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VIS O RĀMIN

VIS O RĀMIN, an 11th-century verse romance by Faḵr al-Din Asʿad Gorgāni, a poet about whom virtually nothing is known and of whose works, apart from *Vis o Rāmin,* only three possible examples (a fragment of personal satire, a short *ḡazal*, and a *robāʿi*), amounting to fifteen lines in all, survive. However, *Vis o Rāmin*'s importance as an aesthetic artifact in its own right, as a witness to Persian Pre-Islamic mores and literary production, and as the seminal Persian verse romance has ensured Gorgāni's position, along with Ferdowsi, as one of the two most significant Persian narrative poets of the 11th century.

The little that is known about Gorgāni has been gleaned from the exordium to his poem, which tells us that it was written in Isfahan, during the reign of the Saljuq ruler Sulṭan Abu Ṭāleb Ṭoḡrel Beg. According to Gorgāni's account, Ṭoḡrel Beg left Isfahan in the charge of ʿAmid Abu'l Fatḥ Moẓaffar, who commissioned the poem from him. These historically verifiable references place the composition of the poem around 1050 CE. Gorgāni's description of his sources for the poem appears credibly circumstantial but on closer examination turns out to be somewhat vague. Maḥjub calls it "an ambiguous explanation" (*towżiḥ-e mobham*, Maḥjub, 1959, 19) referring, as it does, to sources in both Middle ("Pahlavi") and New ("Farsi") Persian, and to texts but also to oral recitations ("samar-ha"). Gorgāni simultaneously evokes both oral and written sources, and implies that the poem is at once a translation of a work in Middle Persian, and a reworking of a translation from Middle Persian into New Persian that has been put together by a number of other scholars whose work the poet is now presenting in a more aesthetically pleasing form.

His explanation bears some resemblance to Ferdowsi's account of his sources at the opening of the *Šāh-nāma*, by which it may be influenced. This suggests that it is, perhaps, to be read as a conventional trope rather than as fact. That the tale existed before Gorgāni's time is, however, certain, since it is mentioned by the 8th century Arab poet Abu Nowās.

Gorgāni is at pains to demonstrate that he is familiar with Middle Persian, but whether his source was in Middle or New Persian is unclear, and has been the subject of some scholarly discussion (summarized by Maḥjub, pp.18-22). Most scholars have concluded that it was probably in New Persian. Maḥjub (p.20) points out that although Gorgāni refers to the difficulty of understanding some Middle Persian terms, he never refers to the difficulty of reading its notoriously demanding script, which suggests that if he worked from a text, it was one written in the Arabic-New Persian script.

Minorsky demonstrated in a series of cogent articles (1943-1946, 1947-1948, 1954, 1962) that the narrative is almost certainly Parthian (see ARSACIDS) in origin. His evidence for this is drawn primarily from the poem's geography and the names of its characters. He draws attention to the fact that the poem's action is bounded by Marv in the northeast and by Hamadān (called "Māh" in the poem) in the west, with Marv as the seat of the king, Moʾbad. Fārs, the Sasanian homeland, is virtually absent from the text. A number of the characters' names suggest a Parthian origin (e.g. Qāren, the father of Vis). Minorsky concludes, "at no period in the long history of Iran, did the material, and especially the geographical conditions, correspond to those described in *Vis u Ramin*, except at the time of Parthian dominion, under the rule of the Arsacid dynasty" (1947-1948, p.22). He further suggests that the poem is connected with "some scion of the branch (of the Parthian nobility) founded by Godarz . . . (and that) the patronymic of the king of Marv, Moʾbad Manikān, may point to his descent from the Godarzid Bižan (See BĪŽAN) and his wife Maniža" (1947-1948, p.31).

A number of important motifs in the tale, together with its episodic structure, are shared by some Hellenistic romances written in the early centuries of the Common Era. Such shared motifs include: an attempted bridal abduction; the repeated likelihood, which is averted by various spectacular means, that the heroine will have no choice but to sleep with someone other than her true love; an emphasis on close endogamous, rather than exogamous, sexual relations (the marriage of Vis and Viru; further, although Vis and Rāmin are not blood-relations they are brought up by the same wet-nurse, which confers

on them a quasi-brother-sister status, and Rāmin is the brother of Vis's second husband); the presence of a temptress who lures the hero away from the heroine but with whose charms he is soon sated, so that he then reaffirms his love for the heroine. As there was considerable syncretism between the Hellenistic and Parthian cultures, these correspondences suggest it is possible that the tale is, in some of its features, a product of such syncretism (Davis, 2002).

