

Introduction, Part Seven:

Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah: the narrative

The real action of the dastan--speaking now of the Bilgrāmī version which has been chosen as our text--begins with Ḥamzah's birth and ends with his death. His birth is the fulfillment of prophecy: although he is born in Mecca, an obscure corner of the Persian empire, he is sought out and honored by the vazir of the mighty emperor Naushervān, for he is destined to rescue Naushervān from his enemies. Along with Ḥamzah his two closest companions, Amar, Ayyār and Muqbil the Faithful, are also born; the wise vazir Buzurchmihr predicts great destinies for them all. All three boys lose their mothers at birth, and grow up together in the house of Ḥamzah's father, Abdul Muṭṭalib. As they grow older, their characters develop along very different lines: Ḥamzah appears as the perfect knightly hero, strong, pious, generous and brave, loyal and trusting; Amar as the consummate trickster, clever, cruel, greedy, selfish, and unscrupulous, yet finally loyal to Ḥamzah; Muqbil as quiet, disciplined, self-effacing yet proud, a great archer, the one companion whom Ḥamzah will always keep with him when he sends all the rest away. The boys are soon honored by divine favor, in the form of specially efficacious gifts and powers bestowed on them by a series of venerable emissaries. Adventures and challenges begin to come their way.

Ḥamzah's exploits now take him on long journeys, but these always seem to begin and end in Ctesiphon (Madāfn), the imperial city, where the vacillating Naushervān alternately rewards and betrays him. He meets the love of his life, Naushervān's daughter Mihr Nigār, and sets out to win her hand. His battles and conquests, and his chivalrous behavior, steadily enlarge his small band of devoted companions. Despite all vicissitudes, Ḥamzah's life is on a rising curve, and things are going his way: he finally wins Naushervān's grudging consent to his marriage with Mihr Nigār. Just before the wedding, however, he is wounded in a battle, and rescued by the vazir of the Parī king Shahpāl, ruler of the realm of Qāf. In return for this act of kindness, Ḥamzah gallantly agrees to subdue the rebellious Devs who have seized Shahpāl's kingdom. The whole expedition to Qāf is to take eighteen days, and Ḥamzah insists on fulfilling this debt of honor before his wedding. We learn, however, that he is destined to be detained in Qāf not for eighteen days, but for eighteen years. At this point, the shape of the story radically changes: adventures take place simultaneously in Qāf and on earth, and the dastan moves back and forth in reporting them. While Ḥamzah in Qāf is killing Devs, trying to deal with Shahpāl's powerful daughter Āsmān Parī whom he has

been forced to marry, and looking desperately for ways to get home, ,Amar in the (human) World is holding Ḥamzah's forces together, moving from fort to fort, and trying to defend Mihr Nigār from Naushervān's efforts to recapture her.

After eighteen years, much suffering, and more divine intervention, Ḥamzah does finally escape from Qāf; he makes his way home, and is reunited with his loyal companions. In the longest and most elaborate scene in the dastan, he marries the faithful Mihr Nigār. But by this time, the story is nearing its end. About two-fifths of the text deals with Ḥamzah's early years, about two-fifths with the years in Qāf, and only one-fifth with the time after his return. The remaining years of Ḥamzah's long life are filled with activity; some of it is fruitful, but usually in a kind of equivocal way. Ḥamzah and Mihr Nigār have one son, Qubād, who is killed at an early age; soon afterwards, Mihr Nigār herself is killed. Ḥamzah, distraught, vows to spend the rest of his life tending her tomb. But his enemies pursue him there, kidnap him, and torment him; his old companions rally round to rescue him, and his old life reclaims him. He fights against Naushervān and others, travels, has adventures, marries a series of wives. His sons and grandsons by various wives appear one by one, perform heroic feats, and frequently die young. He and ,Amar have a brief but traumatic quarrel. Toward the very end of his life he must enter the Dark Regions, pursuing a series of frightful cannibal kings; while their incursions are directly incited by Naushervān, ,Amar's own act of vicarious cannibalism seems somehow implicated as well. Almost all Ḥamzah's army is lost in the Dark Regions, and he returns in a state of grief and desolation. Finally he is summoned by the Prophet, his nephew, back to Mecca to beat off an attack by the massed infidel armies of the world. He succeeds, losing all his companions except ,Amar in the process, but dies at the hands of the woman Hindah, whose son he had killed. She devours his liver, cuts his body into seventy pieces, then hastily accepts Islam to save herself. The Prophet and the angels pray over every piece of the body, and Ḥamzah is rewarded with the high celestial rank of Commander of the Faithful.

