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SAMAK-E ʿAYYĀR

SAMAK-E ʿAYYĀR, a prose narrative originating in the milieu of professional storytellers, transmitted orally and written down around the 12th century. The only extant manuscript is in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (bound in 3 vols., Ouseley 379, 380, 381). The text has been edited by Parviz Nātel Ḵānlari and has gone through several reprints. One of the missing parts of the narrative has been restored from a Turkish translation (Ms. Or. 3298, British Library) dating from the reign of Sultan Morād III (1574-95). The Bodleian manuscript is illustrated (Robinson, pp. 1-7, Plates II and III) and written in different hands. This indicates either that it was copied over several periods or that the missing folios were replaced at a later date. No mention is made of the date of composition of the narrative. However, on one of the folios dating from the first half of the 15th century, the following sentence appears: "I have started this story [...] on Tuesday, 4th Jomādā al-awwal 585 Hejra," [20 June 1189 (IV, p. 3)]. It seems probable that the manuscript we possess was copied from an older manuscript, and the story itself was therefore known as early as the second half of the 12th century. In more recent folios, the scribe has inserted verses by poets from the end of the 14th century, e.g. a line from a *ḡazal* by Hafez (I, p. 50), and a *robāʿi* from the *divān* of Ḵᵛāju of Kermān (I, p. 51). There are also verses of an inferior quality, and some errors in spelling and grammar. Some verses by poets of the 11th-13th centuries (Faḵr-al-Din Gorgāni, named in the text, I, p. 20, Qaṭrān of Tabriz, Masʿud-e Saʿd-e Salmān, Moʿezzi, and Saʿdi) are in all probability later additions. Judging from the numerous Turkish names in the narrative, the text could not have been fixed in writing prior to the Saljuq period. Various factors lead us to believe that the

origin of the story might go back to a period earlier than the time when it was written down, i.e. when the narrative took its final form sometime in the 12th century. In any case, the form in which it has come down to us makes it one of the oldest specimens of the genre.

Two unidentified names appear in the text, unattested in any other source. The first is that of Farāmarz b. Ḵodādād b. ʿAbd-Allāh al-Kāteb al-Arrajāni, who in turn refers to a certain Ṣadaqa b. Abi'l-Qāsem of Shiraz, a storyteller or "the author" of the narrative, from whom he allegedly got the story (I, p. 75, IV, p. 3). Occasionally, the latter is mentioned on his own (I, p. 53, 92). Farāmarz is introduced both as the compiler and the author of the story (I, p. 1, II, p. 63, IV, p. 3), as well as its narrator (I, p. 75, III, p. 87); he is generally considered as the one who shaped the narrative into its present form. In the narrative texture of *Samak-e ʿayyār* one encounters, on the one hand, a compiler (IV, p. 108) who steps into the narrative to request from the audience a reward in kind, and on the other hand an anonymous speaker who not infrequently solicits prayers in favor of the compiler (IV, p. 101, 286, 295, V, pp. 15-16, 349, 609), who is at least once (V, p. 531) identified as Farāmarz. In this regard, the question arises whether it was Farāmarz who recited the story in public (as could possibly be deduced from the remarks of the Turkish translator, III, p. 1) or whether these prayers represent homage to the latter by a storyteller. To define the functions of different speakers in the text is a daunting task in view of the opaque Persian terminology, lacking a specific designation for each name.

As in most narratives of this genre, action and dialogue prevail. The story is told in simple prose, close to spoken language, sometimes adorned with various prosodic techniques (rhythm, rhymed prose, assonance) and with such narrative and rhetorical devices as verse insertions, florid descriptions, and metaphors, employed mostly in conventional depictions of beauty, battles, sunrises, and sunsets. The verses function as intensifiers of description, panegyrics, and comments on the narrative situation. Since the provenance of the verses is otherwise unknown, it is in all probability the storyteller himself who composed them. The dialogues, even those that are recounted, are in direct speech. The language is characteristic of the classical Persian language before the 13th century and comprises a relatively small proportion of Arabic vocabulary. Some words are spelt according to their popular pronunciation (e.g., *naqm* for *naqb*). From the lexical point of view, the text is of particular interest due to a substantial number of rare and archaic Persian words, the signification of which underwent semantic alteration in the course of time.

Similarly, most of the grammatical and orthographic conventions followed in the manuscript are those that one would expect to find in a text written before the 13th century (for a detailed review of these points see Ḵānlari, 1968, I, pp. viii-xi).

