Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic,
the *Shāhnāme*

Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World

Edited by Hamid Dabashi

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Mahmoud Omidshah

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POETICS AND POLITICS OF IRAN'S NATIONAL EPIC, THE *SHĀHNĀMEH*

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To Teresa Portilla Omidsalar, wife, friend, all.

چه پنداری که گورم از عشق تهیست
آواز آید که: "حال معشوقم چیست؟"

گر مرده بوم، برآمده سالی بیست
گر دست به خاک بر نهی کاینجا کیست
ابوسعید ابی الخیر (357-440)

If I've been dead for twenty years or so
And you, believing love gone long ago,
Should stir my dust and say, "whose grave is this?"
"How is my love?" will echo from below.

*(Abū Sa'īd Abelkheyr AD 967-1048;
translation by Dick Davis)*

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Note from the Editor

The Islamic world is home to a vast body of literary production in multiple languages over the last 1,400 years. To be sure, long before the advent of Islam, multiple sites of significant literary and cultural productions existed from India to Iran and from the Fertile Crescent to North Africa. After the advent of Islam in the mid-seventh century CE, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish authors in particular produced some of the most glorious manifestations of world literature. From prose to poetry, modern to medieval, elitist to popular, oral to literary, this body of literature is in much need of a wide range of renewed scholarly investigation and lucid presentation.

The purpose of this series is to take advantage of the most recent advances in literary studies, textual hermeneutics, critical theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and comparative literature to bring the spectrum of literatures and cultures of the Islamic world to a wider audience and appreciation. Usually the study of these literatures and cultures is divided between classical and modern periods. A central objective of this series is to cross over this artificial and inapplicable bifurcation and abandon the anxiety of periodization altogether. Much of what we understand today from this rich body of literary and cultural production is still under the influence of old-fashioned Orientalism or post-World War II area studies perspectives. Our hope is to bring together a body of scholarship that connects the vast arena of literary and cultural production in the Islamic world without the prejudices of outmoded perspectives. Toward this end, we are committed to pathbreaking strategies of reading that collectively renew our awareness of the literary cosmopolitanism and cultural criticism in which these works of creative imagination were conceived in the first place.

—Hamid Dabashi

Preface

This book is a contemplation about the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, its cultural context, and the scholarship on it—both Iranian and Western. Preparing these essays in my twilight years, it dawned on me that there is little in standard *Shāhnāmeḥ* scholarship especially about the poem's history and cultural context, its organization, and the character and motivations of its author with which I agree. Because of my fundamental disagreements with much of standard *Shāhnāmeḥ* scholarship, I have relied on the poem itself and on the primary sources that can shed light on a better understanding of it.

Let me now thank the many friends and colleagues who have helped me over the years, and remember the great scholars upon whose towering shoulders I have climbed in the hope of seeing further.

Through the many years of our friendship, and long, rewarding hours discussing various aspects of narrative and manuscript traditions of Iranian storybooks, Professor Mohammad Ja'far Mahjoob, that walking encyclopedia of Persian folklore and literature, taught me to relearn these texts from inside out. He drew my attention to those aspects that had fallen in the blind spots of my Western education. Although there was much more that I could have learned from him, his untimely death in 1996 brought a sorrowful end to our association.

Alan Dundes, America's undisputed master of psychoanalytic folkloristics, taught me to look behind the obvious and the conscious in search of the implicit and the unconscious. He taught me how important and relevant the social and cultural contexts of scholarship are to its content. I had the good fortune of being able to draw on his vast learning and penetrating insights until his sudden death in 2005. My only solace is that he died the death of a true teacher: while conducting a graduate seminar at UC Berkeley.¹

During his frequent visits to Berkeley, the late Professor Ali-Akbar Shehabi (emeritus, Tehran University) opened the vast vistas of classical Arabic literature in our technical discussions of the subject. His loss would have been unbearable if not for Professor Mahdavi Damghani

(emeritus Tehran University), who took me under his wing and made his great wisdom and immense learning available to me.

I also owe a great deal to Professor Jalal Matini (emeritus, Ferdowsi University). He not only taught me the intricacies of early Persian paleography, but in his capacity as the editor of the journals *IranNameh*, and later *Iranshenasi*, “defanged”—as he is fond of putting it—much of my polemical writings in Persian. Professor Ehsan Yarshater (emeritus, Columbia University) has never withheld kindness and wise council, nor has Professor Heshmat Moayyad (emeritus, University of Chicago). Professors Martin Schwartz (UC Berkeley) and Shaul Shaked (emeritus, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) have been more than generous with their advice on pre-Islamic matters over the years. Professors Susan Slyomovics (UCLA) and Elliott Oring (emeritus, CSULA) have patiently listened to my rants against the followers of Harvard’s tribal religion of “Oral Formulaic Theory” who, in their attempts to convert Ferdowsi into an Iranian Homer, only manage to put his eyes out. Elliott and Susan have always insisted that I need not push a point too far. My learned friend, Heda Jason gave me the benefit of her sensible advice years ago in our walks together, and later in her letters and e-mails. Professor Hamid Dabashi (Columbia University) has often tested my traditionalism with his postmodern sensibility and has pointed out alternative ways of looking at things that I, wrapped in my cocoon of tradition, may have missed. Professor Frank Lewis (University of Chicago) carefully read the manuscript and made a number of typically intelligent and constructive suggestions. I have adopted some, and have tried to explain myself better in response to others. Although Frank and I view a number of problems differently, I am grateful to him for his sensitive and intelligent reading.

