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Kamal Isma^{c}il of Isfahan: Last of the Old Masters of Persian Qasida Poetry

The poet

The late 11th century A.D. was a time of violent upheavals in the eastern provinces of the Abbasid Caliphate. In Iran, the Great Saljuqs lost their empire after Toghril III was killed in 1194 by the Khwārazmians under ^{c}Alā al-Dīn Tekish. In Baghdad, the caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh tried to restore the caliphate to its former power and glory which brought him in conflict with ^{c}Alā al-Dīn Tekish's successor Muhammad II who, by having his name mentioned in the Friday sermon and striking coins in his own name instead of the name of the caliph, went farther in asserting his souvereignty than al-Nāṣir was ready to tolerate.
In the provinces and cities of Iran, people were divided into political factions and religious sects, fighting each other viciously. Isfahan was a focal point of sectarian strife. Main actors in the political drama there were two families, the Khujandīs and the Sā^{c}idīs. The Khujandīs, who lived in the Dardasht quarter of Isfahan, were leaders of the Shāfi^{c}ī community, and the adherents of the Hanafī school of Islamic law followed the leadership of the Sā^{c}idīs, who resided in Jūbāra. From time to time the two groups would engage in violent conflict, raiding each other's quarters, shedding each other's blood and burning down houses. When the famous geographer Yāqūt (d. 1229) visited Isfahan, he noted that the city was partly in ruins as a result of these conflicts.

Kamāl Ismā^{c}īl, whose full name was Kamāl al-Dīn Abū l-Faẕl Ismā^{c}īl b. Jamāl al-Dīn b. ^{c}Abd al-Razzāq, was born in Isfahan around 1170, most probably in 1172. His father, Jamāl al-Dīn, was a goldsmith who worked in the bazaar of Isfahan. Jamāl al-Dīn had, in the words of his son, left his shop to attend college and made a name for himself as a poet. From him Kamāl learned the craft of poetry when he was a boy. We have no indication whatsoever that Kamāl Ismā^{c}īl worked in the bazaar. Except for a small area of land which he was granted later in his life, he seems to have had no source of income other than his poetry. Like his father before him, he was a follower of the Sā^{c}idī family, first under Rukn al-Dīn Sā^{c}id b. Mas^{c}ūd (d. 1203 or 1204) and then under Rukn al-Dīn Mas^{c}ūd b. Sā^{c}id (d. after 1224 and before 1237). When his father died in 1292,

Kamāl was, as he says in one of his poems, no older than 20 years, and he put himself under the tutelage of Rukn al-Dīn Sāʿid b. Masʿūd. At age twenty, Kamāl was already an accomplished poet and had composed several remarkable poems.
His fame continued to rise and spread beyond the city of Isfahan. His voice was even heard in Baghdad where one of the caliph's trustees, the mystic Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Hafs ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, wrote Kamāl a letter exhorting him to remain steadfast in his faith and guide his disciples on the path of spiritual perfection. Yet, although Kamāl Ismāʿīl sent poems to the Khwārazmshāhs and other rulers, he never left the service of his Isfahan patrons. This is not to say that he never left Isfahan, since we know of at least one journey he made to Khwārazm (the region south of Lake Aral). In one of his poems, Kamāl mentions his stay in Khwārazm and complains about the icy cold and his humble quarters. In other poems he mentions trips to Tabaristān (a region bordering on the Caspian Sea) and Rayy (today part of Tehran), and in a letter that has been preserved, a contemporary of Kamāl's who had accompanied a group of Isfahanī notables on the pilgrimage to Mecca, mentions a poet Kamāl al-Dīn who had to abort his pilgrimage because of a fever that befell him. If this poet was indeed Kamāl Ismāʿīl, the fever that kept him away from the Kaaba was not the only ailment that soured his life. In two long poems, Kamāl complains of sore eyes (*ramad*) and scabies (*jarab*), and at one time he and his compatriots lived through a famine. But the hardest blow that fate dealt him was the loss of his teenage son who drowned while on a field trip with other boys.
At the threshold of old age, Kamāl Ismāʿīl had become embittered by what he had seen. He had lost his faith, not in God and Islam, but in the people of his home-town who used religion as a pretext to kill each other. Out of bitterness, he composed a short poem that reads:

As long as Dardasht and Jūbāra exist,
there will be nothing but fight and strife.
Oh Lord of the seven planets! Send us a blood-thirsty king
who will turn Dardasht into a desert and let a river of blood run through Jūbāra!
And who will multiply the number of people in both quarters
by tearing everyone into a hundred pieces (vv. 11561-63).

