



“A Monstrous Courtship” | “قطعه‌ای از بهمن‌نامه‌ی ایرانشاه بن ابی‌الخیر”

Text Information

Author | Hakim Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr

Language | Persian

Period | 11th Century, 12th Century

Genre | Epic poetry

Source | Zaragoza, Biblioteca de la Universidad de Zaragoza, MS 210, fol. 98v-99r

Collection | Gender, Sex and Sensuality: Writings on Women, Men and Desire

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/monstrous-courtship

Transcription, translation and introduction by Sam Lasman.

Introduction to the Text

Likely completed between 1092 and 1108 CE, the **Bahmannāma** (“Book of Bahman”) is the work of a poet so obscure that even his name is not certain. Though there is a general consensus around the form Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr, the first element is spelled “Irānshāh” or even “Inshāh” in some manuscripts. Dedications in the text to the Seljuq sultans Nāser ad-Din Mahmud ebn-e Malekshāh and Ghiyās ad-Din Mohammad ebn-e Malekshāh position him within the Seljuq Empire around the turn of the 12th century CE.

Irānshāh is credited with another epic work, the **Kushnāma** (“Book of Kush”). Both of the poems offer revisionist takes on the New Persian epic tradition established by the monumental **Shāhnāma** (“Book of Kings,” 1010 CE) of Abolqāsem Ferdowsi. This drew upon Persian legend, Zoroastrian religious tradition, and Arabic historiography to craft an immense saga of Iran’s pre-Islamic past, from the first king Gayomart down to the Muslim conquests of the 7th century CE. Subsequent epic poets adopted the *Shāhnāma*’s meter and diction, often situating their narratives in gaps within the earlier poem’s millennia-long scope—a practice literalized by later scribes, who often incorporated segments of these poems seamlessly into *Shāhnāma* manuscripts.

In the **Bahmannāma**, Irānshāh centers not the usual epic heroes but rather a villain, the tyrannical King Bahman. Known for his bloody vengeance against the family of the Sistāni champion Rostam, Bahman is an overbearing, homicidal tyrant. Frequently defeated in battle, he is ultimately devoured by a serpentine monster, an **azhdahā**, making him the only epic character who fails to overcome such a beast.

Before this shocking finale, however, the poem features another encounter with an **azhdahā**. In this excerpt, the hero Borzin-Āzar (“Exalted Flame,” usually just called Borzin), son of Farāmarz (“Beyond-the-Border”), and grandson of Rostam, takes a break from his struggle against Bahman. Together with his companions, Marzbān (“Margrave”) and Tokhāra (“The Tokharian”), he sets out on a hunting expedition. Along the way, they encounter a lion-hunting youth who directs them to a large nomadic encampment with abundant livestock. The lord of the herds is Burāsp, who in the course of a lavish welcome feast reveals that the lion-hunting youth is his daughter. This warrior maiden will only marry the man who can overcome her father’s champion wrestler, a Black African man (**zangi**) and then defeat her in a joust. Borzin accomplishes these feats, but before the wedding, Burāsp reveals the reason behind this warlike courtship. Every year, he is forced to deliver his daughter up to a sexually rapacious cloud; if he fails, his livestock will be slaughtered. Horrified, Borzin witnesses this ritual. He then pursues the cloud back to its mountain lair, where it reveals itself as a monstrous beast. Borzin kills it, and the excerpt ends with a celebratory feast at the court of Burāsp’s brother, the king of Pārs.

Violence and eroticism entwine throughout this passage. One key word is **azhdahā**, a chimeric reptilian beast with anthropomorphic qualities, translated here as “dragon.” This first appears in this edition’s line 111, as a metaphor for the warrior princess; then, in 204, it describes Borzin as he overcomes her. These figurative usages are juxtaposed against the literal monster which terrorizes the young woman and her kingdom, itself killed by one final **azhdahā–Borzin’s** sword.



Irānshāh's poetry invests in depictions of alterity that are both denigrated and desired. The African wrestler is a key figure in this project. Denied dialogue or even a name, his portrayal is a stark example of the anti-Blackness prevalent in Persian epic literature.

He exists only to be overcome, even if the text here tacitly endorses Borzin's chivalrous smackdown over Tokhāra's outspoken bigotry. Yet verbal echoes link all of these figures—Borzin, the princess, the wrestler, and the monster. All are enmeshed in economies of violence that complicate simplistic narratives of culture heroes triumphing over the forces of chaos.

Neither of Irānshāh's epics have been translated into English or other European languages, and scholarly discussion of them remains scant.

