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WOMEN, DEATH, AND FATE
Sexual Politics in the *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah*

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Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd ul-Muṭṭalib, paternal uncle of the Prophet, was a champion and martyr of nascent Islam. He was an outdoorsman, a hunter, described as the strongest man of his tribe and “the most unyielding.” Ḥamzah followed the Prophet from Mecca to Madina, became one of the earliest standard-bearers on expeditions, and fought in the battle of Badr. Finally, in the battle of Uḥud (625 C.E.), as he fought “like a great camel, slaying men with his sword, none being able to resist him,” he was struck by a javelin. The javelin was thrown by a slave who had been promised his freedom in return for Ḥamzah’s death; the act had been instigated by a woman named Hind bint ‘Utbah whose relatives Ḥamzah had killed at Badr. When the battle was over, Hind bint ‘Utbah went to the field and mutilated the bodies of some of the Muslim dead, cutting off their ears and noses. After mutilating Ḥamzah’s body too, she fulfilled a grisly vow of vengeance: She “cut out Ḥamzah’s liver and chewed it, but she was not able to swallow it and threw it away.”¹

Since perhaps as early as the eleventh century, however, there has existed another Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd ul-Muṭṭalib as well—one known to folk romance traditions first in Persian, then in Turkish, Georgian,² Urdu, Hindi, Panjabi, Sindhi, Bengali, and other Middle Eastern and South Asian languages.

¹ Guillaume 1955, pp. 131-32, 283, 299, 375-76, 385-87.

² Lang and Meredith-Owens 1959. For a general discussion of the early development of the Ḥamzah cycle, see pp. 472-77.

The Ḥamzah of romance is a chivalrous knight who travels and wanders through many exotic lands; he is recognized wherever he goes as a scourge of the infidels, a slayer of demons, a destroyer of evil magicians, an invincibly mighty champion endowed with supernatural gifts and blessed by Divine favor.

The pan-Islamic romance of Ḥamzah took deeper root, and developed more luxuriantly in North India than anywhere else in the world. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries it dominated, first the Indo-Persian, then the Urdu romance tradition. During this period the Urdu prose romance called *dāstān* or *qiṣṣah*,³ developed into a flourishing genre that was both oral and written, both elite and popular. It reached its heyday in late nineteenth-century Lucknow, in an era when no wealthy gentleman planning a relaxed, opium-filled evening gathering could afford to be without his professional *dāstān*-teller. On such occasions the romance of Ḥamzah was always "the *dastan*-narrators' real and essential arena."⁴ Under intense cultivation, the Ḥamzah romance grew ever longer and more elaborate. Finally, with the spread of the printing presses, came the masterpiece of Urdu romance literature: the extraordinary *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah* (1881-c. 1905), its forty-six volumes averaging 900 pages each, all commissioned and published by the Naval Kishor Press of Lucknow.⁵

What can we say about the "plot" of such a vast cycle? Obviously any answer that can be given must be specific to a particular version of the *dāstān*. Each narrator inevitably shapes the story and makes it his or her own. There is more than one way for a narrator to take possession of a story: Ilhan

³ Both *dāstān* and *qiṣṣah* mean "story" in Persian.

⁴ Sharar 1965, pp. 188-89.

⁵ Jain 1969, pp. 470-90.

Basgöz has explored the many uses of interpolation,⁶ and Margaret Mills has shown, in her work with women storytellers in Afghanistan, how flexibly traditional narrative patterns can be made to embody a contemporary narrator's real-life concerns.⁷ In the case of a narrative as paratactic, episodic, and expandable as the Ḥamzah cycle, the choice of incidents and the order in which they are included can be full of meaning. I would like to examine the most popular one-volume Urdu version of the *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah*⁸ and to consider the implications of some of the particular episodic beads that have been chosen and the order in which they have been strung.

In this version of the romance, Ḥamzah dies a conspicuously gruesome death, a selective intensification of the historical Ḥamzah's death. A woman named Hindah, whose son Ḥamzah has killed in battle, lies in wait for him by the roadside in a stealthy, dishonorable ambush, and treacherously attacks his steed, Ashqar:

[Hindah] came from behind and struck Ashqar such a sword blow that all his four feet were cut off. Amīr Ḥamzah was not alert; the moment his horse fell he landed on the ground. That ruinous bitch struck such a blow with her blood-drenched, poisoned sword at Amīr Ḥamzah's auspicious head, that the Amīr's head was separated from his body. And cutting open the Amīr's stomach, she pulled out his liver

⁶ Basgöz 1986, pp. 5-23.

