Title
The Representation of Women in Premodern Persian Epic Romance Poetry: A Study of Ferdowsi’s Šāhnāme, Gorgāni’s Vis o Rāmin, and Neẓāmi’s Ḵosrow o Širin

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

by

Sahba Shayani

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Representation of Women in Premodern Persian Epic Romance Poetry:
A Study of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*, Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin*, and Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*

by

Sahba Shayani

Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor M. Rahim Shayegan, Co-Chair

Professor Domenico Ingenito, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines the representation of women in premodern Persian epic romance poetry by focusing on three key texts of the genre: Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* (c. 1010 CE), Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin* (1191 CE), and Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* (1050–1055 CE). It identifies four female characters from the earlier portion of the *Šāhnāme*—Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže—and isolates two specific characteristics for each of these women. These characteristics are then traced in the characters of Širin and Vis: the main female protagonists of Neẓāmi and Gorgāni's works. In doing so, this dissertation demonstrates the interlinked nature of these characters throughout the three different texts. This work also engages with the subject of ethnicity. The texts in question seem to suggest that women who hail from the peripheries of the Iranian empire may exercise greater

agency, in comparison to their counterparts from the heartland, so long as it is to the benefit of the Iranian crown. Once these women have played their role to the benefit of the monarchy, however, they are expected to relinquish their agency and to leave the spotlight; otherwise, they will be severely punished. In stark opposition to this notion stands the character of Vis who, as an Iranian noblewoman from the heartland, defies the patriarchal boundaries set upon her and her kind. She does so by exercising her sexuality as an act of political agency, while remaining the most morally stable character in the poem. In her fiction-world, Vis is ultimately rewarded for her courage and audacity. In the literary milieu, however, she is severely punished for it by becoming a sign of ill repute. It is thus, this dissertation posits, that she and her tale appear to dissipate into the shadows, while the story and character of Širin—who predominantly wields her agency through abstinence—become renowned and "worthy" of emulation.

The dissertation of Sahba Shayani is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2020

ای نام تو بهترین سرآغاز بی نام تو نامه کی کنم باز

The dedication of this dissertation is three-fold:

To my beloved parents: to my dear mother, Roya—my shelter, my *šir-zan*, my "Sindok̲t"—for always being my greatest advocate, for consistently encouraging me to aim higher, and for instilling and cultivating in me the love of Iran, of the Persian language, and of Persian culture. To the memory of my beloved father, Mehran, whose beautiful smile, contagious laughter, and gentle character I miss every single day; my source of artistic inspiration, of love and admiration for the beauty in this world, and my educator and companion in the appreciation of poetry.

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And to the memory of Ṭāhere Qorrato'l-ᶜEyn and Mona Mahmudnezhad: two daughters of "Iran and Turān" whose indomitable courage and strength will forever be a source of inspiration to me.

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TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

The transliteration system used in this dissertation follows that of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, with some minor alterations. Below is a complete list:

Long Vowels:

آ ا	ā
و	u
ی	i

Short Vowels:

ـَ	a
ـُ	o
ـِ	e
ـه	e

Diphthongs:

ـَو	ow
ـِی	ey

Consonants:

ب	b
پ	p
ت	t
ث	ṯ
ج	j
چ	č
ح	ḥ
خ	ḵ
د	d
ذ	ḏ
ر	r
ز	z
ژ	ž
س	s
ش	š
ص	ṣ
ض	ż
ط	ṭ
ظ	ẓ
ع	ᶜ
غ	ḡ
ف	f
ق	q
ک	k
گ	g
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
و	v
ه	h
ی	y
ء	’

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The completion of this dissertation represents the end of an era for me; an era which began with my arrival as an undergraduate, transfer-student from Diablo Valley College to UCLA in 2006. As a result, the number of teachers, mentors, family members, friends, and colleagues to whom I owe my sincerest gratitude for more than a decade of love and support is endless.