Introduction to the Source

The text transcribed here is not medieval; rather, it is a lithograph produced in Mumbai in 1907. This is one of at least two lithographed **poems—the** other being a Farāmarznāma, narrating the exploits of Borzin's father—produced under the direction of Rostam Pur-e Bahrām Soroush-e Tāfti. Soroush-e Tāfti was an Indian Parsi who traveled throughout India and Iran in search of antique manuscripts relating to the Sistāni heroes. According to Rahim 'Afifi, editor of the only scholarly edition of the Bahmannāmeḥ, the lithograph is primarily based on an otherwise unidentified manuscript from 1667. At least four other manuscripts are known, the earliest dated to 1397-98 CE.

About this Edition

I have followed the lithograph wherever possible, only amending or supplying lines from 'Afifi's edition when the lithograph's version is clearly garbled, or important passages are missing. These lines are marked with an asterisk [*] and underlined. No attempt has been made to preserve the original's rhyme scheme (masnavi: AA, BB, CC, ...xx) or meter (motaqāreb: ~- / ~- / ~- / ~- / ~-). I have generally opted for a more naturalistic style over literal renditions. Certain pronouns have been replaced with proper names to aid clarity. Culturally specific terms (**gholām, azhdahā, div, zangi**, etc.) have been rendered into rough English equivalents ("youth," "dragon," "demon," "African," etc.), though I acknowledge this approach sacrifices important nuances for readability.

Thank you to Alexandra Hoffmann, Franklin Lewis, and Mary Thaler for numerous helpful suggestions and amendments.

Further Reading

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- *Brief scholarly outline of the epic.*

Kuehn, Sara. *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

- *Thorough discussion of the pre-modern Islamicate dragon, from an art-historical perspective.*

van Zutphen, Marjolijn. *Farāmarz, the Sistāni Hero: Texts and Traditions of the Farāmarznāma and the Persian Epic Cycle*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

- *Extensive survey of the Persian epic tradition after the Shāhnāma.*

Soroush-e Tāfti, Rostam Pur-e Bahrām, ed. *Bahmannāmeḥ*. Bombay [Mumbai]: Matba'ī-Fayzrasān, 1325 [1907].

- *Lithograph copy of the source.*

Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr. *Bahmannāmeḥ*, edited by Rahim 'Afifi. Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e 'Elmi va Farhangi, 1380 [2001-2002].

- *Published edition of the text.*



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Excerpt from the Bahmannāmeḥ of Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr

They went on like this, three days and three nights, bellies hungry, lips famished
Their famished bodies became like quaking branches, their steeds weak beneath them.

The Tale of Borzin-Āzar, the Youth, and the Lion

The fourth day, at noontime, a youth went by, very pleasing to the heart,
Seated on a horse of exalted pedigree, looking like a mountain, moving like wind,
Face like the sovereign sun, body like lightning amid the air,
A silken shirt over the chest, a musk-black hat over the head—
An opened flower, like an elm flower, shirt stained dark with blood.
With a warlike lion taken in snares, a lasso thrown around its throat.
The hero Borzin said this to his companions: "This is a wonder, unprecedented...
See how this lion-eating child captured that wretched lion."
Right away they drew near to the youth. Borzin asked and gave his greeting,
Said then, "Mighty lion! Open your ears wide to my speech.
Know that we're strangers in these borderlands, though each of us is from the same house.
It's been three days and three nights since we've had food or drink, and sleep has fled from us.
It would be fitting if you hosted us, since nobility also comes from quality."
The fairy-faced youth gave this answer back: "If you don't want to make an easy task tough,
Come, and from the flesh of this battling lion, I'll make you kebabs right away.
This is my food, both night and day; I know no way but woods and lions.
When the belly becomes empty, it begins to churn; then, it might be silenced by anything.
But if you don't have the stomach for such food, there's better hope for you yet:
From these woods, enter the wasteland. When you've gone a little further that way,
In all the vale and plain and mountain and desert, you won't see a spot empty of herds
Of Arabian horses, baggage camels, thousands upon thousands of Tauruses,

روز چهارم گه نیمروز
نشسته بر اسب عقیلی نژاد
رخي همچو خورشيد فرمانروا
يکي پيرهن پرنیان در برش
گشاده گلی چو گل نارون
گرفته يکي شیر جنگی به بند
به یاران چنین گفت برزین گو
ببینید کاین کودک شیر خوار
همانگه رسیدند نزد غلام
بدو گفت از آن پس که ای شیر زوش
بدان کاندیرین مرز بیگانه ایم
سه روز و سه شب گشت تا نان و آب
اگر میزبانی کنی در خورست
پریچهره پاسخ چنین داد باز
بیابید کز گوشت این شیر جنگ
مرا خوردن اینست بیگاه و گاه
شکم چون تهی شد بر آید به جوش
بدین خوردنی گر ندارید خوی
به صحرا بدان بیشه اندر شوید
در و دشت و کوه و بیابان همه
از اسبان تازی هیونان بار