⁷ Mills 1978.

⁸ Bilgrāmī 1969. This is the most recent printing; the Bilgrāmī version was first published by the Naval Kishor Press in 1871 and has been kept in print by their heirs with only minor changes ever since. The Bilgrāmī version was, in turn, based on an earlier version by Ghalib Lakhnavi.

and ate it, and she cut his auspicious body into seventy pieces (542).⁹

The *dāstān* account seizes on the most shocking features of the historical Ḥamzah's actual death—the mutilation of his body and chewing of his liver by a woman—and exaggerates them by (1) removing his death from the battlefield to an undignified roadside ambush; (2) by ignoring the other Muslims whose bodies were also mutilated after Uḥud; (3) by making the woman herself Ḥamzah's slayer, making her actually devour—not just chew and spit out—his liver; and (4) by insisting that his body was utterly dismembered into seventy pieces. Ḥamzah thus becomes a hero whose final destiny, clearly established by tradition and here emphatically reinforced, is death, dismemberment and abject humiliation at the hands of a treacherous woman, a woman who even by eating his liver, practices cannibalism.

The glories of Ḥamzah's early life, however, tend to cast a veil over this fate. Like a proper hero, Ḥamzah is born into a noble Arab family—after dreams and prophecies have revealed his destined future triumphs, both in the Realm of the World and in the Realm of Qāf. He is motherless since his mother died at his birth; he is born at an astrologically auspicious moment which earns him the vague but potent title of *Ṣāhib-qirān*, "Lord of the Conjunction [of planets]," a title taken very seriously in the narrative. He shows his mettle even in childhood and by the age of fourteen or so has begun to acquire a band of loyal companions. With them he travels to the court of Naushervān, the King of Kings; at Madā'in [Ctesiphon], he rescues Naushervān and his Sasanians from invaders and fends off court intrigues and treacheries. Naushervān's daughter Mihr Nigār chances to see him while

⁹ All such parenthesized numbers refer to the Bilgrāmī 1969 edition. Translations are my own.

he is bathing in a water-channel in the garden; she falls in love with him and throws down her necklace so that he looks up to her balcony and sees her too. He falls deeply in love with her and manages to meet with her secretly on several occasions. With great difficulty, the lovers arrange to have several passionate, but chaste meetings. They drink wine, talk, and look into each other's eyes. Finally Ḥamzah asks Naushervān for his daughter's hand. Naushervān, secretly displeased at the lowly birth of this Arab upstart who has saved his throne from invaders, imposes on him a series of dangerous tasks. Ḥamzah, undaunted, undertakes quest after quest to win his true love.

One of these early quests takes him to Greece, where after heroic exploits, he is offered the hand of King Faredūn's daughter, Nāhīd Maryam. Ḥamzah refuses, citing the vow of strict fidelity which he has made to Mihr Nigār:

I would marry the daughter of King Faredūn right now, but what excuse could I give to the princess? For I have sworn to her, "Until I marry you, even if I'm face-to-face with a Pari I'll consider her a witch!"¹⁰

But he is then persuaded by his loyal but unscrupulous companion 'Amar—who has been bribed by King Faredūn:

'Amar said "Oh *Ṣāhib-qirān*, are you in your right mind? Are men ever truthful in such matters? They make even stronger vows to women and then always break their word! And then, someone who is a *Ṣāhib-qirān*, a master of crown and throne, a

¹⁰ The "Pari" race will be discussed below.

taker of tribute—he can't keep his trousers fastened merely for Mihr Nigār's sake! You go ahead and marry Nāhīd Maryam with a good will and enjoy yourself properly (186).

'Amar even promises that he himself will placate Mihr Nigār. Ḥamzah then agrees to marry Nāhīd Maryam, provided he does not have to "share a bed" with her until after he has married Mihr Nigār. This condition is willingly accepted.

But 'Amar "praised Nāhīd Maryam's beauty so lavishly that the Amīr grew impassioned"; Ḥamzah then, without further demur, "married Nāhīd Maryam and for two weeks remained absorbed in enjoyment and pleasure with her" (186).

Nāhīd Maryam is left behind in Greece, pregnant with a fine son, 'Amr (who will turn up later in the *dāstān*), while Ḥamzah moves on. His triumphs are so formidable that Naushervān suspects him of intending to seize the throne, but his loyalty and chivalry are always vindicated by events. The youthful Ḥamzah is a classic all-victorious *dāstān* hero, going from strength to strength and conquering everything and everyone he comes up against. All dangers are successfully overcome, with no losses; all difficulties eventually yield before his firm will and the Divine favor that supports him. Even his marriage to Mihr Nigār, the ultimate goal of all his quests, is finally fixed and is to take place in a matter of days.