In the year 1236, it seemed that God was answering Kamāl's desperate prayer. In this year, the Mongols who had defeated the Khwārazmshāhs and invaded Iran came to Isfahan and demanded surrender of the town. Ibn Abī l-Hadīd, commentator of the *Nahj al-Balāgha*, writes that the Shāfiʿī party sent an envoy to the Mongols who were camped outside the

city walls and promised to open the gates if the Mongols would destroy Jū bāra and kill the Hanafites. The Mongols did so, but not before they had razed Darddasht and killed the traitors who had opened the gates of Isfahan. Kamāl survived this catastrophy for one year; he died in 1237, but exept for an anecdote in Dawlatshāh's *Tazkirat al-Shuᶜarāᵓ* we do not know how his life ended. According to Dawlatshāh, Kamāl was living in a hut outside the city in the garb of a dervish. One day a young Mongol soldier came to his hut searching for hidden gold and other valuables. He tortured the old man who was unwilling or unable to lead him to the hoard and then left him to die. With his own blood, so Dawlatshāh[1] tells us, Kamāl scribbled a last quatrain in the sand:

When life dissolves, fierce anguish racks the soul:
Before His Face this is the least we thole:
And yet withal no word I dare to breathe:
This is his prize who renders service whole.[2]

The panegryyrical qasida

Whether or not this particular quatrain is, indeed, Kamāl's, the poet has left us with a considerable number of *rubāᶜīyāt*, and a selection of them were the first of his poems to be translated into English.[3] Yet, although 19th century English and American readers would see him as a second Omar Khayyam, it was not for his quatrains (*rubāᶜīyāt*) that Kamāl gained his reputation as a poet. Among his compatriots as well as Turkish and Urdu poets, Kamāl Ismāᶜīl was famous as master of the *qaṣīda*, rivalled only by Khāqānī and Anvarī. Compared to his qasidas, his quatrains, lyrical poems (*ghazalīyāt*), and rhyming couplets (*mathnavīyāt*) are of minor importance. He has, however a large number of "fragments"

[1] *Tazkirat al-Shuᶜarāᵓ*, ed. M. Ramazānī and A. Kulālih-i Khāvar. 2nd printing, [Tehran]: Intishārāt-i Padīda-i Khāvar, 1366 h. sh., p. 116.

[2] From: E. G. Browne: *A Literary History of Persia,* Vol II, Cambridge 1928, p. 542. Literally, and with a different interpretation of the last two hemistichs:

The heart is filled with blood, and thus is following the rules of self-sacrifice.
In His presence, this is the simplest of games.
But this notwithstanding, dare I not say:
Is it possible that is the way one treats one's servants?

[3] L. H. Gray and E. W. Mumford, *The Hundreed Love Songs of Kemal Ad-din of Isfahan*, London: Nutt, 1903.

(*muqaṭṭaʿāt*) that could, if ever studied in detail, yield valuable insight into the everyday life of a medieval Isfahani citizen.
My own study of Kamāl Ismāʿīl's poetry, a doctoral dissertation published in 1993, focusses on his panegyrical qasidas.[4] Apart from these, Kamāl has also a number of religious and exhortatory qasidas which have been analyzed and commented upon by A. Pūrhājī-i Langarūdī.[5] In H. Baḥr ul-ʿulūmī's edition of Kamāl's divan (Tehran 1348 h. sh.), there are 134 panegyrical qasidas comprising a total of about 6,500 lines (*bayt*).
Until quite recently, the panegyrical qasida has been considered an unsavoury genre of Oriental poetry.[6] In the eyes of Orientalist critics whose literary tastes were informed by European classic and romantic poetry, the qasida appeared as an expression of insincerity and sycophancy on the part of poets who were not artists of the word but mere versifiers in the paid service of men of power. And, indeed, the panegyrical qasida is not ***art pour l'art*** and its aim is not to express the true feelings of the poet, it is rather an occasional poem dedicated to the praise of someone in power. Its function is ceremonial, and it can be regarded as a gift that the poet offers to the holder of power and for which he expects something in return. This function of the panegyrical qasida is

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[4]*Die panegyrische Qaṣīda bei Kamāl ud-dīn Ismāʿīl aus Isfahan. Eine Studie zur persischen Lobdichtung um den Beginn des 7./13. Jahrhunderts.* Beirut: Orient Institut der DMG, 1993 (BTS 47).