It can be seen that there are a few shreds of tenuous historicity in parts of the story. The dastan-Ḥamzah, like the historical one, is born in Mecca, the son of ,Abdul Muṭṭalib; he is thus the Prophet's uncle. He is a strong and gallant defender of the true faith, who serves the cause of the Prophet and of emerging Islam (associated in the dastan with the monotheistic faith of Abraham). The dastan-Ḥamzah dies a somewhat historically realistic death: he is murdered by a vengeful woman who mutilates his corpse and later accepts Islam; his body is prayed over and honored by the Prophet. His geopolitical situation is also somewhat plausible: Mecca was in fact on the far borders of the Persian empire at the time, while Ctesiphon was the imperial city. The dastan-,Amar seems to have borrowed his

name from a genuine early Muslim figure.¹ The dastan-Naushervān too has a real source for his identity: shortly before the Prophet's time there had been a Sasanian king called Khusrau Anūshīrvān (r.531-79) and there was a contemporary one called Khusrau Aparvīz (r.591-628); it is easy to see how the two might have been conflated.

Apart from these extremely limited correspondences, however, the dastan is clearly not historical. It can best be called Persian-traditional, since its debt to the *Shāh nāmāh* is immense and obvious. It is the *Shāh nāmāh*, not historical fact, which establishes Kasrā Nūshīrvān as a king famous for justice, and tells numerous anecdotes about his wise and virtuous vazir Buzurgmihr.² Above all, a number of Ḥamzah's feats and adventures clearly correspond to those of Rostam, setting up a kind of emulative rivalry which Ḥamzah himself proclaims.³ Apart from many changes and additions of detail in Ḥamzah's specific adventures, the substantive changes from the early Persian *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah* into Ashk's, Ġhālib's, and Bilgrāmī's Urdu versions are largely shifts in emphasis: a decreased respect for Naushervān; an enhanced respect for Ḥamzah and his one Indian companion, Landhaur; a livelier interest in Amar and his feats, especially vulgar ones; a much more serious concern with Ḥamzah's visit to Qāf and with other elements of supernatural adventure. It was not for nothing that Ġhālib Lakhnāvī added two new elements to the traditional Persian ones: according to him, as we have seen, the dastan is made up of *razm*, *bazm*, *ṭilism*, and *ayyārī*--in effect, war, courtly life and love, magic, and trickery.

All of which does not prevent the Bilgrāmī text from maintaining, however erratically, a pretense of historicity. Two rival schools of historians are quoted in one chapter; 'Amar's own testimony is cited by the narrator in another; numerous chapter introductions emphasize the purported derivation from chroniclers' reports. This claim to historicity seems at times to have created awkward consequences within the tradition: one recent Urdu version devotes its

¹See Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, translated by Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): 'Amr bin Umayya Damrī [sic] was a disciple (1:621) of Salmān Fārisī, "the spiritual adviser of the Family of the Prophet," and as Salmān became an important mystical figure in the theology of certain Shī'ite groups (1:300-301, 3:34-35, etc.), 'Amr Damrī sometimes played an ancillary role (2:93). Sharar maintained that the historical 'Amr bin Umayyah Ḥamzī had been, before his conversion, a terrifying, murderous bandit famous for his great speed; see Suhail Aḥmad Kḥān, *Dāstānoḥ kī alāmātī kā fīāt*, p. 109.

²See Levy, *The Epic of the Kings*, pp. 324-334.

