

Introduction, Part One: The medieval Persian romance tradition

Dāstān and *qiṣṣah*¹ in Persian both mean “story,” and the narrative genre to which they refer goes back to medieval Iran. At least as early as the ninth century, it was a widely popular form of story-telling: dastan-narrators practiced their art not merely in coffee houses, but in royal palaces as well. They told tales of heroic romance and adventure--stories about gallant princes and their encounters with evil kings, enemy champions, demons, magicians, Jinns, divine emissaries, tricky secret agents called *ayyārs*, and beautiful princesses who might be human or of the *Parī* (“fairy”) race.

Dastans had no official religious or social purpose within their culture, and therefore no externally prescribed form. They existed for the sheer pleasure of the story-telling experience: created by the narrator’s artistic authority, they were sustained by the listeners’ responsiveness, by the perpetual question, ‘Then what happened?’ Dastan-narrators drew on the revered national verse epic *Shāh nāmāh* (The Book of Kings) (c1010),² and incorporated into its framework folk traditions of all kinds, creating narratives that were swept along by the strong currents of the imagination. Their ultimate subject matter was always simple: “*razm o bazm*,” the battlefield and the elegant courtly life, war and love.

A number of such dastans were current in medieval Iran, and their well-known plots offered frameworks upon which each narrator practiced his own kind of embroidery. As a professional, the dastan-narrator provided passages of elaborate rhyming prose at high points in the story (especially when describing gardens, nights, women, or battlefields), inserted verses from well-known poets, and in general catered most carefully to the mood and tastes of his listeners.

William L. Hanaway, who has made a close study of Persian dastans, describes them as “popular romances” which were “created, elaborated, and transmitted” by professional story-tellers. He mentions five as the principal ones surviving from the pre-Šafavid (i.e., fifteenth century and earlier) period: those which grew up around the adventures of the world-conqueror Alexander, the great Persian king Darius, the Prophet’s uncle Ḥamzah, the legendary king Fīroz Shāh, and--an interesting counterpoint--a humbly born trickster-hero named Samak the Ayyār.³ Only a few translations of these texts into Western languages have ever been made.⁴

¹Both “dastan” (*dāstān*) and “qissah” (*qiṣṣah*) were used interchangeably, with the latter term predominating. To these terms could be appended either “-go” (*go*), “teller,” or “-khvan” (*kḥvān*), “reciter, reader,” to refer to the narrators of the tales.

²An abridged but useful English version of this important text is Reuben Levy’s *The Epic of the Kings*.

³William Hanaway, “Formal Elements in the Persian Popular Romances,” pp. 140-143. This latter romance has been studied in Marina Gaillard, *Le livre de Samak-e Ayyār; Structure et idéologie du roman persan médiéval*.

⁴Two abridged English translations are available: Minoo S. Southgate *Iskandarnamah; A Persian Medieval Alexander Romance*; and William L. Hanaway, *Love and War: Adventures from the Firuz Shah Nama of Sheikh Bighami*. One French translation has been begun, but not completed: Frédérique Razavi, *Samak-e Ayyār*, vol. 1.

It is hard to be certain about the earliest sources and origins of such romances; inevitably, the surviving manuscripts leave many questions unanswered. Moreover, since the dastans lived at their fullest in performance, the written forms they were given from time to time cannot speak with complete authority about their “real” lives. The romances, even in the written “scripts” we have, are so clearly designed to be narrated orally and *heard* by a listening audience, that our lack of access to the medieval performance tradition must always remain a source of regret. According to one observer, the Ḥamzah story in particular was a staple of Teheran coffee-house performances as recently as the early 1930’s.⁵ It is hard to know to what extent we can extrapolate from modern parallels. An excellent study done in 1974-75 found the coffee-houses of Teheran playing host to resident professional narrators who spun out long, complex tales for a relatively stable clientele, filling in the crevices of the *Shāh nāmāh* with material from their notebooks, memories, and opinions.⁶ Another modern study found the Ḥamzah story occasionally told by Turkish coffee-house narrators in Azerbaijan.⁷

Of all the early dastans, the Ḥamzah romance is thought to be the oldest⁸; it probably originated in the eleventh century.⁹ In Hanaway’s view it also shows the “greatest direct influence” of the *Shāh nāmāh*; it is “structurally the simplest of all the romances,” since Ḥamzah himself “comes on the scene early and dominates it throughout the story.” Hanaway finds, however, one “glaring example of padding” in the plot: the “strangely incongruous” episode in which Ḥamzah goes to the land of Qāf and spends eighteen years among the non-human Devs (demons) and Parīs. The incongruity lies in the insertion of such a fantastic episode into “a very earthbound book”--a book which otherwise contains “practically nothing of the marvelous or supernatural.” Hanaway concludes that the whole Qāf episode has no apparent “structural function,” and could even be “deleted without any serious damage to the story.” Apart from the Qāf episode, the Ḥamzah story thus has the virtue of simplicity, though it lacks the “variety and movement” of, for example, the later romance about Samak the Ayyār, in which “numerous strands are woven harmoniously together,” and even a flashback--Samak’s recounting of a childhood experience--appears.¹⁰

⁵D. M. Lang and G. M. Meredith-Owens, “*Amiran-Darejaniani*; A Georgian Romance and its English Rendering”; see p. 474 for discussion of the Ḥamzah cycle’s continuing popularity, including this observation made by E. Bloch in 1934.