Ḥamzah's very chivalry, however, compels him to answer a sudden distress call from Shahpāl, king of the Paris. The *Parī* (cognate with "fairy") race, as the *dāstān* audience knows, is born of fire; Paris can fly and live luxuriously in the fantastic Realm of Qāf, beyond the borders of the Realm of the World to which humans (who are children of Adam, made of

dust) are confined. Paris women—the men are called *Parīzāds*—are extremely beautiful and tend to have a weakness for mortal men. The Paris have helped Ḥamzah recover from a bad head wound which he sustained in battle; now he agrees to go for eighteen days to their realm of Qāf to subdue a rebellion by the Devs, a race of savage, powerful demons.

The Paris fly him off to Qāf, and at first he has a wonderful time in this superhuman realm. King Shahpāl welcomes him most sumptuously, with all the splendor Qāf can command; King Shahpāl's daughter Āsmān Parī—*āsmān* meaning "sky," with overtones of fate and destiny—secretly falls in love with him. In due course Ḥamzah manages by heroic exertion to kill the chief Dev, the ringleader of the rebellion. *Khizr*, a potent ally sent by Divine favor, then kills the Dev's mother who, as a powerful magician, is even more dangerous than her son. After this great victory, Ḥamzah is exhausted. Āsmān Parī finds him asleep in the hot sun; when he wakes she is "shading him with one wing, and fanning him with her other wing." He is not slow to respond:

He rose and embraced her, and showed her much affection, and kissed her moon-like cheek. Seeing her tenderness and love, he felt very much moved; her love and sincerity made him whole-heartedly enamored, and he said, "Oh dearest in the world, oh heart and soul of the *Ṣāhib-qirān*, why have you come here at such a time? It's quite remarkable that you've come!" Āsmān Parī replied, "I came when I heard the news of your victory, and I've also brought you a piece of good news: The king too is coming, he is so delighted at your

victory and the death of his enemies that he can hardly contain himself.”

The Amīr was very happy, and made that charming woman sit down beside him, and treated her most affectionately; he had begun to embrace and caress her and to declare his passion for her—when King Shahpāl’s party arrived like a spring breeze (285-86).

They all return to the court, where in the midst of magnificent festivities, ‘Abdur Raḥmān, Shahpāl’s *vazīr*, congratulates Ḥamzah on his good fortune: Shahpāl has consented to accept him as a son-in-law. Ḥamzah’s reaction is immediate and sharp.

The Amīr said, “I do not at all consent! It is not my custom to undertake such things when I’m in the position of a traveler. For if I married Āsmān Parī, I would have to postpone going to the Realm of the World—I would then stay here with her, absorbed in luxury and enjoyment. And the second problem is that I promised Mihr Nigār, the daughter of Naushervān, the King of Kings of the Seven Realms, ‘Until I marry you, I won’t even steal a glance at anyone else.’ Thus I cannot break my vow, and I cannot turn aside from my oath and promise. To break a vow is very improper; it is incumbent upon every person to uphold his vows (286).”

‘Abdur Raḥmān cleverly replies, “Oh *Ṣāhib-qirān*, you made that promise in the Realm of the World, and this is the Realm

of Qāf!” When this persuasion fails, he resorts to bribes, promising to send Ḥamzah back to the World after one year. Ḥamzah then yields: “The Amīr saw no recourse but to agree, for without their consent he couldn’t manage to leave that place” (286).

The wedding itself is an occasion of wonder and awe. It is described so elaborately and lingeringly that it looms as a real high point of the narrative, for, in a paratactic world, one great measure of significance is the number of words spent in describing an episode. The wedding actually moves the narrator, most uncharacteristically, to address the audience directly for a moment, marveling at God’s power to bridge the boundaries between species:

Then having put a royal robe of honor on the *Ṣāhib-qirān*, they mounted him on a horse and escorted him from the Pavilion of Solomon to the royal ladies’ apartments; the bridegroom arrived at the bride’s house. Look at the marvelous power of the Lord, that a human arrived in the land of the Paris in such style!

When one watch of the night remained, ‘Abdur Raḥmān joined the Amīr with Āsmān Parī in marriage. Both bride and groom gave their formal consent, both achieved their heart’s desire. How many lands of Qāf the king gave to Āsmān Parī in dowry! Over and above this, he showered many favors on the Amīr. Then the *Ṣāhib-qirān* entered the palace. Through the Lord’s marvelous power, on that very night an embryo found lodging in Āsmān Parī’s womb. Through the Lord’s marvelous

power, a son of Adam made of dust and a Pari made of fire—both their natures came to be in harmony.