My greatest debt of gratitude however, goes to two great scholars, Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (emeritus, University of Hamburg), and Iraj Afshar (emeritus, Tehran University). All that I know about textual criticism and codicology I owe to these men.

Khaleghi-Motlagh, this most “Germanic” of Persian scholars, took the time to patiently instruct me in the intricacies of Persian textual criticism. His long letters and innumerable conversations sustained and enlightened me over the 14 years I spent preparing the text of the sixth volume of his monumental *Shāhnāmeḥ* edition. His hundreds of letters on textual problems of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* would be an excellent source for a handbook of Persian textual technique. He read over every verse of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* that I edited, studied every textual variant that I cited, and discussed many thorny problems with me more patiently than I had a right to expect. He also showed exceptional patience with my blunt manner of expressing my opinions. He was always kind enough to allow me

to edit the text as I saw fit, even when he disagreed with my views, and only suggested that alternative readings be mentioned in the volume's notes. This level of critical open-mindedness could only be attained by a perception molded by great learning and scholastic humility.

From Professor Iraj Afshar I learned the art of looking at the manuscript as a cultural artifact, and also the skill of distinguishing significant detail from what only seems important.

Aside from his vast learning and ability to focus on important detail, the most amazing thing about Afshar is that in his eighties, he possesses the natural curiosity of a child. He is certainly more inquisitive, open-minded, and receptive to new ways of looking at old problems than any octogenarian has a right to be. His open-mindedness is as awe-inspiring as his vast erudition and uncanny ability to cut through distractions and focus on the heart of the matter.

During my visits to Iran I've had the opportunity of exchanging views with some members of my homeland's scholarly community. I have been favored innumerable times by the kindness and erudition of the scholars at the Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia (CGIE). My dear friend, Dr. Sadegh Sajjadi, the center's assistant director and the head of its History Department, Mr. Bahramian, and Drs. Mir-Ansari, Majidi, and many other learned scholars in CGIE never withheld good advice. At Iran's National Academy of Language and Literature (فرهنگستان زبان و ادب فارسی), Professors Sa'adat and Mr. Keyhani could not have been more helpful. The young and talented scholar, Mr. Pejman Firoozbakhsh meticulously proofread my edition of the *Shāhnāme*'s sixth volume, with its many thousands of variants. He raised several sensible suggestions in the course of our correspondence, and helped me refine some of my arguments about the poem. I am delighted that over the years of our association he has become a textual scholar of considerable capability, and hope that he has learned as much from our encounters as have I.

Professor Yahaghi (Ferdowsi University and the National Academy), Dr. Sajjad Aydenloo (Urmiya University), and a host of young scholars from Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, and Qom have helped me with access to manuscripts and information not easily available in the United States. My learned friend, Mr. Mehran Afshari (*The Center for Iran's Encyclopaedia Islamica*) has been exceptionally generous with his vast knowledge of Persian folk tradition and epic storytelling (*naqqāli*).

I am greatly indebted to a number of other friends and scholars who have been more than gracious in facilitating my research in Iran: Mr. Bojnoordi, the director of CGIE in Tehran and Dr. Akbar Irani, the director of the *Center for the Written Heritage*. My dear friend, Mr. Nader Mottalebi-Kashani, the learned editor of the *Nameh-ye Bahārestān*, the

international journal of manuscript studies published by the Iranian parliamentary library (کتابخانه مجلس شورای اسلامی), has been instrumental in securing reproductions of Persian and Arabic manuscripts from the different Iranian libraries for me, and I owe him a special debt of gratitude. I am also indebted to Dr. Abhari, the library's former director, and Professor Jafarian, its present director. Friend and foe agree that these two scholars have achieved more during their few years of directorship than have all the previous directors of that library since 1906.

Much of my researches on Persian literature have been possible thanks to the help of my two student assistants, Mr. Carlos Carillo and Ms. Linda Tang, who helped me in ways too numerous to mention.