⁶Mary Ellen Page, *Naqqali and Ferdowsi: Creativity in the Iranian National Tradition*, includes detailed accounts of their narratives. Nowadays these storytellers are called *naqqāl*--derived from *naql*, “anecdote, story”--and according to Page they do not narrate the old romances as such, though they may freely borrow material from them.

⁷Ilhan Başgöz, in “Turkish *Hikaye*-Telling Tradition in Azerbaijan, Iran,” finds that both the *Ḥamzah nāmāh* and the *Shāh nāmāh* are told during the two holy months of the year, when secular *hikaye* narratives are not acceptable (p. 394).

⁸Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” p. 152. For a conflicting view, see Alessandro Bausani, “Hikaya--Persian,” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (new series) 3:373.

⁹Lang and Meredith-Owens, “*Amiran-Darejaniani*,” p. 473.

¹⁰William L. Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances Before the Safavid Period*, pp. 196, 237-238, 230. The Ḥamzah text on which he bases his discussion is Ja far Shi ār, ed., *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah*.

The romance of Ḥamzah goes back--or at least purports to go back--to the life of its hero, Ḥamzah ibn Abd ul-Muṭṭalib, the paternal uncle of the Prophet. According to the earliest biographical source, Ḥamzah was the strongest man of his tribe and “the most unyielding.” He was an outdoorsman, “fond of hunting.” After he accepted Islam, he was impetuously willing to use force in its defense: even in the early days at Mecca, he once struck a violent blow at someone who had been reviling the Prophet, and cried out, “Will you insult him when I follow his religion, and say what he says? Hit me back if you can!” Ḥamzah followed the Prophet 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 in the groin by a javelin. The javelin-thrower was a slave who had been promised his freedom in return for Ḥamzah’s death; his act was instigated by a woman named Hind bint Utbah, whose relatives Ḥamzah had killed at Badr. Hind bint Utbah then went to the battlefield and mutilated the dead Ḥamzah’s body, cutting off his ears and nose, cutting out his liver and chewing it to fulfill the vow of vengeance she had made. Later, when the Prophet conquered Mecca, Hind bint Utbah “came veiled and disguised” before him, fearful of punishment; she accepted Islam, and was pardoned.¹¹

It has been argued that the romance of Ḥamzah may actually have begun with the adventures of a Persian namesake of the original Ḥamzah: Ḥamzah ibn Abdullāh, a member of a radical Islamic sect called the Ḳhārijites, who was the leader of an insurrectionary movement against the caliph Hārūn ur-Rashīd and his successors. This Persian Ḥamzah lived in the early ninth century, and seems to have been a dashing rebel whose colorful exploits gave rise to many stories. As these stories gained circulation they were eventually transferred to the earlier Ḥamzah, who was an orthodox Muslim champion acceptable to all.¹² This conjecture, though attractive, rests on circumstantial evidence alone; it cannot be substantiated, as far as I know, from any evidence within the manuscripts themselves. What the romance claims to be about is the life--and grisly death--of the Arab Ḥamzah, the Prophet’s uncle; though this life is seen through very Persian eyes.¹³

In early medieval Iran, the romance about the life of Ḥamzah was only one of a number of similar stories, and did not particularly stand out among its peers; it was, as we have seen, on the brief, simple and straightforward side, while other early romances had been more elaborately developed. Yet the Ḥamzah story was unique in its ability to grow, to ramify, and to travel: it gradually spread over immense areas of the Muslim world. It was soon translated into Arabic; there is a twelfth-century Georgian version, and a fifteenth-century Turkish version twenty-four volumes long.¹⁴ It also exists in sixteenth-century Malay and Javanese versions,¹⁵

¹¹A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad; A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 131-132, 283, 299, 375-376, 385-387, 553.

¹²Lang and Meredith-Owens, “*Amiran-Darejaniani*,” pp. 475-477.

¹³Somewhat confusingly, there also exists a traditional Arabic Ḥamzah romance, the *Sīrat Ḥamzah*, but its hero is “an entirely different person who is, however, some relative of the Prophet.” See G. M. Meredith-Owens, “Ḥamza b. Abd al-Muṭṭalib,” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (new series) 3:153.

¹⁴Lang and Meredith-Owens, “*Amiran-Darejaniani*,” pp. 471-474.

¹⁵Ph. S. Van Ronkel, *De Roman van Amir Hamza*.

and in Balinese and Sudanese ones as well.¹⁶ Moreover, even in Iran the story continued to develop over time: by the mid-nineteenth century the Ḥamzah romance had grown to such an extent that it was printed in a version about twelve hundred very large pages in length.¹⁷ By this time the dastan was often called *Rumūz-e Ḥamzah* (The Subtleties of Ḥamzah). And by this time, the Ḥamzah romance had made itself conspicuously at home in India as well.

¹⁶G. M. Meredith-Owens, “Ḥamza b. Abd al-Muṭṭalib,” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (new series) 3:152-154.

¹⁷This printed version, *Kitāb-e rumūz-e Ḥamzah* (Teheran, AH 1274-76 [1857-59]), is in the British Library.