شکم گرسنه ناچریده به لب
شده زیرشان بارگی ناتوان

غلامی همی رفت بس دلفروز
به دیدار کوه و به رفتار باد
تنی همچو برقی میان هوا
کلاهی ز مشک سیاه بر سرش
ز خون تیره گشته برو پیرهن
فکنده مر او را به گردون کمند
که با این شگفتست بسیار نو
چگونه گرفتست آن شیر خوار
بپرسید برزین و کردش سلام
به گفتار من پهن بگشای گوش
اگر چند هر یک ز یک خانه ایم
نخوردیم و از ما رمیده ست خواب
که آزادمردی هم از گوهر ست
که گر کار آسان نگیری دراز
شما را کبابی دهم بی درنگ
ندانم جز از بیشه و شیر راه
به هر چیز کردن توانی خموش
شما را ازین بهتر است آرزوی
چو لختی از آن سر فروتر شوید
نه بینید جایی تهی از رمه
ز گاوان گردون هزاران هزار



Also of mares that are loosed at night, also of sheep in abundant flocks.
One after the other, pass among the herds, until you arrive in a further plain.
On that plain, you'll find a thousand tents pitched beside a stream,
All with crimson, yellow, and violet brocade set as flags by the tent doors.
Where there's a crimson tent in the midst, a golden moon on its crest, its skirts of silk, 30
In that tent is my rest and relaxation; the lord of that house is my father.
Give him my regards, brighten your souls with food.
You'll be our guests for a while. Our palace and vaulted hall will¹ become radiant."
Borzin laughed, and said, "Brave one! By God, we've never eaten lion!"
And from there they dashed towards the wood. They found the earth covered in livestock, 35
A child in the midst of the flocks, flocks on the vales and plains, wandering in groups—
Pitched on top a pole, a sort of refuge, as is the custom and tradition of herdsmen there.
The herdboy said, "You're the wise Borzin! You're of the vengeful Farāmarz's blood!
Go on, for now the time of your desires has come; your fame has reached the blazing sun.
For the task that you have up ahead, fortune will be yours, by this prediction!" 40
The commander kept saying, "How did this fortune-teller come to know of Borzin?"
He passed by all that livestock, and came up from that wide plain.
He looked, saw a plain full of tents, all crimson and yellow and violet and white,
Each one fashioned of Byzantine² brocade, sewn all over with golden figures;
They turned towards a nearby crimson tent, the wonder of gossiping tongues, 45
A court of Byzantine brocade, an old man seated in the court,
Golden-belted youths set in ranks, hats and belts stitched with gold.
Borzin praised him, and said, "May praise be mated to your soul!"
Marzbān asked them one by one, spoke his speech with a sweet tongue:
"When your guest comes, speaking eloquent speech, don't knit your brows over your poverty." 50
The councilor spoke fairly to the kingly one: "How sweet is a host's good disposition!"
That old man's name was Burāsb; his livestock made him blissful day and night.
He asked Borzin, "Fame-bearer, why did you set out on this journey?
When and where do you wish to go? Speak! Seek from us whatever wish you desire."
The champion said to him, "Fair-natured man, I have no wish but to see you. 55

هم از مادیانها که بر شب یله
یکایک میان رمه بگذرید
بران دشت یابید خیمه هزار
همه دیبه‌ی سرخ زرد و بنفش
کجا خیمه‌ی سرخ اندر میان
در آن خیمه آرام و خواب منست
ز من پیش او آشنایی دهید
بیاشید یکچند مهمان ما
بخندید برزین و گفت ای دلیر
وز آنجا سوی بیشه پشافتند
یکی کودک اندر میان گله
زده بر سر چوب تکیه چنان
بدو گفت پرمایه برزین تویی
برو گامد اکنون که کام تو
به کاری که داری به پیش اندرون
سپهبد همی گفت کاین فالگوی
از آن چارپا سر به سر در گذشت
نگه کرد دشتی پر از خیمه دید
ز دیبای رومی یکایک زده
نهادند زی خیمه ای سرخ روی
ز دیبای رومی یکی بارگاه
غلامان زرین کمر صف زده
برو آفرین کرد برزین و گفت
یکایک بپرسیدشان مرزبان
چو مهمانت آید سخن خوبگوی
نکو گفت دستور با شاه فش
مر آن پیر را بود بوراسب نام
ز برزین بپرسید کای نامدار
کی و کجا رفت خواهی بگوی
بدو پهلوان گفت کای نیک خوی