My colleague Mr. Lawrence R. Vogt deserves a special note of gratitude. He generously agreed to read over the whole text, and did so with care and competence. Larry reorganized much of the narrative, and made many of my long and confusing sentences actually understandable. He also made a number of very useful suggestions that I believe have considerably improved the narrative. I could not have asked for a more intelligent or patient editor. This would have been a far less readable book without Larry Vogt's capable editing, although I alone am responsible for its flaws. I am deeply grateful to Ms. Zeinab Piri at *The Center for the Written Heritage* in Iran, who took the photograph of Ferdowsi's statue for the cover of this book.

I don't have the words to adequately thank the person to whom this book is dedicated: my dear wife Teresa Portilla Omidshar. For all she is, and all she has given our family over the past 20 years, I am speechless with awe, love, and appreciation. I can't imagine what life would be without her, and ardently pray that I never find out.

Note on Text and Transliteration

I have used the text of Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition for my citations from the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, but have occasionally provided reference to Mohl and Moscow editions when it seemed necessary.

No standard transliteration system has been followed in this book because I expect most readers would prefer convenient approximations to strict adherence to transliteration standards. Nonetheless, I have tried to remain within the confines of generally recognizable transliteration standards by adopting a transliteration system that employs a minimum of diacritical markings.

Persian vowels are the following:

- "a" as in "bat"
- "ā" as in "father"
- "i" as in "red"
- "ī" as in "beet"
- "u" as in "Joe"
- "ū" as in "boot"

The diphthongs are:

- "aw" as is "blowing" except in such names as Khosrow or Kaykhosrow, where the spelling has become conventionalized.
- "ai" as in "grey"

Persian has a few sounds like *gh*, *q*, and *kh* that do not exist in English. Of these, the first two, namely, *gh* and *q* are guttural sounds that resemble the sound of the letter *r* in the French pronunciation of the word *Paris*, but they are harder and closer to a velarized stop. Although these letters, which are written as ġ and ǧ respectively, have distinct pronunciations in Arabic, they sound exactly the same in Persian. Thus, my making a distinction between these letters in my transliterations is only a matter of following the spelling conventions rather than signaling different

pronunciations. Similarly, Persians do not pronounce the Arabic letters ص, ث, or س differently. All of these letters sound as the letter *s* in the English word *sing*. The same may be said of the Arabic letters ح and هـ that are pronounced as the letter *h* in the English word *hat*. Similarly, the Arabic letters ذ, ض, ز, and ظ are pronounced uniformly as *z* in the English word *zebra*. The letter خ is rendered by *kh* in this volume. It is pronounced like the sound of *ch* in the Scottish word *loch* “lake,” or alternatively in the German word *doch*. The letter ژ that sounds like *s* in the English word *pleasure* is transliterated as *zh*. This should help most readers who don’t know Persian with pronouncing words that they encounter in this volume.

Generally, I have decided to follow the Persian pronunciations of names in my transliterations. However, in order to help readers who know Arabic but are not familiar with Persian, I have included the Arabic form of the name in parenthesis when it first occurs, for example, Nazr (نضر). I have made no distinctions between the letters ص, س, and have rendered the letter ث as *th* only in Arabic words or nouns (e.g., al-Tha^cālībī). The letter ع is rendered with a raised ^c (e.g., al-Tha^cālībī again). The following chart describes my system of transliterating Persian consonants in this volume:

ب	b	boy
پ	p	pet
ت، ط	t	top
ث، س، ص	s	sam
ج	j	jack
چ	ch	chair
ح، هـ	h	hope
خ	ch	loch
د	d	doctor
ذ، ز، ض، ظ	z	zebra
ژ	zh	pleasure, garage
ش	sh	shop
ر	r	road

ع	ʿ	a, i, u
غ	gh	—
ف	f	foot
ق	q	—
ک	k	cab
گ	g	good
ل	l	lip
م	m	man
ن	n	noon
و	v or w	vest
ی	y or i	yacht

Although Iranians use a solar calendar now, they used the Muslim lunar calendar during the classical period. I have converted most of the dates from the Muslim or *hijri* dates to the Gregorian calendar, and have provided the *hijri* dates in parenthesis only when absolutely necessary. However, because of the discrepancies between the lunar Muslim calendar and the solar Gregorian, the dates are approximate. For instance, the date of the second redaction of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which is the year 400 in the Muslim calendar may fall anywhere from August 31, 1009 A.D. to August 20, 1010 A.D. because the beginning of the year 400 in the *hijri* calendar falls on the end of August 1009, and its end falls near the end of August 1010. For this reason dates are not exact, except when we know the day and the month as well as the year. Be that as it may, I find presenting the exact dates unnecessary for the purposes of this book except in those few instances when exact dates are necessary for making a point. The reader may rest assured that the Christian dates that have been provided are generally correct. I have also avoided the use of the awkward CE, and BCE and have stayed with the traditional A.D. and B.C.