³In fact, in the early Persian *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah* Buzurgmihr is originally sent by Nūshīrvān not to honor the infant Ḥamzah as a predestined rescuer--but to kill him as a predestined rival. Ja, far Shi,ār, ed., *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah*, vol. 1, p. 24.

last twenty-eight pages to explaining most carefully and emphatically that ‘Amar does *not* represent the Caliph ,Umar.⁴ Some modern Urdu critics have made a point of ferreting out glimpses of South Asian cultural history from dastans⁵; this is, it seems to me, a doubtful project, of no more than peripheral interest at best.

The narrative itself constantly undercuts the pretense of historicity by playing fast and loose not only with historical accuracy but with consistency as well. A classic religious potpourri occurs in Hell-cave Bāno’s funeral procession, which features Brahmans, conches, bells, invocations of “one hundred seventy-five gods,” fireworks, praise for Lāt and Manāt, and a group of fire-worshippers. There are also flagrant, explicit anachronisms: Buzurchmihr gives rupees to the nobles of Ctesiphon (Chapter One), ,Amar recites a verse explicitly attributed to the nineteenth-century Urdu poet Šābir Bilgrāmī (Chapter Eight). The dastan’s claims to historicity were not of course taken seriously by the sophisticated; Ġhālīb, as we have seen, praised dastans for allowing one to hear “what no one had ever seen or heard.” It makes no more sense to expect--or even want--historical accuracy in a dastan, than to read James Bond books as a reliable source of information about the British Secret Service. At the heart of all romance lies the dream-nightmare double vision, the free play of fantasy over time and space.

The story of Ḥamzah should be taken for what it is: a romance which has traveled through long distances in space and time, and has developed a complex history of its own. As Hanaway has noted, the dastan is organized above all by its focus on Ḥamzah’s life, from birth to death. Not too surprisingly, therefore, Ḥamzah’s relationships with a few crucial characters serve to shape the whole story. Among all such characters, Ḥamzah’s foster brother, ,Amar, holds pride of place. He is in fact almost an alter ego for Ḥamzah: as greedy as Ḥamzah is generous, as unscrupulous as Ḥamzah is honorable, as vulgar as Ḥamzah is refined, as roundabout as Ḥamzah is straightforward.

,Amar is an *ayyār*--and what is that? Any answer we can give must be based on extrapolation, for nowhere do we have a definitive origin-myth or code of rules for *ayyārī*.⁶ The dastan treats it as a special kind of profession, passed on from master to pupil; there is an *ayyārī* dress and an *ayyārī* language by which members of the profession can recognize their peers. (Interestingly, Ḥamzah too knows this language, for he and ,Amar are described as using it for secrecy in times

⁴Ratan aiñḍ Kampanī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah mukammal chār ḥiṣṣe*, pp. 308-336. ,Amar is a (deliberately mispronounced) variant of ,Amr, the diminutive of ,Umar.

⁵See for example Rāhī Ma,sūm Rizā, *Ṭilism-e hoshrubā*, and Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb*.

⁶For a discussion of the subject see Sayyid Aḳhtar Mas,ūd Rizvī, “Kuchh ,ayyāroñ ke bāre meñ,” in his *Fikrī kāvisheñ* (Peshawar: Maktabah-e Shāhīn, n.d.), pp. 5-29.

of danger; Baḫhtak also uses it.) *Ayyārs* seem to be a normal part of a courtly retinue, and can defect to another king or feudal lord if discontented; kings have whole troops of them, though only a few emerge as individuals. They specialize in reconnaissance, espionage, disguise (impersonating women with implausible ease), commando tactics (scaling walls, tunneling into fortresses, killing sentries, knocking enemies unconscious with drugs), and other forms of guerrilla warfare, thievery, and dirty tricks. *Ayyārs* are not really part of the courtly elite, and so have less dignity to uphold; they are tremendously given to playing practical jokes, especially vulgar ones, on each other and on their enemies. Bausani refers to them as “trickster figures.”⁷ The description of Amar’s *ayyārī* equipment near the end of Chapter Four is, in my opinion, one of the high points of the whole text.