The salient feature of this long romance is the presence of two heroes: the *ʿayyār* Samak, who, along with his professional companions, comes from a socially lower class, and the prince Ḵoršid-šāh, the only son of Marzbān-šāh, the king of Aleppo. Samak is the protagonist of the narrative and his exploits, crucial for the fulfillment of the prince's aims and desires, constitute the main subject matter of the story. The account of Samak's exploits, while imparting an entertaining quality to the story, at the same time provides a *raison d'être* for its composition, namely, to depict the figure of an exemplary *ʿayyār* in action. The prince, who is invested with all the traditional heroic qualities of a person of noble birth, is the subject of the quest. Although Samak's role is auxiliary to that of the prince, the narrative as a whole is designed to demonstrate the close "brotherly" ethos between the two, based on the code of *javānmardi.* This code contains a set of ethical principles among which bravery and generosity are highlighted, and which requires any follower to develop and apply different and distinct qualities in his daily behavior. Of all the extant narratives of this genre, *Samak-e ʿayyār* is the only one whose original title does not refer to a king or a mythical or historical hero, but to an ordinary man.

During the course of a mysterious encounter, the young prince Ḵoršid-šāh falls in love with Mah-pari, daughter of King Fāḡfur of Čin. Like the other suitors, he is put through the three trials set by the young girl's nurse, who is a witch and wants her own son to marry the princess. For the third trial, an insolvable riddle, Ḵoršid-šāh's half brother Farroḵ-ruz replaces him and is imprisoned by the nurse. Ḵoršid-šāh becomes acquainted with Šoḡāl-e pil-zur, who is the commander of the city of Čin, the head of a group of *ʿayyār*s, and a foster-father to the young Samak (I, p. 43). Interpreting the self-denial of Farroḵ-ruz as an expression of the highest form of magnanimity and noble behavior (*javānmardi*), Šoḡāl and his men enter the service of the two princes. Ḵoršid-šāh frees his brother and Samak stabs the nurse to death. Now it is the turn of the vizier to plot in his own son's favor. After his son has been executed by Samak, he tries to convince the king that the *ʿayyār*s have become too powerful and encourages him to eliminate them. The vizier also promises Mah-pari to Qezel-malek, son of Arman-šāh, King of Māčin, thus scheming to deliver Čin

into the hands of the enemy. Faḡfur is ready to give up his daughter in the hope of preventing a war, but the *ʿayyār*s who were spared are able to find succor and hospitality on the part of a powerful commander of a valley who is also a perfect *javānmard* (I, pp. 491-94), and as a result the king eventually accepts Ḵoršid-šāh as his son-in-law.

War is declared between Čin and Māčin. Ḵoršid-šāh receives help from his father, Marzbān-šāh, and finally marries Mah-pari, but in the meantime the conflict intensifies. Farroḵ-ruz is killed by Qezel-malek; Mah-pari dies in childbirth, delivering a stillborn child. Following numerous other adventures, Ḵoršid-šāh marries Abān-doḵt, who bears him a son, named Farroḵ-ruz in memory of his brother. Ḵoršid-šāh conquers Māčin, but Arman-šāh takes refuge in a neighboring kingdom and the war gradually spreads as far as Hendustān (II, pp. 485-86). Samak is confronted with strange peoples and their local strife on remote islands. For his turn Farroḵ-ruz sets out in search of his beloved, the princess Golbuy, who was separated from him while out at sea (III, pp. 2, 9); this is followed by a new war, this time against the king Ṭuṭi-šāh. Further adventures follow, including multiple kidnappings, capture, liberation, escapes, quests, alliances, treachery, revenge, and love stories.

Marzbān-šāh's health deteriorates and he dies (III, p. 86). Ḵoršid-šāh goes on a quest for his son. To avenge her brother killed by Farroḵ-ruz, a young woman named Zarrin-kiš beheads Abān-doḵt as well as the sister and two other wives of Ḵoršid-šāh. Farroḵ-ruz finally marries Golbuy with whom he has a son named Marzbān-šāh. For a long time both Farroḵ-ruz and Samak have to deal with evil *pari*s ("spirits"). Samak avenges Ḵoršid-šāh, who has been executed by the enemy. Numerous adventures befall Farroḵ-ruz in his search for Mardān-doḵt, whom he marries in the end. His four other wives are beheaded by a dangerous enemy, Tāj-doḵt, who then kidnaps Marzbān-šāh (V, p. 474). Samak embarks on the search for the child and with the help of good *pari*s fights against a sorcerer, an enemy of Farroḵ-ruz. Although he is now advanced in years, Samak continues his remarkable feats. The narrative is incomplete. At the point where the chronicle is interrupted, Marzbān-šāh, who, according to his horoscope, would reign for sixty years, is still a child.