[5] *Sharḥ-i qaṣāʾid-i ʿirfānī-i akhlāqī-i Kamāl Ismāʿīl-i Isfahānī*, [Tehran 1991].

[6] Since completion of my dissertation in 1986, a small number of studies have contributed much to a better understanding of the poetics of the qasida. I would like to mention the works of Julie S. Meisami: *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, Princeton University Press, 1987; Stefan Sperl: *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Benedikt Reinert's two contributions to: *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft. Orientalisches Mittelalter*, ed. by W. Heinrichs, Wiesbaden: Aula: 1990; and Suzanne Stetkevych: *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*: Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
In 1993, qasida scholarship has taken a bold step forward with the Qasida Symposium convened by the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. As a result of that symposium, a book on the qasida in a variety of literatures and a multilingual anthology of qasidas are being edited by S. Sperl and Ch. Shackle and will be published by E.J.Brill in the spring of 1996.

reflected in its structure: it opens with an introduction, called *nasīb*, *tashbīb* or *taghazzul*, in which the poet speaks of love, the seasons of nature, precious objects, or the vicissitudes of fate. At the end of the introduction, a point of the poem called *gurīzgāh*, the poet makes an artful turn from the topic of the introduction towards the main part of the poem. He then introduces the name of the person he wants to praise. This opens the section of the poem which is called *madīḥ* and which consists of an enumeration of the addressee's praiseworthy qualities and remarkable feats. Having introduced the addressee's name at the beginning of the *madīḥ*, the poet then speaks to him directly and, as a rule, uses the particle *ay* (oh!) to indicate his turning towards the recipient of his praise (*mamdūḥ*). In the final section (*duʿā*) of the qasida, rarely longer than two to four lines, the poet prays for the well-being and everlasting happiness of the *mamdūḥ*. Between the *madīḥ* and the *duʿā* of the qasida, the poet can insert a section in which he speaks about himself. The poet may boast of his skills and fame but usually he complains about his poor material conditions or the injustice he has suffered. He reminds the addressee of his duties as protector of his servants and asks for help or remuneration: this section of the qasida is calles *hasb-i hāl*.
The art of the qasida can be called the art of begging,[7] if we regard the *madīḥ* and the *hasb-i hāl* as the core of the qasida. In the *madīḥ* the addressee's desire for adoration and exaltation is fulfilled and in the *hasb-i hāl* the poet gives voice to his own needs and desires. To describe the *mamdūh* in the most grandiose terms and to shower him with the most beautiful words is a strategy of request, a certain kind of seduction, and this might well account for the erotic content of most of the qasidas' introductions. The economy of desire, the logistics of supply and demand, are quite visible even at the surface of the qasida when poets use the image of commerce to speak of their art and call themselves "merchants of the word." It is quite obvious that such a view of the art of poetry would meet with strong resistance from European readers who were accustomed to find in poetry a refuge from a world dominated by the emerging capitalist economy of the 19th century.

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[7] On this, Walter G. Andrews read a paper at the 1995 meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in Washington D.C. I wish to express my gratitude for his letting me read the text of his as yet unpublished paper.

Kamāl Ismāᶜīl panegyrical qasidas

As has been mentioned before, Kamāl Ismāᶜīl's divan contains 134 panegyrical qasidas which add up to a total of about 6,500 lines. In the manuscripts these poems are grouped together according to their addressees. We can distinguish four groups: qasidas praising kings and emirs (20 poems), qasidas addressed to Rukn al-Dīn Sāᶜid b. Masᶜūd and Rukn al-Dīn Masᶜūd b. Sāᶜid (33 and 32 poems respectively) and qasidas addressed to a number of other persons including members of the Khujand ī family (49 poems). It is evident from these numbers that Kamāl Ismāᶜīl was not a court poet since the two men for whom he composed half of his panegyrical qasidas were not rulers but local religio-political leaders without princely courts. It would, however, be wrong to regard Kamāl Ismāᶜīl as a provincial poet with only local importance. On the contrary, Kamāl Ismāᶜīl is one of the Persian poets of the Pre-Mongol era who exerted a lasting influence on later generations of Persian and Turkish panegyrists. Almost 250 years after Kamāl's death, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror ordered one of his court poets, Qabūlī, to emulate Kamāl's style and compose a Persian qasida as an "answer" (*javāb*) to his famous "snow" qasida,[8] and under Mehmed's son Bayazid II, the poet Revānī "answered" Kamāl in Ottoman Turkish. Like Kamāl's qasida with the *radī f* "snow", Revānī's is a begging poem, and the object of the poet's desire is a fur coat.[9]

