnly interred beneath the house

as was then suitable, without ado;  
He gave himself to God, but spoke of you  
as one of whom his heart was ever full:  
1280. obedient, susceptible, and culpable  
of failing, so he said, of his high oath  
to you, that family denied you both.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

I must go and have that body found  
some more appropriate and sacred ground.

DICK WILLIAMS

It may be wise, my lady, more to wait  
and see how these developments relate  
to lies and calumnies, which, now abroad,  
impugn your reputation.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Be assured  
that in a land where everyone is watched  
1290. I'll have these futile imputations scotched.

DICK WILLIAMS

It may be best to not inflame the scene.  
Your husband's glorious embassy has been  
a glittering thing that faltered, fell to earth,  
and there are mutterings too about your birth.  
A lapsed Muhammadan or apostate  
they vilely call you, one whose fate  
would be unfortunate if ever proved.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

So that's what service to the shah has moved  
in us: mere fantasies of springtime air  
1300. fluffed up with promises, but nothing there.



## Scene Three

Rezi and Shah Abbas

SHAH ABBAS

I'd hoped for loyal sons to be like me  
alike in royal scope and constancy.  
But they were flatterers and feckless men,  
bereft of stature, like the cackling hen  
who pecks about and fusses, never sure  
of what its constant preening would be for.

REZI

The sons you bred were like you, every one  
you chose to blind or murder was begun  
in love and fealty to you, fondly looked  
1310. to kinship with you that you never brooked.  
Prince Safi had his dark-eyed mother's charms  
and indolence a little in those arms  
more made to claim the world by graciousness  
than seize by hard and bloodied sword's duress.  
Quli you blinded, and Muhammad too,  
who went in fear but also awe of you.

SHAH ABBAS

I could have your unlimbed body sent  
as unclothed offal to the street, be bent  
or cut into a thousand shapes until  
1320. you'd beg the agonies would promptly kill.

AQA RIZI

You could, your majesty, perhaps you will,  
but I remain your loyal subject still.  
Throughout the ages you'll be called the great

of all the Safavids. You made the state  
assured, magnificent and rightly feared.  
My small accomplishment is having steered  
your grand conceptions into faience stone:  
eternal homage to a splendid throne.

SHAH ABBAS

Perhaps we both are old, then, Rizi, made  
1330. the more by all these empty hopes of trade.

AQA RIZI

We are but men that, like the springtime day,  
high arched in blue, will shortly fall away  
to clouded worries, when our worn out bones  
will serve no purpose more than wayside stones.  
We come into this boiling world of sin  
with nothing. Nothing then our breathing skin  
imbibes, takes in, is plainly mesmerized  
by phantoms, unreal things though much disguised.  
We watch as children at a falling star  
1340. who wonder why it is no more. We are  
but loaned and hopelessly to things that last  
no more than memories when all is past.

SHAH ABBAS

Then each of us must make his own way through  
to what it is we are compelled to do.  
I took no hostages, and would distil  
no plumed buffoonery to my fixed will.  
To have seen much, and done much, had our thoughts  
considered by emperors and regal courts,  
delivered words on which a world reflects  
1350. is surely all a loyal soul expects  
that goes from this brief world to who knows where  
but under, we may hope, abiding care.

AQA RIZI

Under the Infinite and the Compassionate,  
your sovereign majesty, whose greater state  
lies far beyond us, though we still may hope  
our undertakings there find larger scope.

Scene Four

Mir Damad and Iskandar Beg Munshi: Isfahan: 1628.

MIR DAMAD

The shah is dead. At last that scourge of ours,  
that famed usurper of more holy powers  
is to his sepulchre conveyed at Habib's shrine.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

1360. So will that radiant sun no longer shine  
across the mountains and desert ways  
that made the newborn Persia of our days.

MIR DAMAD

Yes, certainly, Munshi, and all are free  
of one-man-worshipping idolatry.

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Prince Sam, another Safi, is elected shah,  
and with a darker nature, that by far,  
whose trembling countenance will always find  
new terrors to afflict its troubled mind.