Amar, unlike Ḥamzah, has what can truly be called a wicked sense of humor. At times he laughs at himself, and far more often he manages to laugh at others. Apart from the running joke of Ādī’s gargantuan appetite, Amar is responsible for virtually all of the considerable amount of humor in the dastan. Not only is the content of Amar’s humor entertaining, but the very fact of its presence is notable as well, for humor has been held to be dangerous to the “high style” of romance. As Field notes, Malory uses a minimum of humor: “The strong and simple emotional responses which romance educes demand that humor be carefully controlled if introduced at all, or it may deflate the reader’s whole reaction.”⁸ But in Chapter Nine, the sublime heights of Ḥamzah’s rapture over Mihr Nigār, and the scatological crudity of Baḫhtak’s being forced to foul his clothing and carpet, occur literally in the same room at the same time--yet thanks to the interposed figure of Amar, Ḥamzah’s dignity is not jeopardized. By the same token, Ḥamzah keeps Amar’s unbounded, cruel humor within some kind of necessary restraint. It is not surprising that John Gilchrist of Fort William College, the first Westerner to comment on the Urdu Ḥamzah romance, singled out, as we have seen, “the wonderful feats and ingenious pranks of Umeer Humzu’s squire Omr-yar” for special praise.

Ḥamzah and Amar together are a natural, narratively effective pair. They are two halves of a whole: the adult and the child, the king and the jester, the feudal knight and the wild barbarian, the straightforward soldier and the devious guerrilla, the patron and the manipulator, the man who recognizes certain limits and the man who recognizes none. In classic fairy-tale style, the dastan expresses conflicts not by internalizing them within a single character’s mind, but by

⁷See Alessandro Bausani, “An Islamic Echo of the ‘Trickster’? The *Ayyārs* in Indo-Persian and Malay Romances.”

⁸P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, p. 109.

embodying clashing values in different characters and then examining their interactions. It might even be said that in the course of the story Ḥamzah learns the limits of his power over ,Amar. Compare, for example, his reaction on the two occasions when ,Amar kills a prisoner without permission: on the first occasion, wrath and retribution; then, after he has seen the results of his behavior, silent resignation when the same thing happens again.

Ḥamzah and ,Amar act together while they can--that is to say, during the first and last parts of the story. During the middle period of their lives, Ḥamzah is trapped in Qāf, so the two do not see each other for eighteen years. They do, however, appear to each other in instructive or cautionary dreams. As the story zigzags unpredictably back and forth between ,Amar in the World and Ḥamzah in Qāf, its variety, richness, and movement are augmented, while the suspense is very much heightened by narrative delays and postponements. For the most part events in the two realms progress independently. But who could predict that, for example, Ḥamzah's jealous wife Āsmān Parī would send down a hand (*panjah*) out of the sky to try to snatch Mihr Nigār from the roof of the fort, and would only narrowly fail; that ,Amar in his anxiety and relief would go so far as to strike Mihr Nigār with a whip for going to the roof without permission; and that the sheltered Mihr Nigār would then actually run away from ,Amar? Who could predict that a mysterious Veiled One Dressed in Orange would come to ,Amar's rescue again and again in time of peril--and insist on preserving the secret of his identity for Ḥamzah's return? If Ḥamzah and 'Amar were not so closely bound together, yet so painfully and radically separated, many of the dastan's most effective episodes would be impossible. Hanaway found, as we have seen, the whole Qāf episode to be a "strangely incongruous" case of "padding," and concluded that it could be "deleted without any serious damage to the story." In Urdu--and especially in the Ġhālib/Bilgrāmī text--it is almost the other way around: Ḥamzah's time in Qāf is at the heart of the story.

Qāf is the place of magic, of strange non-human races, of *ṭilisms*. Ġhālib Lakhnawī was right to add *ṭilism* and *ayyārī* to the list of basic dastan elements, for in Urdu they are of central importance. While feats of *ayyārī* are ubiquitous and easy to relish, the nature of *ṭilisms* is not so transparent. A *ṭilism* is an enchantment created by a magician; it can be as small as a brief magic effect or spell--or as spacious and potent as a whole world. (Enormous *ṭilisms*, though they do not occur in the present text, are everywhere in the forty-six-volume version; one scholar has recently argued that they are allegorical representations of Sufi parables about the deceptive nature of the "real" world.⁹) The essence of a *ṭilism* is

⁹Suhail Aḥmad Kḥān, *Dāstānoñ kī ,alāmātī kā jḥāt*, pp. 65-101.

illusion: nothing is what it appears to be, so that fantastic and frightful encounters are able to overwhelm the unwary. The victim of a *ṭilism* often thinks he knows what is going on, but he does not. *Ṭilisms* cannot normally be escaped from, only broken; the breaking of a *ṭilism* usually results in the death of the magician who has made it. A *ṭilism* can be broken only by its predestined destroyer, and then only by means of some special knowledge not deducible from anything within the *ṭilism* itself.

