



BADĪ'-AL-ZAMĀN HAMADĀNĪ

BADĪ'-AL-ZAMĀN HAMADĀNĪ, ABU'L-FAẒL AḤMAD B. ḤOSAYN B. YAḤYĀ (b. Hamadān 358/968, d. Herat 398/1008), Arabic belle-lettrist and inventor of the *maqāma* genre.

Abu'l-Faẓl Aḥmad, known as Badī'-al-Zamān (Wonder of the age), studied in Hamadān with the great Arab philologist, Ebn Fāres (d. 395/1004). In 380/990-91 he went to Ray, where he benefited from the presence at the court of the famous Buyid minister and literary patron, Ṣāḥeb b. 'Abbād. Thence, Badī'-al-Zamān traveled to Jorjān (Gorgān), where he lived among the Isma'ilis. The biographical sources are not completely clear about Hamadānī's religious affiliations. Some, cite the historian of Hamadān, Sīrawayh, to the effect that Hamadānī was a Sunni and learned in Hadith but Ṣafadī notes that Badī'-al-Zamān was accused of Ash'arism. However, Monroe's conclusion (pp. 52-55, based partly on Hamadānī's own writings) that Badī'-al-Zamān converted to Shi'ism and then later reverted to Sunnism is probably correct.

Badī'-al-Zamān arrived in Nīšāpūr in 382/992 (Ṭa'ālebī, *Yatīma* IV, p. 257) or in 392/1001 (Yāqūt, *Odabā'* I, p. 96). It was here that his rivalry with the noted Arabic litterateur Abū Bakr K̄vārazmī (d. 383/993) took root, a rivalry said to have contributed to the latter's demise. According to Ṭa'ālebī (*Yatīma* IV, p. 258), who apparently knew Hamadānī personally, the latter traveled so widely in Khorasan, Sīstān, and Ġazna that there was not a single place he did not visit and benefit from. He finally settled in Herat, where he died in 398/1008, at age forty. Hamadānī is said to have gone mad towards the end of his life (Yāqūt, *Eršād* I, p. 95; Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi* VI, p. 355). Both Ṣafadī (*al-Wāfi* VI, p. 358)



and Ebn Ẓallekān (*Wafayāt* I, p. 129) give the same two variants of the death of Badī'-al-Zamān. According to the first he died from poisoning. According to the second he suffered a stroke and was quickly buried. Then he awoke in his grave and his voice was heard in the night. But when people opened the grave, he was found dead, his hand clutching his beard.

Hamadānī had a pleasant countenance, was good company, lofty of spirit, a good person to befriend, but, at the same time, someone who was bitter when it came to his enemies. The biographers note his prodigious memory, which seems to have been photographic. He could apparently glance quickly at several pages of a book he did not know and then reproduce their contents. Hamadānī was also quite skilled in spontaneous composition. If someone suggested to him that he compose a *qaṣīda* (ode) or an epistle on an unusual subject, he would do so immediately and without hesitation. Hamadānī's linguistic skills are worthy of note as well. He was able to easily translate Persian poetry rich with unusual expressions into Arabic verse.

Perhaps even more significant for Hamadānī as creator of the *maqāmāt* was his sense of humor and play. Ṣafadī (*al-Wāfi* VI, pp. 357-58), for example, recounts an encounter between Ẓvārazmī and Hamadānī, in which the latter declined a word incorrectly. When Ẓvārazmī chided him for it, he replied with a word play based on the misdeclined word. On another occasion, with the same Ẓvārazmī, Badī'-al-Zamān showed his linguistic skills by a series of verbal stunts based on words ending with the same consonants.

But Badī'-al-Zamān owes his fame to the new literary genre he created, the *maqāma* genre, one of the few totally new, yet lasting, genres created in medieval Arabic literature. The *maqāmāt* of Hamadānī are a set of adventures narrated in rhymed prose (*saj'*), but also including original poetry. They revolve around a rogue hero, Abu'l-Faṭḥ Eskandarī, and a narrator, 'Īsā b. Heṣām. The most common (though by no means the only) structural pattern in the *maqāmāt* is one in which 'Īsā finds himself in one of the cities of the Islamic world and happens upon a swindler who is invariably cheating his audience. After much verbal display, usually on the part of the rogue hero, 'Īsā discovers that he has indeed been witnessing a disguised Abu'l-Faṭḥ in action. After this process of recognition, the two bid each other adieu, until the next *maqāma*. But, the literary role of 'Īsā b. Heṣām in Hamadānī's *Maqāmāt* is not restricted to that of narrator. He performs tricks of his own, like those of Abu'l-Faṭḥ (e.g., in the *maqāma* of Baghdad).



Holding the text together, thus, are not only the repeated narrative structures of the *Maqāmāt* but also the interplay of the two central characters. Abu'l-Faḥ is a hero who lives by his wits (mostly verbal) and who often takes advantage of the gullibility of his audience. Furthermore, in a certain sense, he initiates ʿĪsā b. Hešām (and the reader) into the art of roguery.

According to the sources, Hamadānī wrote four hundred *maqāmāt*, though only fifty-two have come down to us. Apparently, as well, they were written in the earlier part of his life. Badīʿ-*al-Zamān* is also credited with the authorship of a number of epistles.

Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122), who was Hamadānī's most important continuator in the *maqāma* genre, clearly attributed the creation of this new form to Badīʿ-*al-Zamān* (Šarīšī, *Šarḥ maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* I, p. 21). However, Ḥoṣrī (d. 413/1022), in his *Zahr al-ādāb* (I, pp. 305-06), claimed that the *Maqāmāt* of Hamadānī were written to counter a set of stories invented by Ebn Dorayd (d. 321/933) and written in unusual language. This claim has caused much ink to be spilled over the question of origins, and has set scholars searching for stories which might have served as prototypes for the *maqāmāt*. What is important is not that a specific story from an earlier literary work inspired Hamadānī or even served as a model for him, but that the entire earlier Arabic literary (and specifically *adab*) corpus was there for Badīʿ-*al-Zamān* to draw upon and that the rogue hero he devised has antecedents in other *adab* character types, like the *ṭofaylī* (or party crasher). Badīʿ-*al-Zamān*'s innovation consists in the creation of a set of texts all employing the same distinctive discourse, revolving around the same characters and characteristic plots, and whose setting traveled from one location to the next.

Most intriguing from a literary historical and biographical point of view is the relationship of Badīʿ-*al-Zamān* to his rogue hero. Abu'l-Faḥ, like his creator, is widely traveled, has a sense of humor, and, perhaps most important, is able to manipulate the Arabic language and its traditions with virtuosity. Badīʿ-*al-Zamān* has left his mark on Arabic letters not only through his own qualities but through their reflection in the literary hero he created, Abu'l-Faḥ Eskandarī, and the genre which embodies both.



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