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VITA

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2017	"The Archetypal Qualities of Key Female Characters in Classical Persian Epic Poetry" Faculty Research Seminar The Oriental Institute University of Oxford

Introduction

This dissertation investigates the representation of women in premodern Persian literature. In order to acquire a more in-depth understanding of this vast subject, I have chosen to focus on the literary representation of female characters during the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE in the genre of classical epic romances.[1] I have sought to investigate how salient female characters were developed in a period when authors were predominantly male.[2] I have done so in the belief that

[1] On the subject of epic in classical Persian poetry, François de Blois argues that there is no clear-cut distinction between heroic and romantic epic. Love stories coexist alongside great battles in the *Šāhnāme*, while "romantic epics" almost always revolve around a pseudo-historical royal or noble figure. Perhaps one could have argued that a variation in meters sets the heroic and romantic epic apart from one another, as the *Šāhnāme* is in *motaqāreb*, while *Vis o Rāmin* or the later *Ḵosrow o Širin* of Neẓāmi are in *hazaj*, yet even this does not hold true as two of the earliest romantic epics—*Vāmeq o Aḏrā* and *Varaqe o Golšāh*—are both composed in the meter of *motaqāreb*. Julie Scott Meisami has argued for a divide between the genres of epic and romance on the basis of the "psychological depth," which the protagonists of the latter demonstrate primarily through their use of words, as opposed to the predominantly action-oriented heroes of the epic (Meisami 1987, 86). While Meisami's argument holds true, as the monologues of the heroes and heroines of the epic tend to be far less frequent (if present at all) and our access to their inner, psychological world is limited, I believe that specifically the romantic episodes in a text like the *Šāhnāme* are prototypes for the longer epics that follow (such as *Vis o Rāmin* and *Ḵosrow o Širin*) and therefore exist in a milieu in between what Meisami would call distinctly "epic" and "romance." Another topic closely related to this matter is the question of the oral versus written sources of these texts and whether one could potentially classify epic and romance on the basis of sources. As Kumiko Yamamoto has noted, the issue of the oral or written origins of early sources has been a preoccupation of scholarship since the late nineteenth century and continues to this day, particularly in regard to the *Šāhnāme*. Yamamoto argues that it is clear that this work manifests "both written and oral characteristics, and that any attempts to reduce the [text's origins] to one or the other are likely to fail" (Yamamoto 2003, xxii). Therefore, she instead sets out to explore to "what extent elements typically associated with oral tradition can be found in [the *Šāhnāme*] and the later epics, while taking as [her] point of departure the fact that [the *Šāhnāme*] was a written epic" (Yamamoto 2003, xxii). Taking into account this complexity of the issue of oral versus written sources, both in part due to the lack of existing written sources and the fleeting nature of oral sources, one cannot use these criteria as a means to classify epic against romance poetry either. For more on these subjects, see de Blois 1998 and Meisami 1987, in addition to Davidson 2005, Davidson 2006, Hanaway 1978, Shayegan 2012 (*Aspects*), and Yamamoto (2003).

[2] The earliest female composer of Persian poetry known to us thus far is Rābeᶜe Qozdāri (fl. 10th century CE). Known also as Rābeᶜe Balkhi or Rābeᶜe bint Kaᶜb, she is remembered as a master of both Arabic and Persian poetry and an ardent Sufi, killed at the hands of her own brother because of the love she bore for one of his slaves. Mahsati Ganjavi (1089–1159) is another renowned female poet from the early period. Although no complete collection of her works remains and much of her poetry has been preserved through historical accounts of her life, penned by later authors, Mahsati Ganjavi is nonetheless considered the best composer of Persian quatrains, after ᶜOmar Ḵayyām. Her quatrains, which focus on the themes of longing and love, are composed in the style of *šahrāšub*, which erotically describes different members of the society in connection to their profession. Through her mastery of words and imagery, Mahsati Ganjavi creates accounts of the day-to-day activities of various common professionals (i.e. bakers, butchers, carpenters, etc.) that border on the risqué and the sexual. She takes the homoerotic writing practices of her time and creates her own works within that framework, never explicitly stating her sex in her poems; a practice which we later see implemented by other female poets in the following periods (e.g. the Injuid poet-princess, Jahān Malek Ḵātun). For more on Rābeᶜe Qozdāri, see Ṣafā 2000, 308–9 and Mottahedin 2018. For Mahsati Ganjavi, see Meḥrābi 2003 and de Blois 2004, 235. For Jahān Malek Ḵātun, see Brookshaw 2005 and 2008, Ingenito 2018, and Kāšānirād and Aḥmadnežād 1995.