The plot is as follows: Šahru, the queen of Māh, refuses an offer of marriage from King Moʾbad of Marv, but promises that if she bears a daughter she will give the child to him as a bride, (a promise that is condemned by Gorgāni as immoral; Maḥjoub, p. 27, l.51, and l.7). She duly bears a daughter, Vis, who is brought up by a nurse in the company of Moʾbad's younger brother Rāmin. By the time that Vis is to be married, Šahru has forgotten her promise and marries Vis to her (Vis's) older brother Viru. The marriage is unconsummated on the wedding night due to Vis's menstruation. The next day Moʾbad's brother Zard arrives to demand the bride and fighting breaks out, during which Vis's father is killed. Moʾbad bribes Šahru to hand Vis over to him. Moʾbad's brother Rāmin escorts Vis to her new husband and falls in love with her. Vis has no love for Moʾbad and turns to her old nurse, who makes a talisman that renders Moʾbad impotent with Vis. The spell can only be broken if the talisman is broken, and it is swept away in a flood and lost, so that Moʾbad is never able to sleep with his bride. Rāmin uses the nurse as a go-between and after much back and forth Vis falls in love with him, and the two consummate their love. Moʾbad overhears a conversation between the nurse and Vis, and realizes his wife loves Rāmin. He banishes her to her hometown of Māh, but Rāmin follows her. The lovers are pursued by Moʾbad, who tells Vis that she must undergo a trial by fire to prove her chastity. Rather than do this, she and Rāmin elope. Rāmin's and Moʾbad's mother makes peace between her sons, and eventually Vis, Rāmin and Moʾbad are again together in Marv, with Moʾbad uneasily watching the lovers while they seize every opportunity they can to be together. At one point Vis asks her nurse to take her place beside Moʾbad in bed while she is with Rāmin. The trick is almost discovered, but Vis is able to sneak back to her bedchamber in time and reproach Moʾbad for his suspicions.

Moʾbad leads an army against a Roman invasion and takes Rāmin with him. Vis meanwhile is imprisoned in a fortress guarded by Zard. Rāmin falls sick while on the campaign and Moʾbad leaves him behind to recover. Rāmin

makes his way to the fortress where Vis is held and contrives to scale the walls. The lovers spend some months together before Moʾbad, returning in triumph from his military campaign, hears of what is going on; when he arrives at the castle, Rāmin is able to escape. Moʾbad confronts Vis and the nurse with what he has learned and savagely beats them. Moʾbad and Vis return to Marv, and Rāmin meets secretly with her in the palace gardens; again, they are almost caught by Moʾbad, but again Rāmin escapes in time. Later, at a banquet, Moʾbad threatens Rāmin with his dagger.

At this point Rāmin decides there is no future in his love for Vis and he asks Moʾbad to send him to Māh as his representative. While there, he visits the castle of Gurāb (identified by Minorsky, 1954, p. 91, as the modern "Jurāb, about five miles from Malāyer" where there is indeed a ruined pre-Islamic castle). Here Rāmin meets a beautiful woman, Gol, who immediately sets about seducing him, and whom he marries. He writes a letter to Vis telling her of this. She sends the nurse to remonstrate with Rāmin but he sends an insulting message back. Vis then writes Rāmin a long and rhetorically highly elaborate letter in ten sections, reproaching him for his infidelity and reminding him of her love. By the time the letter reaches him he has already become tired of Gol, and he immediately sets off for Marv in hopes of being reconciled with Vis. When he arrives, on horseback, a snowstorm is in progress; Vis appears on the roof of the castle and rejects all of Rāmin's lengthy pleas that she take him back. Rāmin rides despondently off into the snow; Vis regrets what she has done and she and the nurse set off after him. After further altercations, the lovers are reconciled.

Moʾbad takes Rāmin hunting, and the nurse plans an insurrection. Vis and her womenfolk visit a fire temple and there she meets up with Rāmin, who has absented himself from the hunting party, together with forty of his companions. Rāmin and the companions disguise themselves as women and return with Vis to the castle. There they kill the garrison, including Zard, and make off with Moʾbad's movable wealth to Daylam, an area traditionally associated with outlaws. Moʾbad however is killed by a wild boar during the hunt, and Rāmin is able to return to Marv in triumph, without fighting against Moʾbad, and be crowned king. He marries Vis and the two enjoy a long and happy life together. Rāmin reigns for eighty-three years; in the eighty-first year Vis dies, having borne Rāmin two sons. Rāmin hands his kingdom over to his eldest son Ḵoršid, and after two years of mourning at Vis's tomb, he too dies.

Aesthetically the poem is extremely compelling, despite its episodic and often highly repetitious nature. Gorgāni explicitly asks his readers not to blame the lovers (*nabāyad sarzaneš kardan bedišān*, p.30, l. 12); on the contrary, their love is enthusiastically and compassionately celebrated, despite its obvious flouting of social norms. The characters are drawn firmly and boldly; Šahru is worldly and venal, the nurse worried and resourceful, Vis high-spirited and determined, Rāmin impetuous and emotionally volatile. The most complex character is Moʾbad, whose hopeless psychological situation flickers wearily from patience to self-assertion to fury and back again. The characters are largely conventional, as is always the case in medieval narratives, but their often long and rhetorically charged speeches do much to individualize them. The language, which combines great sweetness and strength, is in the main fairly simple, and the rhetorical devices most frequently used, e.g. anaphora and amplificatio, are also generally straightforward; these can produce moments of great eloquence (for example, in Vis's letter to Rāmin, especially its fourth section, which in its acute psychological insight and anguished but beautifully controlled diction is arguably one of the finest passages in the poem). Many of the narrative's most significant scenes happen at night, and this adds considerably to the poem's almost constant atmosphere of mingled danger, romance, and intrigue. In contrast to virtually all subsequent Persian romances, carnal love is celebrated in and for itself, and the poem contains no hint that physical love is to be considered as a metaphor for spiritual love. Gorgāni is also more frank, and less prurient, in his descriptions of sexuality than most of the writers who imitated him; for example, Vis's menstruation and defloration, as well as Moʾbad's impotence, are openly discussed.