As Kamāl Ismāᶜīl spent his whole life in the service of the Sāᶜidī family, his qasidas - but even more so his "fragments" - reflect the ups and downs of theirs and the poet's lives. There is a qasida in which the young Kamāl reminds Rukn al-Dīn Sāᶜid of the services his late father had rendered him and offers his own services as a poet and loyal servant. There are qasidas on the occasions of Rukn al-Dīn Sāᶜid's wedding night and the birth of his son. And there are qasidas that speak of a deteriorating relationship between the poet and his patron. Then Rukn al-Dīn Sāᶜid dies and his son Masᶜūd inherits his position as *qāẓī* of Isfahan. Kamāl congratulates him with a qasida. When Masᶜūd has to leave Isfahan and take refuge with the Khwārazmians, Kamāl sends him a qasida in which he deplores the fate of those he left behind, and when

[8] A partial English translation of this qasida can be found in Rolof Beny's *Persia - Bridge of Turquoise*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1975.

[9] An English translation of this qasida will apear in W. G. Andrews's forthcoming book on the Ottoman qasida.

Mas^c^ūd returns, Kamāl rejoices and recites a long qasida in which he graphically describes what has happened to his followers during his absence. Whenever an important occasion arises, the poet is there and presents a festive qasida. When the Khwārazmshāh Mengburni, a veritable desperado, rests his horses in Isfahan on his way back from Kermān where he had punished one of his disloyal warlords, Mas^c^ūd b. Sā^c^id greets him and Kamāl presents him with an exquisite poem.[10] One of the happiest moments of Kamāl's public life must have been the reconciliation between the two feuding parties and a formal peace between Mas^c^ūd b. Sā^c^id and ^c^Umar-i Khujandī. In his qasida for this occasion, Kamāl praises two persons instead of one and he says, among other things:

They are two men of eminent learning, two with hearts [wide] as the ocean,
two commanders, two lords over us the tips of whose reed-pens are interpreters
of Divine decrees.
Tyranny's back trembles [in fear] when this one's face it sees,
the soul of Hope rejoices when that one's pen is set in motion.

But, as has been pointed out, the peace between the two parties did not last and in the end both of them were destroyed by the Mongol warriors who razed Isfahan in 1235.

Kamāl's style

For the generations of poets who came after Kamāl and emulated him in poetry, the important aspect of his work was not that it reflected the life of a lost world - and everything before the advent of the Mongols was part of a lost world to them - no, what they saw in his poetry was dazzling rhetorical brilliance and a style that satisfied their "taste for the intricate", to borrow Maria Eva Subtenly's apt phrase. The literati of the Timurid era adorned Kamāl with the epithet "Khallāq al-Ma^c^ānī" (Creator of Intricate Meanings), and their most eminent representative, Jāmi (d. 1492), says that no other poet had reached his refinement of poetical diction.[11] In this respect we might consider Kamāl as a forerunner of the so-called "Indian style" (*sabk-i hindī*) that was to revolutionize Persian

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[10] A full German translation of this qasida can be found in my book (pp. 128-134) and a partial English translation in J.A. Boyle, *The History of the World Conqueror*, Manchester: University Press, 1958, vol. II, pp. 433ff.