these characters may afford us a better perspective on the role of women in classical Persian literature at large. These mythical or pseudo-historical female characters, by dint of the pathways they forge for women in the realm of story, exercise a certain influence on their future literary progeny. A study of the female characters in these texts from the past is essential; for it will assist us in deciphering the blueprint on which later female characters of Persian literature are built and by whom they are influenced.

Although studies of female characters in classical Persian epic romances have been conducted before, many of these studies, while providing readings of the texts, represent either general surveys or broad comparisons. The lacuna this work seeks to fill is an examination of female characters through a close reading of the texts, while also keeping in mind the various "horizons of expectations" (to borrow from Hans Robert Jauss) informing the circulation of past narratives and the intertextual relationships between texts. Likewise, this study offers an analysis of the interwoven and -linked nature of three crucial texts—that is, the *Šāhnāme* (c. 1010 CE) of Ferdowsi (940–1019/1025 CE), *Vis o Rāmin* (1050–1055 CE) of Gorgāni (1014–? CE), and *Ḵosrow o Širin* (1191 CE) of Neẓāmi (1141–1209 CE).

Case Studies

I begin this study with an analysis of four women in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*. As the oldest remaining complete epic from the early periods of New Persian epic composition, the *Šāhnāme* rightfully deserves its place as a pivotal piece in the history of Persian literature and a weighty source. As Dick Davis has argued:

> …Ferdowsi's poem has survived [many] political vicissitudes and its immense value both as a literary work and as an unrivaled source of Iranian legendary material will certainly ensure its continued vitality as a component of the culture. Whatever else it is, the *Shahnameh* is the one indisputably great surviving cultural artifact that attempts to assert a continuity of collective memory across the moment of the conquest; at the least it salvaged

> the pre-conquest legendary history of Iran and made it available to the Iranian people as a memorial of a great and distinctive civilization.[3]

Given its status as the foundational text of Persian classical poetry, the inclusion and analysis of the *Šāhnāme* is essential to such a study. I focus on the women of the *Šāhnāme*'s mytho-heroic eras (the Pišdādiyān and the Kayāniyān periods) specifically, because they are the first female characters to play significant and major roles in the work. Of the four women analyzed one (Rudābe) belongs to the Pišdādiyān era, while the other three (Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže) belong to the Kayāniyān period.[4] These women and their stories likewise "constitute some of the best known and most loved sections of the poem in both popular and educated Persian culture."[5]

The character of Širin, who appears in the later, quasi-historical portion of the *Šāhnāme* is not only an important character in her own right—as the strong and influential wife of the renowned Sasanian king Ḵosrow Parviz—but she also acts as a perfect link between the work of one great master of classical Persian epic romance (Ferdowsi) to that of another (Neẓāmi). On the one hand, this interrupts an ideally sequential approach to analyzing the texts (Neẓāmi composes in the 12th century CE, while both Ferdowsi and our next poet, Gorgāni, composed in the 11th century). On the other hand, the presence of Širin in both the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin* as well as the interconnection of these two texts demands a contiguous analysis.[6] As one of the few influential women in the latter part of the *Šāhnāme* and as the female protagonist of Neẓāmi's masterpiece, who is later often remembered in the lyric (*ḡazal*) tradition as an ideal beloved, the inclusion of Širin in this study is imperative.[7] Finally, unlike Neẓāmi's other

[3] Davis 2006, xxxiii.
[4] On this subject, see Davis 2007, 78–79, 81–82, and 84–85. On the Pišdādiyāns, see Melville 2016 and Ṣeddiqiyān 1996. On the Kayāniyāns, see Skjærvø 2000.
[5] Davis 2007, 72.
[6] While Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* has very visibly influenced Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*, Neẓāmi only makes mention of Ferdowsi as one of his sources for writing his poem.
[7] On the Persian *ḡazal*, see Bausani 1960, Lewis 1995 and 2006, and Yarshater 2006.

archetypal love story *Leyli o Majnun*, which originally stems from Arab literary tradition and revolves around the tale of Bedouin tribes, the story of Širin and Ḵosrow, like those of the *Šāhnāme*, are rooted in the Iranian literary heritage and orbit the world of the royal court.[8] These similarities offer us a more solid ground for the intertextual comparison of female characters in the works that I have chosen.