Thus when Ḥamzah enters his first *ṭilism*, he is provided with a tablet (*lauḥ*) of detailed instructions--but he often forgets to consult it. The most common source of power within *ṭilisms* is the use of a secret, esoteric Name, which somehow invokes the power of the one named; virtuous characters use one of the known Names of God, or even the legendary unknown Great Name. Only constant aid and prompting from the Unseen enable Ḥamzah to thwart *ṭilisms* while still, as a good Muslim, refusing to dabble in magic himself. For he often finds himself bewildered: Qāf is full of strange species like the frightful demon Devs, but in addition to the “ordinary” Devs of Qāf there are the magic Devs inside *ṭilisms*, who don’t respond to any of the usual forms of combat, who come back to life when killed, who often multiply themselves many-fold. Gorgeous Parīs inside *ṭilisms* may be demons in disguise--or authentic Parīs, trapped there. In a way *ṭilisms* show imagination raised to its ultimate power, cut loose and floating free, detached not only from the real world but even from the “real” dastan world. They show how dastans can command the farthest reaches of both dream and nightmare. Ḥamzah’s courage, despair, vanity, and simple curiosity all lure him up to the heights, and down to the depths; of course his destiny is involved too, as the dastan frequently asserts (but never explains).

Ḥamzah’s destiny is so arranged that the most important people in his life, after Amar, are two daughters of kings: Mihr Nigār, daughter of Naushervān the King of Kings (of the Realm of the World), and Āsmān Parī, daughter of Shahpāl the King of Kings of the Realm of Qāf. A few obvious parallels can be noted. Ḥamzah rescues both kings from usurpers and restores their thrones to them; both kings realize that accepting Ḥamzah as a son-in-law, despite his lesser lineage, would be a proper reward for this service. Both princesses see Ḥamzah before he sees them, fall instantly in love with him, and maneuver him into noticing them. Here, however, the similarities are replaced by sharply drawn oppositions. Ḥamzah responds to Mihr Nigār with unbounded ardor, and loves her passionately for the rest of his life; he tries in every way to overcome her father’s resistance to their marriage. Ḥamzah responds to Āsmān Parī with no more than a brief (although quite evident) infatuation, refuses point-blank to marry her, and reluctantly consents only when coerced by her determined father.

Mihr Nigār, though a princess, has two brothers, and there is never any question of her inheriting the throne; she lives for the most part an irreproachably secluded life. Āsmān Parī, by contrast, seizes power even during her father's lifetime, takes the throne, and drives *him* into a life of seclusion. Mihr Nigār always does as Ḥamzah wishes; Āsmān Parī does exactly as she herself wishes. Mihr Nigār gives birth to a son, Qubād, who respects his mother and whose name links him with the Persian royal tradition; Āsmān Parī gives birth to a daughter, Quraishah, who frequently abuses her mother and whose name links her with Ḥamzah's own Arab ancestry. The dastan shows us, in short, that Mihr Nigār plays by the rules, while Āsmān Parī breaks them; in a way, Āsmān Parī can almost be seen as Mihr Nigār's alter ego.

Āsmān Parī -- "Āsmān" means "Sky," with overtones of fate and destiny--can get away with her behavior because she is a Parī, a creature of fire, not bound by human norms; moreover, she is the queen of the Parīs, and much the most powerful of them all. Significantly, Ḥamzah begets with her a daughter, rather than the sons he has with his other wives. In the course of his marriage, Ḥamzah has nothing but trouble with Āsmān Parī; she is simply too strong for him, and he cannot control her. In marrying the queen of the Parīs, Ḥamzah has overreached himself--yet he never wanted to marry her at all, it was simply something that was part of his destiny. On the narrative surface at least, Ḥamzah is an innocent victim of fate: he is simply destined to have trouble with women, in life as in death, and in some way he understands this--as witness his cryptic remark when he is kidnapped by one of Naushervān's wives and rescued by Amar. Like a good Muslim story hero,¹⁰ Ḥamzah must end his glorious rise to almost superhuman stature with a fall back into common human vulnerability.