We still seek to go elsewhere—our passage has led through this country.
 We've come as guests to this court; we've come to purchase your honor with our souls."
 Burāsb commanded his cook to bring food right away:
 Fried meats and fish and poultry and lamb, every sort of pleasing food.
 They ate, and it refreshed their spirits; it brought back strength to the champion's body. 60
 A resting place was decked out for him; his spirit settled down from the sufferings of the road.
 The next day, Burāsb set out a banquet, unlike any that anyone could remember.
 He summoned a famous lord from every tent; with such preparations, set out a banquet for them.
 They ate, partook in that banquet with gusto; they were fashioning a feasting place.
 The earth was drenched in pure-bright wine, the air filled with the scents of musk and incense, 65
 The heavens smoke-choked with kebab vapors. The earth grew drunk with gout of wine.
 From the scent of rose, daffodils, and jasmine, the earth became like lofty paradise.
 All that court's gear was pure silver, all hearts set on the songs of harp and rebab.
 When yellow wine, just like beauty, emptied the haughty lords' heads of wisdom,
 The breeze lifted a veil from the face of shame. Those soft words took flight. 70
 The proud Borzin said to Burāsb, "Now there's no need to conceal speech.
 I must know who you are, your name and your lineage; what should I call you?
 It's fitting if you say what this place is, and whose is this lovely livestock?
 Whose might this land and stream be, this warband like a spring garden?"
 The other answered him, "Proud man, I will reveal this secret to you:
 Know that this borderland is my place. All the plain is full of my livestock.
 The name of this stream is the Zandeh-rud.³ Seeing it, I am blissful every month and year.
 When greenery comes up from the earth's face, I come from Pārs to this very place.
 To this prairie, I bring the livestock; when they become fat, I go back.
 The king of Pārs is a famous man, my brother, descended from my father. 80
 Proud Yazdād is his name. From end to end, the world is subject to his desire.
 In the mustering place, more than sixty thousand of his famed warband come to him.
 These livestock are shared between me and him; all of my dominion is based on this.
 The tragedy is that thanks to Bahman son of Esfandiār, he passes his days in anxiety.
 Bahman keeps seeking royal tribute from his land; I don't know what secrets the heavens keep. 85

همی رفت خواهیم جای دگر
 بدین بارگه میهمان آمدیم
 بفرمود بوراسب اندر زمان
 ز بریان و ماهی و مرغ و بره
 بخوردند و زان تازه تر شد روان
 بر آراستندش یکی خوابگاه
 دگر روز بوراسب خوانی نهاد
 ز هر خیمه ای نامداری بخواند
 بخوردند از آن خوان پرداختند
 زمین بستد از باده ی ناب نور
 فلک دود بست از بخار کباب
 ز بوی گل و نرگس و یاسمین
 همه ساز آن بارگه سیم ناب
 چو از باده ی زرد همچون بهی
 هوا پرده بر داشت از روی شرم
 سرافراز برزین به بوراسب گفت
 همی تا بدیدم بدانم ترا
 سزد گر بگویی که این جای چیست
 که را باشد این کشور و جویبار
 چنین پاسخ داد کای سرفراز
 چنان دان که این مرز جای منست
 مر این جوی را زنده رودست نام
 گیا چون بر آید ز روی زمین
 بدین مرغزار آورم چارپای
 شه پارس باشد یکی نامور
 سرافراز یزدان نام ویست
 به گاه شمردن دو ره سی هزار
 میان من و اوست این چارپای
 غم آنست کز بهمن اسفندیار
 همی خواهد از کشورش شاه باژ

بدین کشور افتاد ما را گذر
 خریدار رویت به جان آمدیم
 به خوالیگرش تا بیاورد نان
 ز هرگونه ای خوردنیها سره
 در آورد نیرو به تن پهلوان
 روانش بر آسود از رنج راه
 که هرگز کس آن را ندارد به یاد
 بدان ساخته خوانشان بر نشاند
 یکی بزمگاه همی ساختند
 هوا پر شد از بوی مشک و بخور
 به جرعه زمین مست گشت از شراب
 زمین شد به سان بهشت برین
 همه دل بر آواز چنگ و رباب
 سر سرکشان شد ز دانش تهی
 بلندی گرفت آن سخنهای نرم
 که اکنون سخنها نباید نهفت
 به نام و نژادت چه خوانم ترا
 همین چارپای دلارای کیست
 چنین لشکری همچو باغ بهار
 کنم آشکارا به پیش تو راز
 همه دشت پر چارپای منست
 من از دیدنش سال و مه شاد کام
 بیایم من از پارس ایدر چنین
 چو فربه شود باز گردم به جای
 برادر مرا و ز پشت پدر
 جهان سر به سر زیر کام ویست
 فزون آیدش لشکر نامدار
 همه گدایی مرا زین به پای
 به تنگی گذارد همی روزگار
 ندانم که گردون چه دارد به راز