Notwithstanding repetitive elements, the narrative is entertaining throughout the entire work. It presents a complex structure, where unity and cohesion are preserved by linking the multiple subplots with the main plot more closely than is customary in this type of a story. The scenes, partly composed of recurrent motifs, nevertheless vary in their arrangement according to the

imagination of the storyteller. They crisscross at a fast pace, single combats alternating with battles, actions of *ʿayyār*s, court matters, and debates. The venue of action changes as the geographical setting of the narrative moves, transporting the protagonists to fabulous worlds inhabited by supernatural beings. New characters are constantly introduced into the story, and despite the similarity of their narrative roles, each character has enough idiosyncrasies to furnish him with his own distinct personality. The narrative is marked by a strong epic spirit and borrows much from folklore.

Samak-e ʿayyār is a mine of cultural and social information. As William L. Hanaway has pointed out "The popular romances are a rich source for reconstruction of the social history of medieval Persia, a source only beginning to be investigated" (Hanaway, 1971, p. 140). Even though the action supposedly takes place outside Iran, the story paints a detailed picture of everyday life of the times. Not only does it offer a glimpse into the life of the common people, a rare occurrence in Persian literary texts, but it also provides invaluable information on the milieu of the *ʿayyār*s, both male and female, and their daily professional practices. It describes a great variety of acts relating to their sphere of activity as well as the details of techniques used, the necessary equipment (arms, tools, work outfits), and the means employed to accomplish their missions, among which physical skill, disguise and/or the usurpation of identity, the use of sleep-inducing drugs, eloquence, elaborate plans, and daring stratagems figure most prominently. Originating in a society where from the noblest to the lowliest, each has his own worth conditioned by his adherence to the code of *javānmardi*, *Samak-e ʿayyār* proves to be of particular importance for our understanding of how this code was applied to the specific case of an *ʿayyār*. The storyteller portrays different types of *ʿayyār*s, ideal and less so, to illustrate the difference between good and bad behavior, a distinction which lies at the heart of the code of *javānmardi*. Two principles of this code are particularly significant: the keeping of a secret (*rāz pušidan, serr negāh dāštan)*, and requesting protection and bestowing it (*zenhār ḵᵛāstan, zenhār dādan)*. The narrative also shows the different facets of the activities of *ʿayyāri*; some are praiseworthy, others, such as trickery, a prerequisite of their profession, are more doubtful and morally ambivalent. Whereas the good *ʿayyār*s, guided by their conscience, sometimes counteract authority and sometimes work along with it, stealing mostly from the rich and redressing wrongs done to the poor, the few bad *ʿayyār*s in the narrative practice extortion from the people, attack innocent women, and act for their own advantage.

While the negative perception of Samak and his companions is largely represented through the eyes of their enemies, the narrative also represents their own viewpoint, and the way in which they envisage themselves and justify their own conduct. Light is thrown on their unstable position in society where their status shifts from thieves to commanders of large towns. We learn of the network of collusion and solidarity amongst the *ʿayyār*s, as well as between the *ʿayyār*s and the population. Throughout the narrative they find assistance from different sources, often from poor people who also name themselves *javānmard*s and are called upon to prove their integrity and to put their principles to the test. At the same time, regardless of their origins, whether well established or novice, those *ʿayyār*s who wish to undergo their apprenticeship with Samak, spontaneously rally to his cause. They come either individually or in groups and swear an oath of allegiance, thus forming a fraternity; the ritual that they practice consists of drinking a goblet of wine to the health of an admired person (*šādi ḵordan*). The narrative has no particular religious connotation as such, except that Islam is the common background; there are elements, however, which strongly evoke Mithraism, particularly in the formulation of oaths.

The text has retained some interesting evidence of its oral origins. Among the most important indications is the asides made by the storyteller during his performance as noted down by the scribe. Addressing himself directly to the audience, sometimes through one of the characters, the storyteller reminds his audience that he expects a reward for his work. These interruptions take place at well-chosen moments when a scene clearly excites the curiosity of the audience and when the storyteller can thus create an effect of suspense. There are also other means that could possibly be a sign of pauses in the narration. At times, commentaries are introduced in the first person and thus can be understood as originating from the storyteller. Otherwise, in most narratives of this genre the storyteller generally expresses his attitude towards the characters unambiguously.

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