



DALQAK

DALQAK, buffoon, court jester, also sometimes known as *maskara*. The earliest extant study of buffoons is that of Athenaeus (bks. 1, 6, 12) from the 2nd century CE, though it seems that clowns, comic actors, jugglers, conjurers, and acrobats were not yet clearly distinguished (Welsford, p. 4). The absence of such clear distinctions among different classes of royal and popular entertainers is also typical of Persian sources, both pre-Islamic and Islamic. Here the word *dalqak* refers to the court jester, the professional buffoon employed by nobles and kings for the explicit purpose of entertainment. In addition to such resident court clowns, when kings or nobles were traveling local fools or humorists were sometimes brought to entertain them.

From references to court jesters in *Husraw ī Kawādān ud rēdag* (de Menasce, pp. 1182-83) and data scattered in classical Arabic texts it seems that they already existed under the Sasanians. (Pseudo) Jāḥeẓ, in *Ketāb al-tāj* (p. 21), a text based primarily on Persian sources, reported that kings had need of a number of attendants, including jesters (*moẓḥeks*), whom he distinguished from satirists (*ahl al-hazl*). According to him (pp. 23-24, 26), the Sasanian **Ardašīr I** was the first to rank his companions in three groups, including jesters in the third; Ardašīr was also supposed to have warned his descendants against such frivolities as jesters and clowns (p. 65).

There is more information about court jesters in the Islamic period. Ebrāhīm b. Moḥammad Bayhaqī, who was active under the 'Abbasid caliph al-Moqtader (295-320/908-32), wrote *Ketāb al-maḥāsen wa'l-masāwī*, in which he referred to a group of entertainers of the Omayyad period, apparently professional



clowns. They wore saffron-colored garb, which sometimes did not even cover their genitals, and played musical instruments and chattered meaningless gibberish (*dār-bāzī*) in the streets, which made people laugh. Such entertainers sometimes also provided amusement for the ruling class (II, p. 239). The 'Abbasid caliph al-Motawakkel (232-47/847-61) was fond of jesters and had one who was often tormented for fun on his orders. This jester, when frightened by lions or poisonous snakes or distressed by other unpleasant means, would cry out in anguish, which caused great merriment. A later, more pious caliph, al-Mohtadī (255-56/869-70), dismissed all the entertainers who had served his predecessors (*Mojmal*, ed. Bahār, pp. 361, 364). Helāl Şābe' (d. 448//1056; pp. 15-27) included jesters in a long list of personnel at the caliphal court. A monthly budget of 3,300 gold coins was required to pay the expenses of this staff (Faḡīhī, p. 395).

In the early Persian classical sources, though *dalqaks* are frequently mentioned, little detail is provided. Most references are simple statements that clowns, listed among the lowest social classes, made courtiers laugh (see, e.g., Nāşer-e Ḳosrow, pp. 279, 483). A clown named Abīvard, who was a great mimic, was mentioned among the courtiers of Ḥasan b. Moḥammad Mohallebī, vizier of the Buyid Mo'ezz-al-Dawla (334-56/945-67; Baktash, p. 101). Another, Ebn Moḡāzelī, known for his ability to tell funny stories of various ethnic groups while mimicking their speech mannerisms and accents, entertained the caliph al-Mo'tazed (279-89/892-902; Mas'ūdī, *Morūj* VIII, pp. 161-64). Abū Bakr Ḳvārazmī (d. 383/993) wrote a letter to the Buyid vizier Sāḡeb b. 'Abbād (d. 385/995) on behalf of several banished clowns, requesting that each be reviewed with respect to his particular talents (Baktash, p. 101). The most famous of the *dalqaks* of the Ghaznavid sultan Maḡmūd (388-421/998-1030) was Talḡak, whose name became synonymous with *dalqak* in Persia (Nūrbakş, pp. 10-11; Zarrīnkūb, II, p. 952). According to Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqī, during Mehragān celebrations the Ghaznavid sultan Mas'ūd I (421-32/1030-41) distributed 30,000 silver coins to be divided among the minstrels and jesters of his court (ed. Fayyāż, p. 274). Māfarrūḳī mentioned a number of jesters at Isfahan in the same period, including a certain Abu'l-Fawāres, several of whose anecdotes he included in his text (pp. 46-47; tr. pp. 109-11). The Saljuq ruler Malekşāh (465-85/1072-92) had a clown named Ja'farak, who made a practice of ridiculing the grand vizier Neẓām-al-Molk behind his back at the sultan's private parties. When Jamāl-al-Molk, Neẓām-al-Molk's son, heard of this behavior, he ordered the clown to be put to death in a horrible manner. Malekşāh, offended by this action but also mindful of the grand