MIR DAMAD

Then all is as I feared. When shall we see  
1370. that certitude and quiet humility  
that knows men as they are, and does not build  
what must by nature stay but unfulfilled?

ISKANDAR BEG MUNSHI

Our kingdom, as a prophet said, is not this earth,  
parades and palaces and ingrown birth  
of rivalries, hostilities, imagined slights  
wherewith the evil in us much delights.

MIR DAMAD

Each man must carry in him some far home  
beyond the halls of learning and the airy dome,  
the great assemblies and the souls in prayer  
1380. united in that solemn, breath-held air.  
What man may know is only found by acts,  
their truth but dust-stained thoughts that thought exacts,  
and what's most truly us, our good repute,  
proves not a worthy or a wise pursuit.  
Faith is what compel us, and then must fill  
our thoughts with that divine and larger will  
of worlds more wonderful than mind of man  
has yet conceived of, shall, or ever can.

Scene Five

Shah Jehan, Zainal Beg: Delhi: 1633

SHAH JEHAN

No doubt your latest ruler seeks to make  
1390. his rule significant, beyond mistake.

ZAINAL BEG

Indeed, your majesty.

SHAH JEHAN

And well fulfilled  
with forty women of the harem killed,  
and all successors blinded, so we hear.

ZAINAL BEG

My sovereign Safi still has much to fear  
from hopefuls stirred up by his father's word.  
Not all has been contained. Some plots occurred.  
He stays alerted, as a ruler must.

SHAH JEHAN

A sad thing, is it not, this lack of trust,  
that we, the rulers of our God's good earth,  
1400. have not the child's simplicity that birth  
and prospects and our subject's love would give —  
to grasp the full day's bounty, and to live?

ZAINAL BEG

Each role brings duties, majesty. We serve  
and find our recompense as we deserve.

SHAH JEHAN

And in that spirit, my good khan, we'd be  
conciliatory towards this latest embassy,  
but Qandahar, the jewel my father lost  
by inattention, when his path was crossed  
with many troubles that obscured his reign,  
1410. we ask to be returned to us, on pain  
of new hostilities that neither need.

ZAINAL BEG

I think my sovereign would be first to heed  
a neighbour's wishes from so great a throne  
whose new magnificence is cast in stone.

SHAH JEHAN

There are some lessons of your Isfahan  
that we've observed, or will, my learned khan.  
Your ruler built a grand new city, so

shall we, and not of semblance, empty show,  
but solid, sculpted masonry that all  
1420. may wonder hourly at the muezzin's call.

ZAINAL BEG

No doubt some well trained architects could go  
to such a ruler, wise enough to grow  
his future prospects from the current lease  
and know how rich the land that is at peace.

SHAH JEHAN

Perhaps then treaties could be freshly urged  
upon such neighbours that are newly purged  
of stratagems to forfeit subject's lives  
to wars with no long gain.

ZAINAL BEG

Our conscience strives,  
your gracious majesty, to have our lands  
1430. of woods and mountains, rivers, burning sands,  
united in some common faith that men  
may turn to deep contentedness again.

SHAH JEHAN

True, we would have scholars grace our court  
and through their piety instruct our thought.  
Your Mir Davad is one: throughout his life  
refrained from spectacle and outward strife.  
and so exemplar of a purer strain  
of grace that all of us, I'm sure, would gain.

ZAINAL BEG

The very invitation serves to be  
1440. the gracious offer of your majesty.

SHAH JEHAN

You think he will not come, for all we add  
our reputation to the name he had?

ZAINAL BEG

Of course I'll pass that invitation on  
but he is someone now as shadows gone  
into the thickly clustering evening close  
in heartfelt harmony with all he knows.  
He's less a presence now, more in between  
a lingering perfume in some far off scene.