Night and day before God on his feet, Yazdād keeps saying, 'Oh Just One of pure judgment,
Deliver Borzin from that evildoer; do not turn his spirit back from vengeance.
By Borzin's hands, destroy Bahman's life; do not deliver the world into his control.⁴
Now news has come these past few days of Borzin, how his luck went crooked.
He was destroyed by that demon-spawn's hand (may that lineage's name vanish from the earth!) 90
Our hearts trembled from that pain and sorrow, and from that news our souls grew depressed.
Later, we heard from a courier that the champion remained alive, somewhere."
Borzin told him, "An army came from Bahman, an army that blocked the passage of the wind.
They were shattered by Borzin-Āzar; many were killed or hurt or wounded."
When Burāsb heard this, he became glad, and his spirit became freed from that sorrow. 95
He praised him, and said, "Young man, you've freed my spirit from sorrow.
May your spirit be free from sorrow. May your fair-fortuned heart be glad!"
Borzin said to him, "These tents altogether—whose are they, famous nobleman?
We don't know anyone in this encampment; no king has such a court!"
Burāsb laughed and said, "Son, whose is this gear, these customs and might? 100
They belong to these proud lords you keep seeing; you'd always pick out love in their hearts.
They aren't mine, they aren't my warband—all bring the pain of their own hearts!
They're a thousand kings' sons from China; from Byzantium, China, and the land of Iran.
Each of them searching for his heart's desire, and by this heart's desire still confounded.
On the road here, if you saw a child who'd captured one of those warlike lions, 105
Know this: she is my daughter, who in times of violence is worth a whole warband.
At the year's start, the kings of the earth will come seeking her from me in this way.
Anyone who wishes for my daughter from me, know this: I will not overrule her judgment.
I will set forth for him two pledges regarding this, and both of these are linked to blood:
One is that he must fight against her, and bring her head and helm down into the dirt. 110
The second is that I have a gigantic Black man; throw him on his back upon the earth.
Whoever accomplishes these two things, then and there, fate will turn his heart to gladness."
Just then that brave dragon came down from the hills, having captured two lions.
Servants came running forward; they took those bound beasts from her.
The fairy-faced girl came before her father, kissed the earth and came through the door. 115

همی گوید ای دادر پاک رای
مگردان ز کینه مر او را منش
منه بر جهان پیش فرمان اوی
ز برزین کجا بخت او گشت کوز
منه بر جهان پیش فرمان اوی
وزین آگهی جان ما شد دژم
که آن پهلوان زنده مانده به جای
سپاهی که بر باد بر بست راه
بسی کشته و زار و خسته شدند
وزان غم روان وی آزاد شد
مرا از غم آزاد کردی روان
دل نیک بختان تو شاد باد
که را باشد ای مهتر نامور
ندارد چنین دستگه هیچ شاه
که را باشد این ساز و آیین و کر
به دل مهرشان بر گزینی همی
همه با دل خویش درد آوری
ز روم و ز چین و ز ایران زمین
وزین کام دل باز مانده خجل
گرفته ز شیران جنگی یکی
که هنگام کینه یکی لشکر است
بیایند خواهندش از من چنین
چنان دان که از رای او نگذرم
که این هر دو نزدیک باشد به خون
سر و خود او زیر گرد آورد
زند بر زمینش به هنگام پشت
دلش شادمان گردد از روزگار
ز پشته در آمد گرفته دو شیر
ازو بستند آن ددان بندگان
زمین را ببوسید و آمد به در

شب و روز در پیش یزدان به پای
بده برزین ازان بدکنش
تبه کن تو بر دست این جان اوی
کنون آگهی آمد این چند روز
تبه کن تو بر دست این جان اوی
دل ما بلرزید از آن درد و غم
دگر باره شنیدم از رهنمای
بدو گفت کز بهمن آمد سپاه
ز برزین آزر شکسته شدند
چو بشنید بوراسب از آن شاد شد
بدو آفرین کرد و گفت ای جوان
ز غمها روان تو آزاد باد
بدو گفت کاین خیمه ها سر به سر
ندانیم کس را بدین پایگاه
بخندید بوراسب گفت ای پسر
مر این سر کشان را که بینی همی
نه خویشند ما را و نه لشکری
هزارند فرزند شاهان چین
همه یک به یک در پی کام دل
بدین راه گر دیده ای کودکی
چنان دان که او مر مرا دختر است
سر سال شاهان روی زمین
هر آنکس که خواهد ز من دخترم
دو پیمان نهم پیش او اندرون
یکی آنک با او نبرد آورد
دو دیگر که دارم سیاهی درشت
هر آنکس که آرد به جا این دو کار
درین بود کان اژدهای دلیر
دویدند پیش پرستندگان
بیامد پرچهره پیش پدر