When the destined eighteen years in Qāf are over, Ḥamzah is finally freed from Āsmān Parī's grasp; surely not coincidentally, his rescuer is another woman. Bībī Āṣifā Bāṣafā, "Lady Āṣifā the Pure," the mother of the venerable brothers Ḳhiẓr and Elias, commands a divinely-given power: she turns Āsmān Parī's fiery nature into literal flames that 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. After a lavish wedding celebration (during which he divides his nights among his several wives) Ḥamzah is finally able to live

¹⁰J. A. B. van Buitenen outlines a broad contrast between Hindu and Muslim story heroes in "The Indian Hero as Vidyadhara," in *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, ed. by Milton Singer (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959), pp. 99-105.

the human life he had wanted all along. Mihr Nigār receives the long-deferred recompense for her years of solitude and suffering, and as far as we can tell she enjoys it fully.

Ḥamzah was gone for eighteen years; he is together with Mihr Nigār for about eighteen more, time enough for them to raise their son Qubād to young manhood. Then suddenly ,Amr, Ḥamzah's oldest son, is killed in his sleep by a jealous woman. 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 dastan. He sends away all his companions except Muqbil the Faithful, and plans to live the rest of his life as a *faqīr*, tending Mihr Nigār's tomb.

He is dragged back into the real world, of course, and obliged to resume the life of conquest and adventure to which he was born. He marries other wives--as he has done throughout the dastan, for even in his youthful days he was persuaded by ,Amar to marry Nāhīd Maryam, breaking his promise to Mihr Nigār that he would never look at another woman *until* (his exact choice of words) he married her. Ḥamzah's lesser wives are somewhat casually treated, but the Bilgrāmī text seems to recognize eight of them, of whom the following appear in the present volume: Nāhīd Maryam; Raiḥān Parī; Qamar Chahrah or Saman Sīmā Parī; Nāranj Parī; Gelī Savār the warrior-princess; and perhaps we should include the poor Cowhead princess, Arvānah, whom Ḥamzah so callously and inexcusably murders. Ḥamzah begets with his minor wives a total of seven sons, but only three of these-- ,Amr bin Ḥamzah, Rustam, and Badī, uz-Zamāñ--are important in the dastan cycle as a whole. None of the women makes more than one or two brief appearances, generally in connection with courtship and childbirth, in the whole course of the story. Once Ḥamzah has lost his two serious wives--Āsmān Parī paying only rare visits from Qāf, and Mihr Nigār dead--his later, somewhat perfunctory marriages only serve to emphasize the winding down of his life. Ḥamzah has sons and even grandsons, but these gallant and promising young men rarely survive for very long; their untimely deaths foreshadow Ḥamzah's own. And Ḥamzah's death, as we in the audience know very well, will come about at the hands of a woman.

Besides his wives and ,Amar, Ḥamzah has a number of other loyalties--to his father, to his close companions (especially Landhaur), to his steeds (especially Ashqar), to Kḥizr, to the kings Naushervān and Shahpāl--that lend additional kinds of motivation and structure to the story. These loyalties give rise to typical situations in which Ḥamzah repeatedly finds himself: arraying his army

and directing its movements; presiding over the single combats of his own champions with enemy champions; personally encountering another champion in single combat; deciding the fate of conquered enemy champions; wandering alone or with companions in a strange country; rescuing people besieged in a fort; being urged to marry a local king's daughter; etc. Each individual strand is temporally linear, and the dastan is woven out of such strands like a tapestry. Thus the term "entrelacement" or "interlacing" used by romance scholars, and the phrase "polyphonic narrative": "In music, polyphony is a form in which the various voices move in apparent independence and freedom though fitting together harmonically. This is an apt metaphor for romance narration....[W]e are presented with a thronging, level world, held at a constant distance from us, colourful, full of detail and particularity, ramifying endlessly outwards."¹¹ Temporal connections are multiplied, as we shift from one scene to another taking place at the same time, but causal links are almost never supplied.