In the morning the Amīr bathed, dressed, and entered the court. A joyous and festive gathering began. Through this close kinship all distance vanished from between them. To make a long story short, every sort of luxury was provided for the Amīr night and day, all his desires were at once fulfilled. But night and day the Amīr kept counting the days: “When will the year be over so I can go to the Realm of the World and have the joy of seeing my near and dear ones, and tell them about this realm, and show them the strange and remarkable gifts I’ve obtained in the land of the Paris!” (288).

This is the high point of Ḥamzah’s life as a hero: He has fearlessly come so far; he has dared and achieved so much, he could almost be said to have transcended the limitations of his human birth. But he has mixed feelings, a typical malaise of the sons of Adam. He relishes the super-human world of Qāf—but he also longs to go home and tell everyone about it. Moreover, nine months later, Āsmān Parī gives birth not to a son, but to a daughter—which makes Ḥamzah “thoroughly unhappy” and “very disturbed in his heart.” Shahpāl consoles him: “Oh Amīr this is the decree of God, and nobody’s at fault in it! It’s not an occasion for you to be grieved; this is not how the wise behave” (295). When Ḥamzah hears that his daughter Quraishah is destined to wield kingly power in Qāf, he cheers up. He continues to have success in every battle; he kills huge, vicious, monstrous Devs with ease and becomes known as the

“Earthquake of Qāf” and the “Younger Solomon.” He lives in royal luxury, seeing marvels, acquiring gifts.

But then one night Ḥamzah dreams of Mihr Nigār. He cries out and suddenly awakens and begins to “weep, loudly and uncontrollably, and to drown himself in tears and sobs of sorrow.” Āsmān Parī asks the reason for his grief.

The Amīr said, “How can I tell you of the wretchedness I feel? I’m so sick of life, I feel like destroying my life with my own hands!” Then she replied, “Please at least say something! Tell me about your grief.” The Amīr said, “Āsmān Parī, for the Lord’s sake please send me at once to the Realm of the World—however it can be done, please have me taken there! Just now in my dream I saw Mihr Nigār in the the most terrible state, I saw her utterly distraught with grief at being parted from me.”

Āsmān Parī asked, “Oh Father of Greatness, who is Mihr Nigār? Do tell me about her and explain this fully to me.”

The Amīr said “She is the daughter of Naushervān, King of the Seven Realms, and she’s my beloved. In beauty and radiance she is peerless, and she is my own true love to whom I’ve lost my heart.”

Āsmān Parī hearing this replied, “So now I know! You have an attachment in another place, and you love some daughter of Adam too! So why should you not clamor to go

there, why should you not eat your heart out in her absence? Listen, Amīr, tell the truth: Is Mihr Nigār even more beautiful than I, is she so peerless in loveliness, charm, airs, and graces that even when I'm with you you pine to be with her and love her with a thousand loves?" From the Amīr's mouth there burst out uncontrollably, "Even Mihr Nigār's serving maids are thousands of times more beautiful and charming than you!" (308).

The result is a furious marital quarrel during which, as can be seen, Ḥamzah does not behave very tactfully. In the course of the quarrel Ḥamzah's *Ṣāhib-qirānī* too becomes an issue: Āsmān Parī sneers, "Don't go boasting that you're the *Ṣāhib-qirān*, and descended from Ḥaẓrat Abraham the Prophet, and superior to me in birth and station!" For she herself, she points out, is descended from Ḥaẓrat Solomon, "a most powerful and glorious Prophet"; thus her birth is "not in any way lower" than Ḥamzah's (308). This quarrel seals Ḥamzah's fate; he is unable to get back to the Realm of the World. Again and again Shahpāl sends him off on a throne borne through the air by four Jinns; again and again Āsmān Parī intimidates the bearers, and they abandon him in the wilderness of Qāf, where he wanders, killing Devs and breaking magic spells (*tilisms*) and having other adventures, until he is recaptured.

Āsmān Parī is simply more powerful than Ḥamzah, and he cannot control her. In the course of a series of further confrontations he is reduced to lamenting and begging, weeping and threatening, trying to run away, but all in vain. She repeatedly makes promises, breaks them, mocks his helplessness, and finally treats him with open disdain. Āsmān Parī's father King Shahpāl cannot manage her either and

finally renounces his throne in despair at her behavior, leaving her in full command; only her daughter Quraishah is not afraid of her and helps to defend Ḥamzah from her wrath. *Khizr* eventually breaks the news to Ḥamzah: having come to Qāf for eighteen days, he is destined to stay for eighteen years.