All the brave lords humbled themselves; they kept praising her in God's name,
Her stature, her appearance, and her conduct, her mightiness and deeds.
Borzin kept saying, "Day and night, we will open our lips for her manliness and strength.
Her quarry is like Bānu Goshasp's, that lion-heart, when she rides upon her horse,⁵
Who binds in one course two savage lions from among the heroes of Iran and Turān."⁶ 120
Burāsb said this: "Lion man! The time of battle is coming now."
He said, "The new year starts in three days; that day, everyone starts searching for a mate."
Borzin said to him, "For these three days, I will stay close to you, heart-pleaser.
We will see how that elm blossom demonstrates her skill at this gathering."
They engaged in pleasure and flute-playing, their tongues brimming with heroic songs. 125
For New Year, a new-fashioned banquet was set; the gate of pleasure and delight was opened.
When the hand of joy shut the gate of grief, they opened their hands to ruby wine.
The next day, Burāsb set out a throne upon the plain, beneath a tree branch.
Noble thrones were set out before him, imperial brocade was spread out.
The wise sat upon those thrones, like Borzin, and others of great worth. 130
Another cried out amid the crowd, "Famed ones! Men among men!
Know that today is the New Year; it's the time of pleasure, the festival of Kay Khosrow."⁷
Enter the arena and seek your desire! Exalt your name among the brave."
Enter the arena and seek your desire! Exalt your name among the brave."
The heads of the famed lords lifted from sleep; each one came rushing to the arena. 135
When the arena became a mass of those chieftains, the army came like a massive mountain.

The Tale of the African and His Battling

Rubbed with oil from head to foot, like a demon fleeing from the name of God,
His body naked from head to foot, famed throughout the world for wrestling—
You'd say he always trained himself in violence; the earth trembled beneath his feet. 140
His eyes were like two bowls of blood, his head and shoulders like Mount Bisotun.⁸
He entered the arena, hissing and strutting, everyone's heart fleeing for fear of him.
Just then Burāsb shouted out, "Famous lords of glorious lineage!
Enter the arena seeking desire and fame, for sweet fame comes through desire.
Whoever sets his hands to wrestling, and keeps from himself a black calamity— 145

دلیران یکایک فرو ماندند
ز بالا و دیدار و رفتار او
همی گفت برزین که ما روز و شب
شکارش به کردار بانو گشاسب
که بندد به یک ره دو شیر ژیان
چنین گفت بوراسب کای شیر مرد
سر سال نو را سه روز است گفت
بدو گفت برزین که ما این سه روز
ببینیم تا آن گل نارون
بودند با رامش و نای ورود
سر سال خوان نو آیین نهاد
چو در دست شادی در غم بیست
دگر روز بوراسب بنهاد تخت
نهاده برو دستهای مهی
نشستند بر تخت پرمایگان
منا دیگری در میان بانگ کرد
بدانید که امروز سال نوست
به میدان شوید و بجوید کام
به میدان شوید و بجوید کام
سر نامداران بر آمد ز خواب
چو شد توده میدان از آن سروران
داستان زنگی و جنگ کردن او
به روغن بمالیده سر تا به پای
برهنه سراپای و اندام او
تو گفתי همی کینه ورزد همی
دو چشمش به کردار دو طاس خون
به میدان در آمد دمان و دنان
همانگاه بوراسب آواز داد
به میدان شوید از پی کام و نام
هر آنکو به کشتی کند دست پیش

چو دیوی رمیده ز نام خدای
به کشتی به گیتی شده نام او
زمین زیر پایش بلرزد همی
بر و یال همچون که بیستون
دل هرکس از هیبت او رمان
که ای نامداران فرخ نژاد
که این نام نیکو رساند به کام
بلای سیه باز دارد ز خویش