The poem's most obvious reflection of pre-Islamic mores is Gorgāni's unembarrassed account of extreme endogamy (e.g. the brother-sister marriage between Viru and Vis). This is in contrast to the discomfort other 11th century writers (e.g. Ferdowsi) tend to display when obliged to deal with material involving such customs. Other pre-Islamic topics include the threatened trial by fire, as well as references to Zoroastrian festivals, fire temples, and beliefs. *Vis o Rāmin* also contains a substantial number of words that have retained relatively older forms, and is one of the richest extant sources for such items.

The poem had an immense influence on Neẓāmi, who takes the bases for most of his plots from Ferdowsi but the basis for his rhetoric from Gorgāni. This is especially noticeable in his *Ḵosrow o Širin*, which imitates a major scene (that

of the lovers arguing in the snow) from *Vis o Rāmin*, as well as being in the same meter (*hazaj*) as Gorgāni's poem. Nezami's concern with astrology also has a precedent in an elaborate astrological description of the night sky in *Vis o Rāmin*. Given Nezami's own paramount influence on the romance tradition, Gorgāni can be said to have initiated much of the distinctive rhetoric and poetic atmosphere of this tradition, with the exception of its Sufi preoccupations, which are quite absent from his poem.

No discussion of *Vis o Rāmin* can avoid the question of whether it has any relationship to the European story of *Tristan and Iseult* (the first extant version of which, by Béroul, appeared some one hundred years after *Vis o Rāmin*). The tales share a number of motifs, including the hero falling in love with the heroine while escorting her as a bride to his king and close relative; the hero being renowned as both a minstrel and a hunter; the crucial role of the heroine's servant/confidante as go-between; the substitution of a female servant for the heroine in the king's bed; the episode of the hero's false love (Iseult of the White Hands, Gol; the characterization of the two is extremely similar); a threatened but averted trial by fire that will establish the lovers' culpability or innocence; the lovers' escape together to an "uncivilized" area (the forest, Daylam); the hero's disguising himself as someone of intrinsically lower status (Tristan as a leper, Rāmin as a woman) in order to gain access to the beloved; Moʾbad's being killed by a boar, while a dream has the equivalent character's (King Mark's) palace despoiled by one.

Even where there are differences between the tales, tantalizing parallels exist. Tristan is King Mark's nephew, while Rāmin is Moʾbad's younger brother. But twice Rāmin is also referred to as Moʾbad's son (Maḥjub, p. 82, l.17; p. 177, l.63), and once he refers to Moʾbad as his father (op. cit., p.351, l.20). Rāmin could be both son and brother to Moʾbad by Parthian custom, a relationship that was obviously impossible in Europe; it seems plausible that a brother and son could turn into a brother's son when the story moved to another culture. Although the magic love potion handed by Iseult's confidante to the lovers is absent from *Vis o Rāmin*, Vis's confidante is also a practitioner of magic (she prevents Moʾbad from sleeping with Vis by means of the talisman), and Gol says that Rāmin's heart is bound to Vis by "the old nurse's spells" (Maḥjoub, p.241, l.100); moreover, the metaphor of love as a wine that induces intoxication and delirium, and which one drinks mutually, is a commonplace of the poem. The most obvious difference between the two tales is the ways in which they end, and this can be put down to differing perceptions of the

cultures from which the tales are presumed by their authors to have sprung. Both narratives are essentially "Pagan" vis-à-vis the culture in which they were written down in the forms that have reached us. On the one hand, the deaths of Tristan and Iseult imply that the values by which they lived have no ultimate validity in the Christian world, which cannot allow the lovers to be rewarded by success or happiness. On the other hand, Vis and Rāmin are vindicated, despite their highly (in Islamic terms) transgressive lives, and this suggests a nostalgia, which is also visible in some other 11th century texts, for the imagined world of pre-Islamic Iran. In the argument against the existence of a connection between the two tales, much has been made of the absence of evidence of textual transmission, but a greater awareness of the ways in which stories travel orally from culture to culture makes such concerns perhaps less decisive than they once seemed. A possible conduit could have been the Saljuq court culture of Syria, which showed a lively interest in literature in Persian (e.g. the 12th century Persian compendium of advice, *Bahr al-Favā'id*, was a product of its patronage) and also had extensive contacts with the crusaders of Outremer. Although the notion of a connection between the tales has been rejected by most scholars who have examined the topic, it is the present writer's opinion that their parallels are too numerous and telling to discount, and that *Vis o Rāmin* did probably contribute some motifs to the Tristan legend, although whether it should be considered as the tale's sole "origin" remains more problematic.

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