By marrying the queen of the Paris, it seems that Ḥamzah has overreached himself. Yet he never wanted to marry her at all: it was a result of the situation he was in; it was simply something that was part of his destiny. Is he then an innocent victim, bearing no responsibility for his fate? Remembering Ḥamzah's first reaction to Āsmān Parī, we may well take a more complex view. We see his immediate strong response to her, as he calls her his "dearest in the world" and begins to embrace her and declare his passion—then almost immediately thereafter he high-mindedly takes refuge behind his vow to Mihr Nigār never even to "steal a glance" at anyone else! And he has the gall to make lofty remarks about always keeping one's word! How can we not remember the marriage to Nāhid Maryam? Ḥamzah then seems to accept 'Amar's convenient arguments that men break vows to women and that a *Ṣāhib-qirān* can't possibly "keep his pants fastened" for any one woman. Ḥamzah has broken his own vows to Mihr Nigār which creates an appropriate symmetry when Āsmān Parī breaks her vows to him. Ḥamzah enjoys the rewards of his special status as a *Ṣāhib-qirān* which makes it right that he should also pay a price for it.

Ḥamzah's marriage with Āsmān Parī has such staggering ups and downs that he finally, in desperation, divorces her and flees once again into the desert. There he kills a Dev, rescues two young boys whom the Dev had abducted, and promises to take the boys back to the World with him. The three seek passage on a ship that is about to set off for the Realm of the World. The ship owner declares that

the price of their passage is for Ḥamzah to marry his daughter. Ḥamzah, understandably, refuses.

The Amīr recoiled: "This cannot be—I refuse to marry! I feel a distaste for this deed." The Amīr rose and went away; the merchant's speech did not please him at all. But the two boys said to the merchant, "If you arrange marriages for us as well, then we will make the Amīr agree. We take this upon ourselves." The merchant said, "I agree."

The boys said to the Amīr, "Dear Power of God, why don't you marry? You will not only reach the World and get a woman for free, but also enjoy so many kinds of pleasures!" The Amīr said, "I am not willing to marry, I absolutely won't take a step along that road!" The boys replied, "Dear Power of God, you will have to marry! Your refusal will count for nothing; we see that it will only cause you grief." The Amīr said, "Am I to marry under pressure from you and ensnare myself in difficulties?" The boys said, "Certainly you must marry under pressure from us!" The Amīr burst out laughing at this conversation, and said, "All right, if you insist like this, then I'll marry; I will not cause you any kind of disappointment."

The boys joyfully ran to the merchant and reported the conversation and said, "There, sir, we made him agree, we made him give us a firm promise about it! Now please

marry him to your daughter, arrange for the wedding festivities." The merchant instantly married the Amīr to his daughter and married the boys to the daughters of some other person; he brought this task to a successful conclusion. In the morning, when the Amīr looked, Āsmān Parī was sleeping beside him and that merchant was [the *vazīr* of Qāf] 'Abdur Raḥmān. . . . Āsmān Parī, falling at the Amīr's feet, began beseeching and imploring him, and showing utter submissiveness. . . . "Oh, Amīr, in truth I will send you now to the World, I swear now that I won't commit any fault." Having no choice, the Amīr, together with the two boys, went along with Āsmān Parī to the Garden of Iram. Āsmān Parī celebrated with festivities for six months.

Then the Amīr again said one day to Āsmān Parī, "Oh Āsmān Parī, now send me off to the World! For I'm very tired of staying here, I have suffered very much at the separation from my near and dear ones." Āsmān Parī replied, "Oh Amīr, if God Most High wills, I'll send you off tomorrow morning. But please tell me if you'll come here again some time." The Amīr said, "Oh Queen of Qāf, just as here I long for Mihr Nigār, there I'll long for you; my heart will be eager to see you." Āsmān Parī was very pleased with this answer of the Amīr (377).

It seems that Ḥamzah has finally learned wisdom and has mastered the tact necessary in dealing with a woman more

powerful than he is. But once again fate—with the aid of his own temperament—conspires against him. The next morning, just as Āsmān Parī has seated him on a flying throne, and is loading him with gifts, word comes that her father Shahpāl has died. She begs Ḥamzah to stay for forty days more, until she has completed her father's funeral ceremonies. He agrees, and for thirty-nine days all goes well.