[11] Jāmī, *Bahāristān*, ed. by O. Schlechta-Wssehrd, Vienna 1846, p. 98.

poetry soon after Jāmī. And Jāmī might very well have been aware enough of the potential inherent in Kamāl's style to feel ill at ease with it, and so he remarks: "But he went too far in his zeal to refine the subtelties of his diction and thus overstepped the boundaries of elegance and smoothness of style."[12]

The most visible element of Kamāl's poetical style is his use of difficult words in the *radīf*. The *radīf* of a Persian poem is a sequence of one or more semantically independent morpho-syntactical units which is repeated after the rhyme of each verse (*bayt*). Easy *radīfs* would be the copula (*ast*) or one of the semantically not very specific verbs that occur in a great number of compound verbs such as, for example, *shudan*, *dādan*, *āvurdan* etc. A very difficult *radīf*, on the other hand, would be a whole phrase such as: *kākul-i mushkīn-i dūst* (the friend's musky hairlocks).[13] In his qasidas Kamāl Ismā^cīl does not use very long phrases as a *radīf*, the longest being *padīd nīst* (is not visible), but he does use nouns with a very specific meaning in poems of considerable length:[14] *shukr* (thanks; 44 *bayts*), *nargis* (narcissus; 84), *parda* (veil; 53), *sar* (head; 42), *chashm* (eye; 52), *dast* (hand; 56), *pāy* (foot; 78), *shikūfa* (blossom; 106), *shīrīnī* (sweetness; 46), *sukhan* (speechi, 32), *barf* (snowi, 58). To use the word "blossom" at the end of each and every line of an overlong qasida of 106 *bayts* is a real *tour de force*. The poet went through the ordeal of composing this poem because he wanted to greet Mas^cūd b. Sā^cid on his return to Isfahan with a huge "bouquet of artificial flowers", as he himself says in his qasida.[15]

To use one and the same word in a great number of consequent lines of poetry without boring the reader of the poem requires considerable skill. The semantical unit thus introduced in the text of the poem acts as a severe constraint on the choice of words and images. To counterbalance this constraint, the poet is free to use whatever verbal or conceptual

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Examples: Kamāl-i Khujandī, *Divan*, ed. by K. Shidfar, Moscow: Akademia Nauk SSSR, 1975, no. 98 (Persian ghazal); I. E. Erünsal, *The Life and Works of Tâcīzâde Ca^cfer Çelebi*, İstanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Basimevi, 1983, no. 13 (Ottoman Turkish qasida).

[14] For a complete list of rhymes and *radīfs* of Kamāl's qasidas cf. Glünz 1993, p. 30-33.

[15] *Divan*, v33972

artifice he has at his disposal. In the field of force created by the polarity of constraint and freedom, he is drawn away from simple images and common metaphors towards complex multilayered structures and far-fetched ideas. Personification of abstract concepts, extented metaphors and phantastic etiologies (*husn-i ta*l*ᶜīl*) are among the rhetorical devices Kamāl Ismāᶜīl uses most often. In a qasida in praise of Rukn al-Dīn Sāᶜid that has the *radīf* "hand," for instance, Kamāl "explains" the trivial fact that the hand has to hold the reed-pen in order to write a love poem by personifying the hand and comparing it to a madman who rides a hobby-horse till he is restrained and put in fetters. He says:

It is desire for the chains of your curls that makes the hand mount the reed-pen
like a hobby-horse (v. 1875).

The "chains of the curls" is a stock metaphor of Persian love poetry. Here in this verse, however, there, is something that hides behind this metaphor: the image of lines of writing that resemble chains and curls at the same time. By connecting the three, Kamāl alludes to the idea of the poet as lover and inspired madman that can be traced back to the teachings of Plato. The poet's hand represents the poet metonymically while his mad love appears in the guise of pretended insanity: a man hopping around madly in order to be bound by the object of his desire.
In another verse, Kamāl speaks of his patron's munificence. Again, he uses the hand as a metonymic representative of the whole person and to this he adds the metaphor of the ocean which represents the immense bounty of the *mamdūḥ*s generosity. In combining the two, he creates a daring hyperbole:

In the wide expanse of existence, nothing - apart from your heart -
is perfect if not the ocean
but when the moment of your munificence approaches,
even [the ocean] takes refuge in a ship in order to reach dry land
and save its life from the wave of your hand (vv. 1611-12).

Kamāl's style in qasida poetry was something even Hāfiz could not ignore and thus he "answered" one of Kamāl's panegyrical poems for Masᶜūd b. Sāᶜid with a qasida in praise of Qawām al-Dīn Muḥammad Ṣāḥib ᶜIyār which has not only the same meter (*mujtass*) and rhyme (*-ānī*) as its model but contains also direct quotations from Kamāl.