SHAH JEHAN

Then may we all, my good ambassador,  
1450. have his good sense to quietly press that door  
that opens out to who knows where, but some,  
we hope, bright other world — through this become  
accustomed to our lot down here, more placed  
to note the Prophet's tidings which have graced  
this world of ours.

ZAINAL BEG

So blessed.

SHAH JEHAN

And not deceive  
ourselves with shadowed things we all must leave.

Scene Six

Lady Teresa Sherley, Miguel della Valle, Usher. Santa Maria della  
Scala Church in Rome: 1658.

USHER

The old contessa, sir?

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

Yes. She is where?

USHER

Walk quietly, if you would, she's still at prayer.  
Our countess through protracted widowhood  
1460. has given lavishly, as Christians should.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

I heard she's laid her husband's bones to rest  
in this fine sepulchre that guards the blest.

USHER

Just so. The priests have gone, but deep in thought  
the dona stays withdrawn in all she sought.

*(Arrive at kneeling figure of Teresa, now considerably aged. A  
pause.)*

Contessa, there is someone here who's come  
to pay his last respects.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

Words are dumb,  
Contessa, at such sad events. Because  
my travelled, late departed father was  
a while acquainted with your husband, I  
1470. have come on his behalf, to add my sigh  
to yours, as della Valle would have done.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

You're don Pietro della Valle's son?

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

Miguel, my lady.



TERESA

A title I've not used  
these ages past. Indeed it's one excused  
by circumstances in this Roman land  
1480. so far from Persia's fervid heat and sand.

MIGUEL

He often spoke of you, your husband too,  
as though belonging to a far-off view  
to which his thoughts stayed close.

TERESA

*(Coldly)* Most certainly  
I see it too.

MIGUEL

Perhaps not happily  
that former life they shared is now exhumed?

TERESA

I see it as a loathsome land, consumed  
by enmities, divisions, burning faiths  
that on enquiry turn to blood-soaked wraiths  
hallucinating in that desert air  
1490. to thinned-out pieties and things not there.  
I see those shimmering vaults of faience tiles,  
their fiery messages in Naskhi styles  
of sweep and wonder at the Prophet's word,  
the holy surahs and the ways preferred  
by custom, law and blind obedience  
as things abhorrent to a woman's sense  
of comeliness. Italy is home  
to me, where church and customs make this Rome  
a sanctuary for hope and future grace  
1500. where we may one day glimpse our Saviour's face.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

I pay my reverence to his honour's name  
who stays so quietly after distant fame,  
and hope, when this great trampling race be run  
I'll too lie quietly when this world be done.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Amen to that, but yet in truth I wait  
for something simple but denied by fate.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

It is our dreams that make us as we are,  
who hold within ourselves that latent star.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

I mean my motherhood, some son to leave  
who would remember me the while.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

1510. Believe  
me now, my lady: he the same in time  
would look beyond this petty world of crime  
towards some larger innocence, and see  
a world eternal in God's majesty.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

It is the state for which the pure heart strives,  
but in the fleeting passage of our lives  
grow strange confusions, which the pomp of day  
will conjure phantoms of, and load the way  
with vain illusions which we cannot meet,  
1520. as mirages are dowered with midday heat.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

So men have said, my lady, though it's true

I have not witnessed them myself.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Then you,  
good don Miguel, should think, and long reflect  
on all your father did, and not neglect  
the eloquence he gave to that far throne  
what soul must strive for, yet not reach alone.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

I know—

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

That full and everlasting court  
beyond the firmaments that make our thought.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

So pray we all may gain that inner sense  
1530. of peace in worlds still further hence.  
No doubt through folly and their mindless prayer,  
men stir but incense in that perfumed air,  
yet some compassion still remains in One  
who'll speak and care for us when all is done.

LADY TERESA SHERLEY

Why in this church, no formal rites abjured,  
I've had my dearest husband's bones interred,  
that he may rest beyond this stir and fuss  
till that last trump shall come for each of us.

MIGUEL DELLA VALLE

So must we hope. Whatever He may give  
1540. or not, it is His grace in which we live.

*End of Play*