Following the women of the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's Širin, Gorgāni's Vis is the next character with whom one ought to engage. Firmly rooted in the Iranian tradition (her story hails from the Parthian era), Vis is the female protagonist or, as I will argue, *the* protagonist of Gorgāni's romance. The work at large also warrants inclusion in such a study, as it was only completed roughly twenty years after Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* and is the first full romance of Iranian origins to which we have access. *Vis o Rāmin* has also had very visible influences on Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*, sharing with it a number of scenes and literary devices. In addition, just as the character of Širin offers us a link between the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's works, Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* acts as a bridge between the *Šāhnāme* and *Ḵosrow o Širin*, as it is closer in time of composition to the former, yet closer in genre to the latter.

Theoretical Frameworks

At the core of my personal analytical theory lies the notion that the text itself must be the primary source of analysis. Details from the text, whether in the form of word choice, imagery, or even the

[8] *Leyli o Majnun* is the second epic romance that appears in Neẓāmi's *Ḵamse* (Quintet). Based on Arab lore, it is the renowned tale of two Bedouin lovers—Leyli and Qeys—who are kept apart from one another by their two tribes. In his love for Leyli, Qeys is eventually driven to a kind of madness, thereby gaining him the title "Majnun" (lit. crazy). Majnun's love for Leyli is ultimately so abstracted that even when he finally has the opportunity to be with her, he denies it. Leyli dies of a love-sick heart and her death ultimately leads to Majnun's demise, as well. Neẓāmi's version renders the story of Leyli and Majnun as one of the greatest examples of earthly love representing mystical love. For an edited volume of Neẓāmi's *Leyli o Majnun*, see Ṯervatiyān 1985. For secondary sources, see Saᶜidi-Sirjāni 1988, Seyed-Gohrab 2003, and Seyed-Gohrab 2009.

purposeful withholding of information, are the best source from which one can derive knowledge regarding the text. This is particularly true for the epic romance, for as Meisami argues:

> In contrast to the heroic poem, in romance the emphasis is on word rather than on deed, on the exploration, through discourse and dialogue, of the moral complexities of experience; the action, rather than constituting its own raison d'être or functioning to demonstrate a hero's prowess, typically points to values beyond itself.[9]

The basis of my analyses, therefore, are the primary sources themselves. Critically edited volumes have served as the sources for these three primary texts, namely Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh's edited volumes of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* (2007), Mojtaba Minovi's edition of *Vis o Rāmin* (1935), and Vahid Dastgerdi's edition of *Ḵosrow o Širin* (1954). I have also prioritized fidelity to the original texts, both in regard to imagery and language, in my translations from the primary sources. Dick Davis' translations of both Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* and Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* have been consulted in situations where the complexity of the language made translations difficult, but I have chosen to provide my own translations in order to reflect more closely the primary semantic contents of the original texts. Unlike Davis' translations, which seek to skillfully maintain the poems' rhythm, I have abandoned rhyme in my translations, as I find it often influences word choice, forcing one to steer further from the original. In addition to the emphasis on the original texts as the primary source of analysis, I have gleaned inspiration from three theories in the fields of literary criticism, anthropology, and gender studies.