On the fortieth day, however, just before Āsmān Parī's return, Ḥamzah insists on opening the Dungeon of Solomon and releasing its captives—including two Paris whom he had somewhat casually married and whom Āsmān Parī had jealously imprisoned. But that was not all: he went out of his way to add insult to injury. "That night he slept with Raihān Parī and Qamar Chahrah in Āsmān Parī's bed, he possessed them and enjoyed them both" (381). Āsmān Parī soon gets word of it; predictably, she is enraged. "Just wait and see what I do to the *Ṣāhib-qirān* in revenge for this, what disasters and calamities I bring down on his head!" (382). Ḥamzah is once again in flight from his powerful wife's deadly anger. When she catches up with him, she is quite ready to kill him, and only Quraishah's forceful intervention prevents her from stabbing him to death as he sleeps.

If Ḥamzah has overreached himself by marrying a Parī, the *dāstān* also shows us the cruel destiny of a woman of the Cow-head race who similarly overreaches herself—by seeking to marry Ḥamzah. The story, though briefly told, is so striking that it is worth presenting in full. The Cow-heads, a vaguely conceived race about whom we know little more than their name, live in one of the borderlands of Qāf, and their king is named Samrāt (Emperor) Cow-head. When Ḥamzah, accompanied by the two boys, passes through the Cow-heads' domain, their king behaves most respectfully:

Coming out of the fort, he touched the dust of the Amīr's footsteps to his eyes. Everyone treated the Amīr with extreme honor; taking him into the fort, they showed him great hospitality, and celebrated for a number of days. The Amīr said to Samrāt Shāh, "Can you convey us across that river?" He replied, "If you will marry my daughter, whose name is Arvānah, then why not? I will convey you across the river and carry out your order." The Amīr refused.

But the boys said to Samrāt Shāh, "Prepare for the marriage; we will make the Amīr agree; we will insist on this matter." The king prepared for the marriage according to their custom and ordered his officers to collect the necessary items. The boys persuaded the Amīr to go through with the marriage; they delighted the king with this outcome. That night, when the Amīr lay down next to Arvānah, she wanted to embrace the Amīr and kiss him, to give herself joy. The Amīr slapped her so hard on the mouth that her front teeth were knocked out. Weeping, she went to her father, very sad and downcast, and told him the whole story.

He sent for the two boys and asked, "Why has the Earthquake of Qāf done this mischief, why did he strike my daughter?" The boys said, "It's the custom of our country to knock out the bride's teeth on the first night, so that the night will be

memorable. And we sons of Adam only sleep with our brides for the first time in the middle of a river and not in any other situation." Since the king was of the Dev race, he believed that it must be true. At once he ordered a boat and placed his daughter in it and prepared all the supplies necessary for a river trip. And he said to the boys, "Inform the Amīr so that he too may enter the boat."

Both boys, delighted, went to the Amīr, and recounted all these matters to him, and reported all the conversation that had taken place and said, "Please come along and enter the boat!" The Amīr, hearing the boys' words, laughed out loud and went with them and entered the boat. When they were on the river, Arvānah wished to sleep with the Amīr, she told him this longing of her heart. The Amīr bound her hand and foot and threw her in the river; he drowned the poor thing in the river of suffering. And he said to the captain, "Take us across quickly! Otherwise I won't leave one of you alive." The captain, out of fear, hoisted four or five sails on the mast and took them across at once. He did as the Amīr had said (384-85).

So ends the brief and unfortunate life of Arvānah Cow-head—married to Ḥamzah, murdered by her bridegroom.

In a highly patterned story, this episode is unique. Nowhere else in the *dāstān* is Ḥamzah guilty of anything like such callous brutality. The narrator, most

uncharacteristically, actually goes so far as to imply criticism of Ḥamzah's action by referring to Arvānah as the "poor thing," one whom Ḥamzah drowns in "the river of suffering." The ignorance, naivete, and presumption of the Cow-head king, who is described as a member of the Dev or demon race, is set off by the cynical, exploitative wit of the two boys as they take mocking advantage of his ignorance about the human race. (The two boys themselves, who confidently take such coquettish liberties with Ḥamzah, are suggestive as well as comic figures.) It is a cruel kind of humor, but the *dāstān* audience must have laughed. Probably the ludicrousness or outrageousness of Arvānah's aspirations—imagine the lordly *Ṣāhib-qirān*, uncle of the Prophet, with a cow-headed wife!—prevented Arvānah from receiving the sympathy often accorded by Ḥamzah to even the most wicked Devs. It should also be noted that this episode takes place in the course of Ḥamzah's homecoming, during his liminal journey from the Realm of Qāf back toward the Realm of the World. Clearly Ḥamzah, while finally escaping from a superhuman marriage, reacts far more violently against the very idea of a subhuman one. For inter-species marriages by humans in the *dāstān* world, hypergamy is obviously the one great rule.