vizier's influence, supposedly had Jamāl-al-Molk secretly poisoned in revenge (Ebn al-Aṭīr, VIII, p. 131; Mīnovī, p. 217; Faqīhī, pp. 562-63; cf. Bosworth, p. 75; Lambton, *Continuity*, p. 303). Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī (604-72/1207-73) related several tales about jesters in his *Maṭnawī*. In one a fictitious jester of the provincial governor Sayyed Shah of Termed (bk. 2, v. 2333; bk. 4, v. 2507; bk. 6, v. 2510; cf. Zarrīnkūb, I, pp. 129, 336) was described in terms that may also have been applicable to real jesters: "There was no companion more agreeable . . . bringing up stories and jests and keeping the king in merriment and laughter" so that he "would grip his belly with both hands . . . and his body sweated from the violence of his laughter, and he would fall on his face with laughing" (bk. 6, vv. 2531-34). Elsewhere Rūmī described the relative immunity of the court jester from punishment (bk. 6, v. 2570). Tales about jesters can also be found in the works of other poets (see, e.g., Mo'ayyad, pp. 612-13). The satirist 'Obayd Zākānī (d. ca. 772/1371; p. 151) ruefully advised men to learn *maskaragī*, music, and dancing, rather than pursuing the sciences.

From the reign of the Safavid shah Ṭahmāsb (930-84/1524-76) there is an account of a procession of comics (*možhekān*) singers, homosexuals, and prostitutes formed to ridicule a person of high rank (*Ālamārā-ye Šāh Ṭahmāsb*, p. 71). Among the clowns at the court of Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) were Kal 'Enāyat (lit., "Enāyat the bald") and a woman named Dalāla Qezy (Falsafī, pp. 250-52). For unknown reasons the surname *kačal* (bald) was applied to several comedians before the Zand period (1163-1209/1750-94), when the term *kačalak-bāzī* came to signify a play performed by bald *lūṭīs* (rogues; Bayzā'ī, p. 170). **Jean Chardin**, who visited the house of Kal 'Enāyat in the Dardašt neighborhood of Isfahan, reported that he was a talented performer, who could, simply by adopting comic postures, make people laugh whenever he wanted. He had a lively and sensible mind and took liberties even with the shah, performing comic sketches designed to influence certain royal decisions, for example, the unpopular ban on *kūknār* (an infusion of poppy seeds; Falsafī, pp. 250-51; Chardin, VII, p. 471, VIII, pp. 124-30).

Karīm Khan Zand (1163-93/1750-79) had a great many buffoons, who bore the titles *moqalled-bāšī* (chief mimic) *maskara-bāšī* (chief buffoon), and *lūṭī-bāšī* (chief rogue). Two of them were quite skilled in producing a variety of sounds with their intestinal gases, whereas others told amusing jokes and anecdotes (Āṣaf, pp. 101, 410-11). The most famous of Karīm Khan's clowns was Lūṭī Šāleḥ Šīrāzī, who managed to amass considerable wealth in the service of his patron. Perhaps he was the buffoon who compared the Lorī dialect of Karīm



Khan's family with the barking of dogs (Malcolm, II, pp. 551-52; Dubeux, p. 459). Lūṭī Šāleḥ later entered the service of the founder of the Qajar dynasty, [Āqā Moḥammad Khan](#), in Tehran. One of his jokes supposedly stirred that monarch to kill his brother Ja'farqolī Khan. Later the repentant shah was supposed to have cut off the clown's nose in revenge, but Lūṭī Šāleḥ remained at court through the first years of Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah's reign (1212-50/1797-1834). He is believed to have died at Kāzēmayn in Iraq (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* IV, pp. 122-23).