Then at the time of battle, casts that daughter of mine from her mount's back into the dirt.
Right then, I'll grant her to him with no evasion; I'll ask for no dowry, no lion's pledge."
His command made hearts spring from their place; wisdom lagged behind love.
One stripped off his robe and leaped from his place; he came to grips, struck with both hands.
When the Black man saw this, he became full of violence. A furrow appeared between his brows. 150
He roared like an elephant in musth. He stuck his arm out between the other's legs,
Threw him and slammed him on the ground; the ends of his vertebrae stuck out from his back.
Another one came against the fierce African; he didn't give him a moment's respite in wrestling.
A famed lord came out from the crowd, from the seed of the Iranian nobility.
The Black man smashed a fist against his middle; the famed lord was destroyed by that injury. 155
A famed lord came out from the crowd, from the seed of the Iranian nobility.
The Black man smashed a fist against his middle; the famed lord was destroyed by that injury.
So it was until he'd overthrown twenty men from the assembly; each of them kept crying blood.
Enraged, Tokhāra sprang from his place. Firelike, he set his mind on wrestling.
Burāsb said to him, "Lion-man! Don't orbit around calamity, if you can help it. 160
These days, you're our guest; what business do you have, battling with brave men?
It wouldn't be right for the African to break you, to hurl your famed body in the dust."
Tokhāra said to him, "Maybe that's right, but passion rules over everyone's heart."
When that brave man came near the African, he roared like a male lion;
He loosened his tongue with curses, and said, "Ugly man of bad substance, demons' mate, 165
You've unleashed your hands on these famed lords; see now the skills of an elephant in musth!"
The African grew enraged from his curses, and from his slanderous speech and will;
In answer, without adding to the drama, he acted on him like a demon from the Iron Fortress.
He fell upon him violently, enraged; his great frame bristled, his back stretched.
He struck him in the flank, shattered him utterly. Tokhāra fell—you'd say he died! 170
Some lifted the body up from the dust. They brought him, pitiful, into a tent.
Borzin laughed at his deeds, and at his sharp, raw speech.
Marzbān grew enraged at his laughter, and said to him, "Lion-hearted champion,
It would be fitting for you to endeavor also, to forcefully display your skills.
Should you throw this Black man off his feet, you'll become lord of that moon-bodied girl. 175

همان دخترم را به گاه نبرد
همانگه بدو بخشمش ناگزیر
ز قهرش بجنبید دلها ز جای
یکی جامه بر کند و از جای جست
سیه چون چنان دید شد پر ز کین
بغرید مانده‌ی پیل مست
در آورد و زد بر زمینش درشت
یکی دیگر آمد بر شرزه زنگ
بیامد یکی نامدار از میان
یکی مشت زد بر میانش سیاه
بیامد یکی نامدار از میان
یکی مشت زد بر میانش سیاه
چنین تا از آن انجمن مرد بیست
ز خشمش تخاره بر آمد ز جای
بدو گفت بوراسب کای شیر مرد
تو مهمان مای بدین روزگار
نباید که زنگی ترا بشکند
تخاره بدو گفت شاید رواست
چو نزدیک زنگی رسید آن دلیر
زبان را به دشنام بگشاد و گفت
بدین نامداران گشادی دو دست
بر آشف زنگی ز دشنام او
به پاسخ نیفزودنی گرم و سرد
ز کینه بدو اندر آمد درشت
بزد بر تهیگاه بشکست خرد
ز خاکش تنی چند بر داشتند
بخندید برزین ز کردار او
دژم شد ز خندیدنش مرزبان
سزد گر تو نیز آزمایش کنی
بود کاین سیه را در آری ز پای



For the seed of Nariman's your origin; you're grandson of the World-Champion,⁹ Rostam.
Wrestling's part of your nature and disposition! Now you must bring a just end to this combat."

Borzin's Wrestling with the African Youth

Borzin grew enraged when he heard this. Right away he stripped the robe from his body.
"What are you trying to do?" Burāsb asked. "May wisdom be mated with your pure soul!" 180
"Just once," Borzin said, "I'll wrestle with the Black man. Just once, I'll outmaneuver him."
Burāsb said, "Essence of faith and justice, mind that you don't have cause to rue this speech.
You're a stranger here. Don't come into this! Don't come for fighting and vengeance!
Especially since you've seen his skills—no one on earth has a stance like his!
He's killed three of those famed lords, slammed the bodies of twenty violently against the earth. 185
Why should anyone dare to swim the sea, especially someone who doesn't know how to swim?
Appoint wisdom to your heart, if you can; for ahead lies the caravansarai of clay."
Borzin said to him, "Essence of manliness, my heart has grown sad from the African's fighting.
I'll try myself once against the Black man. If fortune's mine, I might force the blocked path."
When the commander pulled his robe over his head, the girl saw him from inside her tent: 190
His well-nourished body, that fair striding and step of his.
Love for him brought a blazing fire to her heart. Her heart tore the shroud of shame.
Her heart became like a stricken eye; her mighty body became ruined and undone.
She kept saying to herself, "Lord, the Black man's hands and feet have become a bit weak.
Perhaps the other will be my husband and master. In this world, only he will be my companion." 195
That fairy-faced moon was in a state of anxiety when Borzin went up against the Black man.
He roared, and like thunder struck with his two hands; he circled him like an elephant in musth.
The African feared his limbs and frame. Weakness made his legs like leather strips.
Borzin backhanded him across the mouth; he broke his two front teeth.
He stuck his hand between the other's legs, showed his skill, and uprooted him from his place. 200
He hoisted him by the neck and hurled him onto the earth, sat on his chest like a lion in its lair.
Upon him, everyone called out praises anew. Shouting whoops rose up from that assembly.
When they lifted that Black man up from the dust, his back and sides were completely shattered.
Burāsb said to Borzin, "Famous man, there remains ahead of you one battle to wage.
When you have both of them in hand, the conditions will be fulfilled in this world." 205