Hans Robert Jauss' (1921–1997) Reception Theory has acted as my foremost theoretical guiding light. An offspring of Reader Response criticism and a reaction to New Criticism, Jauss' Reception Theory emphasizes the subjectivity of reader responses to and evaluations of a text. Jauss frames these responses as joint products of the reader's very own "horizon of expectations"

[9] Meisami 1987, 87.

based on their previous experiences.[10] In other words, contrary to New Criticism, according to which only the content and the form of text contribute to its meaning, Reception Theory posits that much of a reader's understanding of a text hinges on their own experience of other literary and non-literary texts, through what constitutes the reader's "horizon of expectations" embedded in the text itself. What is meant by "horizon of expectations," then, is the metaphorical horizon on which the "implied reader" of a text makes sense of a story on the basis of previous narrations and culture-specific expectations.

While I find Jauss' theory to be a compelling critical paradigm, my own theoretical approach to text in this work lies somewhere between Reception Theory and New Criticism. My heavy reliance on close readings, literal translations, and methodical analyses stems from the necessity of approaching these texts from a philological perspective. Naturally, as Jauss (influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutics) has argued, I also believe that some of our understanding of the text depends on our own "horizon of expectations" as readers. More crucial to my work, however, is the implementation of this notion of "horizon of expectations" with respect to representations of female characters in each of the three works that I analyze. In other words, rather than focusing on the reader, I apply Jauss' "horizon of expectations" to the way by which consecutive texts understand and rely on female characters and on the characteristics of their previous mother texts. In more specific terms, the characters of Rudābe, Tahmine, Maniže, Sudābe, and Širin in the *Šāhnāme* represent specific qualities which are then cast onto their "literary daughter" Vis in Gorgāni's romantic epic. These same qualities, after running through Vis, are then transferred to Neẓāmi's Širin. The systematic application of the specific qualities found in the

[10] Jauss 1982, 19–23.

women of the *Šāhnāme* onto the characters of Vis and Širin highlights the importance of regarding this process as the implementation of the "horizon of expectations" versus that of mere influence.

A vital complication in this matter, however, is the issue of ethnicity. The majority of the aforementioned female characters, although usually members of the larger Iranicate world, belong to the borderlands and the peripheries of the empire, such as Kābolestān, Turān, Ḵuzestān, or even Hāmāvarān.[11] As a result, these women inhabit a "liminal" space for a majority of their tales. Anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) and, later, Victor Turner (1920–1983) argued that in most human societies liminal spaces exist between an earlier social state and a final social destination that humans hope to reach. The liminal space offers the subject the chance to be (as Turner entitles one of his works) "betwixt and between," that is, neither fully in the original state nor fully transformed. As an example, Turner writes that "…neophytes [subjects of the liminal phase] are sometimes treated or symbolically represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sex."[12] This relates to our topic of study in that almost all of the women analyzed in this work, with the exception of one, are women of the borderlands functioning in an Iranian-dominant milieu. I posit that as a result of their liminality these women are allotted qualities and characteristics that are forbidden to their Iranian, female counterparts who hail from the heartland. The women exercise these qualities and wield a greater sense of agency until they have either completed the task for which they have been chosen or married off to the Iranian king or hero, at which point they step out of the liminal phase and enter the period of post-liminality (i.e. becoming an Iranian wife). Turner writes:

[11] Geographically, Kābolestān is generally affiliated with modern-day Kabul and Afghanistan, Turān with the areas to the northeast of Iran, Ḵuzestān with western and southwestern Iran, and Hāmāvarān with the Yemen.
[12] Turner 1967, 98.

> The neophytes return to secular society with more alert faculties perhaps and enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law… [T]hey are shown that ways of acting and thinking alternative to those laid down by the deities or ancestors are ultimately unworkable and may have disastrous consequences.[13]

As we shall see, the character of Sudābe, as a literary construct, reflects aspects of the socio-anthropological pattern described in the passage above. Gorgāni's character, Vis, is the one exception to the women-of-the-periphery rule. Although an Iranian woman, she challenges all of the subliminal roles an Iranian woman (a post-liminal woman) must play and as a result is shunned by future generations and made "infamous the world over for [her] obscenity." The cases of Sudābe and Vis are the perfect examples in which we can apply Turner's theory of liminality to a literary setting, rather than a socio-anthropological space.[14]