Of the Qajar rulers Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96) was most famous for the number of clowns at his court. The most renowned clown of his period, however, was not a courtier: Karīm, whose sobriquet Šīra'ī referred to *šīra* "molasses" and not, as some have thought, to the narcotic *šīra*, obtained from the residue of burned opium (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 360; cf. Deḥkodā, s.v.). Karīm, a native of Isfahan, was an intimate of the shah; between 1299/1881 and 1311/1893 he rose to the rank of *nāyeb* (lieutenant) of the *naqqāra-kāna* (drum corps). He was also a kind of patron for groups of *moṭrebs* (minstrels), who brought him their conflicts and quarrels for settlement (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 359). Karīm was described as tall and thin, dressed in colorful clothes of strange design and riding a short-legged donkey (Nūrbakš, p. 31). He performed both at court and in the royal harem. His critical views of dignitaries and his ridicule of courtiers greatly delighted the shah. Some courtiers even bribed Karīm to avoid becoming targets of his wit (for a sample of his jokes, see Mostawfī; Nūrbakš; Mo'ayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 287). He was also known for practical jokes on individuals associated with the court, including the Austrian instructors of the Persian army (E'temād-al-Salṭana, *Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 163). Knowing of the shah's hatred for [freemasonry](#), several years after the banning of the Armenian Malkom Khan's lodge in 1277/1861 Karīm performed a grotesque sketch in which he presented his own version of freemasonry, called *farāmūš-kāna* (for details, see Bāmdād, *Rejāl* I, pp. 397-98). Several plays performed in the 1950-60s were attributed to him: *Ṭabīb-e māzandarānī* (The physician from Māzandarān), *Dallāk-e māzandarānī* (The barber from Māzandarān), *Zan-e Mollā-ye deh* (The wife of the village mulla), and *Yak zan o seh mard* (One woman and three men), but no details are known (Bayzā'ī, p. 178). Karīm Šīra'ī is enshrined in Persian folk and artistic traditions as the protagonist of many jokes and anecdotes and one of the principle prototypes for Ḍabīḥ Behrūz's *comédie-bouffe* "Jījak-'Alīšāh" (first printed in Berlin in 1922).

Another famous clown of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah was Esmā'īl Bazzāz, who began as



a servant in the house of ‘Ezzat-al-Dawla, the shah’s sister. Later he became a draper, a trade at which he continued to work until the end of his life (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 361). He gained more status for the callings of clown and minstrel than they had enjoyed previously, though stern courtiers like E‘temād-al-Salṭana disapproved of the practical jokes, some of them extremely tasteless, that he played on dignitaries. The shah, however, remained protective of his clowns, despite courtiers’ objections. Esmā‘il Bazzāz’s sharp wit did not spare even the religious practices of his time. In September 1888, accompanied by about 200 buffoons and musicians, he reportedly presented a comic sketch, with obscene gestures, following a performance of the *ta‘zīa* play *Dayr al-Solaymān* (The monastery of Solaymān) attended by the shah and the British and Italian ministers (*Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 591). Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah noted in his memoirs (I, pp. 19-20) that Esmā‘il Bazzāz and other Persian performers attempted unsuccessfully to emulate the style of performance of Molière’s comedies. Referring to some Algerian female dancers whom he saw during his visit to Europe in 1889, the shah commented, “They made gestures that even Karīm Šīra‘ī and Esmā‘il Bazzāz would not dare to make” (I, p. 270). In about 1310/1892 Esmā‘il Bazzāz withdrew from his profession as buffoon and was succeeded by Akbar Ġūra (lit., “Akbar sour grapes”), whom E‘temād-al-Salṭana found sinister (*Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 836). Esmā‘il Bazzāz himself made the pilgrimage to Mecca at the end of his life, built a mosque in Tehran, and made pious endowments. The present Mawlawī street in Tehran used to bear his name (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 361).

Still another clown of this period was Shaikh Ḥosayn, also known as Shaikh Šeypūr. Originally an *ākūnd* who had changed his profession, he was still performing during the reign of Aḥmad Shah (1327-44/1909-25). He could expertly mimic a variety of animal sounds, as well as the fanfare, from which he drew his sobriquet Šeypūr (trumpet). Mehdī Bāmdād, who knew him personally, called him a charitable man (*Rejāl* I, p. 395). Zayn-al-‘Ābedīn Marāḡa‘ī referred to his skill at mimicry and added that he gave to the poor a portion of the money that he made by entertaining the rich (pp. 363-65). Shaikh Ḥosayn made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1319/1901 and received the title Amīn-al-‘Olamā’ (lit., “confidant of the learned”).

Another clown with similar skills was Shaikh Karnā, a bearded man who could duplicate the sounds of the long horn (*karnā*; Bāmdād, *Rejāl* I, p. 400). Still another clown, ‘Alīyon, was so liked by the king that he was even allowed



to ride his mare into the royal palace (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* I, p. 401). Shaikh ʿĪsā, the jester of Amīn-al-Solṭān (q.v.), was also a moneylender (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, *Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 614).

Many other characters are mentioned in the written sources because of their comic talents or skill in entertaining rulers. As most of them were not professional jesters, however, and many were individuals of some means, they cannot be included among the *dalqaks*.

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