The result is a story that is full of linear recurrences--but always with variations. Andras Hamori has described the use of rhythmic recurrence as a source of "musical pleasure," a means of holding the audience's attention: "You know something is destined to happen again, but you also know that it will come in by a different door, or even a window."¹² My own experience as a dastan-reader bears him out. Not only does the constant rapid movement of the story make for variety, but the patterns of recurrence-with-variation actually enable the reader to enjoy the story with increasing subtlety and sophistication.

As a translator, I wanted to show my own readers how this could be the case. At first I felt handicapped in doing so, for the sheer length of the text compelled me to omit many of the repeated episodes that would illustrate my point. Finally I decided to choose one sort of episode, and include multiple examples of it. If I had chosen on the basis of frequency alone, I would have selected some episode of combat. Because of my own interests, however, and because it was convenient to have slightly fewer episodes to work with, I chose to concentrate on Ḥamzah's crucial relationships with women. In a general way, therefore, I have translated most of the episodes in the text about Ḥamzah and women. And as my central example, I have translated virtually every single word Ḥamzah exchanges with Shahpāl and Āsmān Parī on the subject of his departure from Qāf.

Almost as soon as Ḥamzah arrives in Qāf he begins negotiating for his return; since he knows that he cannot return without the Parīs' help, he tries to buy

¹¹Gillian Beer, *The Romance*, pp. 20-21.

¹²Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 172.

his release by cooperating. As his polite, diplomatic requests are met with evasion and deceit, he becomes more and more distraught; the result is a long, tangled series of struggles, interwoven with many other kinds of events taking place in both Qāf and the world, and displaying a number of recurrences. These recurrences include four major confrontations between Ḥamzah and Āsmān Parī, each followed by a desperate effort on Ḥamzah's part to escape to the World. Since these four episodes have much in common, it might seem that they would grow tedious. But in fact, the converse is true: each one presupposes the previous ones, and screws the tension a notch tighter as Ḥamzah's desperation increases. The reader cannot predict exactly how any one of them will develop; memories of the previous ones permit a satisfying sense of recognition, and make the points of branching off, of differentiation, more piquant. Or at least so I would maintain; while the argument cannot be developed here at length, the textual evidence is fully present, and every reader can explore it.

The paratactic structure of the dastan in fact invites every reader to individual speculation. That endless string of seemingly haphazard, repetitive, randomly ordered adventures--does it not hold within itself subtle progressions, developments, meanings? Does Ḥamzah's character not help to make his fate? Does Ḥamzah's life not have some larger shape? Long interlaced strings of beautifully colored beads are held up before us; by the conventions of the genre, they are shown directly, authoritatively, without interpretive clues, without even a sidelong glance from the narrator. The narrator never moves below the surface of the story; but he may be addressing us in a kind of code. Parataxis involves simply "one fact laid end to end with the next"--but there are always "silent intervals," in Vinaver's words, between the facts.¹³ What mysteries, what relationships lie in the "silent intervals" generated by parataxis? It is part of the lasting appeal of dastans that the text itself will never answer such questions; we are left to make our own meanings.

Dastans may be studied from any number of perspectives, but always, from any point of view, they belong most of all to their audience. Dastans are built around a "criterion of immediate rhetorical effect": they abound in wild dreams and nightmares, dizzy ascents and disastrous falls, marvelous and terrible encounters. As the Bilgrāmī text itself explains at the beginning of Chapter Sixteen, dastans are not a whit more extraordinary than the realm of the World, in which we humans live. "The fickleness of Fortune is well known, the Conjuror's marvelous tricks are clearer than clear. Sometimes right in the midst of merriment, causes of grief make themselves felt; sometimes in the midst of utter despair, the

¹³Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 6.

bright face of hope can be glimpsed. Therefore this dastan follows the same pattern.” Like all human art, the dastan both protests against the human condition, and in the end somehow affirms it.