When the predestined eighteen years in Qāf are over, Ḥamzah is rescued from the power of Āsmān Parī—by another woman. Bībī Āṣifā Bāṣafā, "Lady Āṣifā the Pure," the mother of the venerable brothers *Khizr* and Elias, commands a Divinely-given power: she turns Āsmān Parī's fiery nature into literal flames which all but burn her alive. From that point on, Āsmān Parī is a changed woman: rather disappointingly to the modern reader, she loses all her flamboyant bitchiness. Her few remaining appearances in the story are exemplary, with barely a flash of the old fire. She presides over Ḥamzah's long-delayed wedding to Mihr Nigār, bringing wedding gifts from Qāf which reconcile everybody to everything. Ḥamzah's marriage to the faithful Mihr Nigār is

the single longest and most elaborate scene in the *dāstān*; to Ḥamzah himself, it is clearly the ultimate fulfillment. He is finally able to live the human life he had wanted all along.

But by this time, the story is nearing its end. About two-fifths of the text deals with Ḥamzah's early years in Qāf, about two-fifths with the years in Qāf, and only one-fifth with the time after his return. Ḥamzah was gone for eighteen years; he is together with Mihr Nigār for perhaps eighteen more at the most, barely time enough for their only son, Qubād, to grow into a fine youth. Then suddenly disasters fall on Ḥamzah from all sides. 'Amr, Ḥamzah's son by Nāhīd Maryam, is killed in his sleep by a jealous woman to whom he has refused to make love. Soon afterwards Qubād is also killed in his sleep through the thoughtless machinations of his grandfather, Naushervān. And before long, Mihr Nigār herself is killed while fighting off a long-time suitor who is making a last desperate attempt to abduct her. The crazed grief Ḥamzah shows at this triple bereavement is unlike any of his other emotions in the *dāstān*. He sends away his companions and undertakes to live the rest of his life as a *faqīr*, tending Mihr Nigār's tomb in fulfillment of a vow he had made to her. Even when Ḥaẓrat Abraham himself appears to him in a dream and scolds him for showing such distress over "one woman" when he could have many others (452), Ḥamzah's resolve is not shaken.

But his enemies pursue him to the tomb; taking advantage of his weaponless condition, they kidnap him and torment him cruelly. Of course, his companions hasten to the rescue, and in the stress of battle he too becomes his old self again. He marries more women, conquers more champions, undertakes more quests, enjoys feasting and wine-drinking as much as ever. He fathers another fine son, Rustam Pīl-tan. But every so often an unaccountable, bizarre thing happens to him. On one such occasion, he is drugged in his sleep, bound, and actually carried bodily away by one of Naushervān's wives

who is infatuated with him. For two days he refuses to make love to her, despite threats to his life. Finally 'Amar arrives, and the woman runs off. As 'Amar prepares to loosen his bonds, Ḥamzah exerts his full strength and snaps them in an instant. 'Amar asks, "Why didn't you exert your strength and free yourself from captivity two days ago, why didn't you break your bonds before?" Ḥamzah cryptically replies, "All actions depend upon their proper time. And it was the Lord's will that a worthless woman should bind me" (483). The woman who abducted Ḥamzah is soon killed—by another woman, Gelī Savār, a warrior-princess whom Ḥamzah has married. Gelī Savār gives birth to another son, Badī'uz-Zamān, who grows up and becomes very dear to Ḥamzah. Life goes on—but it is now steadily winding down.

Toward the end of the story, Ḥamzah's life suddenly becomes much grimmer. It becomes necessary for him to fight with a series of frightful cannibal kings, including Saryāl bin Salsāl, one hundred forty yards (*gaz*) tall, ruler of the intriguingly named land of Qazā o Qadar, or "Fate and Destiny," located on the border of Qāf, but outside it (523). Ḥamzah eventually does defeat Saryāl and converts him to Islam.

While Ḥamzah is gone, however, his oldest surviving son, Rustam Pīl-tan, grows restless. Taking the whole army, he sets off to conquer another cannibal king and win his own share of glory. This king, Ahriman (named after the Zoroastrian principle of evil), is one hundred twenty-five yards tall and proves to be more than a match for the Muslim army. One champion attacks Ahriman and is soon most graphically dismembered and eaten: "The cannibals rushed to divide up every morsel of his flesh; they chewed up his bones, rib-cage and all." The next champion lasts a little longer, but then fares no better: "Finally, as they fought and fought, that cannibal seized Aljosh and ate him raw." Rustam himself,

though he escapes being eaten, is mortally wounded, for while fighting a cannibal he "exerted so much strength that the wall of his stomach burst" (526). The cannibals easily carry the day.