نبیره جهان پهلوان رستمی
کنون داد باید بدین رزم داد

همانگاه جامه ز تن بر کشید
که با جان پاکت خرد باد جفت
برو بر یکی پیشدستی کنم
نگر تا ازین گفته نیاری تو یاد
نه از بهر پیکار و کین آمدی
ندارد کسی بر زمین پای او
تن بیست را بر زمین نهد درشت
به ویژه کسی کاو نداند شناه
که پیشین بود کاروان گاه گل
دلم شد ز پیکار زنگی غمی
مگر بخت بگشایدم بسته راه
ز پرده درون دختر او را بدید
چنان کش خرامیدن و گام اوی
دلش پرده ی شرم را بر درید
تن زورمندش تباه و نژند
سیه را یکی سست شد دست و پای
به گیتی نشاید جز او یار من
که برزین در آمد به تنگ سیاه
به گردش بگردید چون پیل مست
ز سستی شدش پای همچون دوال
دو دندان پیشین او را شکست
هنر کرد و بر کند او را ز جای
نشست از برش همچو شیر عرین
وزان انجمن بانگ بر خواست غو
برو پشت و پهلو همه چاک چاک
نبردیست مانده ز پیش تو کار
بهانه به گیتی سر آید همی

که تو مایه از تخمه‌ی نیرمی
ترا هست کشتی سرشت و نهاد

کشتی گرفتن برزین با غلام زنگی

بر آشفست برزین کزینسان شنید
چه خواهی همی کرد بوراسب گفت
یکی با سیه گفت کشتی کنم
بدو گفت کای مایه‌ی دین و داد
تو بیگانه ی نه بدین آمدی
به ویژه که دیدی هنرهای او
ازان نامداران سه تن را بکشت
چرا کرد باید به دریا شناه
خرد بر گمار ارتوانی به دل
بدو گفت کای مایه‌ی مردمی
یکی آزمایش کنم با سیاه
سپهبد چو جامه ز سر بر کشید
بدان ناز پرورده اندام اوی
ز مهرش به جان تاب آتش رسید
دلش گشت چون دیده‌ی دردمند
همی گفت با خویشتن کدخدای
مگر گردد او شوی و سالار من
در اندیشه بود آن پرچهره ماه
بگرید و چون رعد زد هر دو دست
بترسید زنگی ازان شاخ و یال
بزد بر دهانش یکی پشت دست
برون کرد دستش میان دو پای
به گردن بر آورد و زد بر زمین
برو هر کسی آفرین خواند نو
چو بر داشتند آن سیه را ز خاک
بدو گفت بوراسب کای نامدار
چو هر دو به دستت بر آید همی



Critical Notes

Translation

- Note 1* Throughout this tale, the poet uses the architectural vocabulary of a settled court to describe the nomadic domain of Burāsb.
- Note 2* Rumi, "Roman," a generic term for the West; in Irānshāh's day, it referred particularly to the Byzantine Empire.
- Note 3* Literally, "Life-Giving River," this flows from the Zagros Mountains through the city of Esfahān, though in recent years its flow has become drastically reduced through drought and mismanagement.
- Note 4* Oppressed by Bahman, Yazdād prays for the king's rival, Borzin.
- Note 5* Bānu Goshasp is a famed warrior woman, daughter of Rostam (and therefore Borzin's aunt). In addition to appearing in the Bahmannāma and other poems, she stars as the hero of her own brief epic, the Bānugoshāspnāma.
- Note 6* Iran's traditional rivals, representing the peoples of the Central Asian steppes; from at least the Shāhnāma onward, associated with the Turks and with Chin (China).
- Note 7* Kay Khosrow was a just and much-loved king, who reigned before Bahman's great-grandfather Lohrasp came to the throne.
- Note 8* A peak in the Zagros Mountains, famed for the ancient reliefs carved on it.
- Note 9* Jahān-pahlavān, an epithet regularly granted to Rostam as the preeminent epic hero.