When Ḥamzah returns and learns of these deaths, he falls from his horse and rolls on the ground, distraught with grief. His companions try to console him: "Oh Amīr, there's no refuge against fate and destiny (*qazā o qadar*), no one can avert God's command for even the space of a breath" (527). They encourage him to continue his adventures, and he does so: he fights, subdues, and converts an even more important cannibal king, the huge Gā'olangī, ruler of the city of Alabaster, who becomes the last addition to his band of close companions. Together they travel on to attack another cannibal king, Kākh Bākh̄tarī, who is one hundred sixty yards tall; Ḥamzah fights and kills him too.

By now Ḥamzah's travels have taken him well into Zulmāt, the "Dark Regions." He must fight the last and worst king of all, the rudely named "Stonethrower the Bloodthirsty," who is one hundred ninety yards tall and rules the city of "Reed-thicket" (535). Ḥamzah does kill him, and destroys his city with fire—but at the cost of his whole army; as he wanders further in the Dark Regions, he loses his last beloved son Badī'uz-Zamān as well (540). He emerges from the Dark Regions having lost everything. It is time for him to return to Mecca for the last battle.

It is the former cannibal king Gā'olangī who actually summons him back: "You said that you would cause me to kiss the feet of the Final Prophet of the Age, God's peace and blessing be upon him, and would surely show me his auspicious beauty. So please now proceed to Mecca" (540). Ḥamzah does so; but Mecca is almost at once in danger from infidel armies of the "kings of Hind, Rūm, Syria, China,

Zanzibar and Turkestan," together with the usual Sasanians. These armies cleverly abandon the honorable tradition of single combat and make a unified attack. All Ḥamzah's remaining companions are killed in a single sentence: "Landhaur, and Sa'd bin 'Amr bin Ḥamzah, and 'Adī etc., all the comrades of Amīr Ḥamzah were martyred, to the last man" (541). Ḥamzah himself survives the battle, but while riding back from it, he suffers the far more degrading roadside death; he is duly dismembered into seventy pieces, with his liver eaten by Hindah.

In this particular telling of the story, the narrator has, by deft juxtapositions, conveyed to us the idea that Ḥamzah's own treacherous, sexually-motivated breaking of his vow to a woman is linked to a situation in which another woman, also sexually motivated, treacherously breaks her vows to him; that Ḥamzah's invocation of his *Ṣāhib-qirānī* as a justification for unique license is linked to situations in which his unique destiny of *Ṣāhib-qirānī* costs him suffering as well. Similarly the incursion of cannibal kings into Ḥamzah's life, which leads to the loss of all his surviving sons and the destruction of his whole army in the Dark Regions, serves to prepare the stage for his own grotesque death and dismemberment at the hands of a treacherous, cannibalistic woman.

By the time Ḥamzah dies, his life has thus formed a kind of trajectory: he has moved beyond the Realm of the World, high up into the superhuman Realm of Qāf; he has returned from Qāf to a brief period of happiness, longer years of mixed experience and slow decline, a descent into the subhuman realm of the Dark Regions, and a horrible death.¹¹ As I have

¹¹After his death, of course, the Prophet and the angels perform his last rites, and he is given a jewelled throne and a particularly high rank in heaven; but all this occupies less than a single page and is a postscript to the real story.

argued, the convergent themes that are emphasized in his death—treachery, suffering inflicted by powerful women, helplessness and humiliation, dismemberment and cannibalism—play their parts in his life as well, interwoven in striking and suggestive ways. These juxtapositions and resonances, never acknowledged within the narrative itself, come instead to inhabit the reader's imagination; the crevices between the paratactic facts become almost more compelling than the facts themselves.

The trajectory of Ḥamzah's life is also a more general image of human destiny: beneath all the daily paratactic ups and downs, it is clear that his tremendous ascent ends in a decisive fall. The great divide, the separation between Creator and "creature of dust," is absolute, and Ḥamzah is never allowed to forget it. As van Buitenen has pointed out, there are no Islamic Vidyādhara.¹² All human roads lead to the dust. Ḥamzah dares and conquers far more loftily than ordinary mortals—and then is brought down even lower into the dust than ordinary mortals. He is the *Ṣāhib-qirān*; he is a mighty champion, but he is human. His life is our common fate writ large.

¹² van Buitenen 1959, pp. 99-105.

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