The final theoretical perspectives on which my work relies are Hélène Cixous's identification of binaries and queer theory. In an essay entitled, "Sorties: Out and Out: attacks/ways out/forays," written in 1986, Cixous, on the basis of Levi-Strauss' structuralism, identifies binaries linked to the perceived binary of man and woman, such as: activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, head/heart, etc.[15] She then illustrates how the representation of gender as a binary inevitably leads to a violent shutdown of the female. Cixous writes:

> The (unconscious?) stratagem and violence of masculine economy consists in making sexual difference hierarchical by valorizing one of the terms of the relationship, by reaffirming what Freud calls *phallic primacy*. And the 'difference' is always perceived and carried out as an opposition. Masculinity/ femininity are opposed in such a way that it is male privilege that is affirmed in a movement of conflict played out in advance.[16]

Cixous's opposition to a rigid binary paves the way for queer theory's rejection of an inherent division between male and female. As we shall discuss, manifestations of these theories'

[13] Turner 1967, 106.
[14] Dastgerdi 1954, 120, v. 11. As we shall discuss the noted quotation is said to Širin by her aunt, Mahin Bānu, as she warns her niece to protect her chastity at all costs against Ḵosrow's advances, until he has officially married her.
[15] Cixous 1986, 63.
[16] Cixous 1986, 205.

perceptions of gender can guide an analysis of the characters and behaviors of our protagonists, which often seem to deviate from the prescribed gender norm. While this generally rings true for the women selected for this study from the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's Širin, its bolder manifestations appear in *Vis o Rāmin*, both because of Vis' character and actions and also because of how both Vis and Rāmin are represented, especially in the "ten letters." Given the commonly non-gender binary descriptions of the beloved in the later *ḡazal* tradition, this leads one to ponder whether Gorgāni's "ten letters" (one of the most often emulated parts of the epic) should be understood as a predecessor for the *ḡazal* tradition.[17]

Literature Review

The Šāhnāme

Some of the older approaches to Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*, such as that of Theodor Nöldeke's, seem to suggest that women do not play any "active" roles in this epic and that they function primarily as the male characters' objects of desire.[18] Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the women of the *Šāhnāme*, also echoes Nöldeke's words when claiming that these women did not wield any real power. Nevertheless, he demonstrates that, in spite of their lack of power in the fiction-world, they do in fact play important roles in the structure of the narration. Writing in the same year as Khaleghi-Motlagh (1971), Ṭalᶜat Baṣṣāri also illustrates in her book, *Zanān-e Šāhnāme* (*Women of the Šāhnāme*), the elevated roles women play in Ferdowsi's epic and concludes her analysis with the argument that women represent an integral part of this work. Both Khaleghi-Motlagh's and Baṣṣāri's works (and even some of the modern secondary sources on the

[17] I am grateful to Professor Domenico Ingenito for bringing this important and intriguing notion to my attention.
[18] Nöldeke 1920, 59: Die Frauen spielen im Schahname keine sehr aktive Rolle. Sie treten fast nur als Gegenstände des Begehrens oder der Liebe auf.

Šāhnāme) provide mere lists of the women's names and simply recount some of their stories to illustrate the validity of their claims.[19]

In an article written in 1991, the poet Nader Naderpour draws from literary theory and psychological practices to illustrate the powerful role women play in the *Šāhnāme*. Naderpour argues that this illustrates Ferdowsi's hidden emphasis on the importance of women's roles in the family unit and showcases his belief that women are endowed with a greater sense of morality. He also claims that in the fictional world of the *Šāhnāme* this signals the mother's influence is far greater than the father's in the establishment of their posterity.[20] Naderpour's analysis predominantly focuses on the women of Zāl's household: Rudābe, Sindoḵt, and Tahmine.

Published roughly a year after Naderpour's article, Ḵojaste Kiyā's book on the women of the *Šāhnāme* also offers us some fresh perspectives. For example, Kiyā notes that while goddesses are the only women playing key roles in Mesopotamian myths, it is mortal women who stand out in their Indo-European counterparts.[21] Kiyā goes on to argue that the women of the Kayāniyān period, spanning from the rule of Keyqobād to the death of Dārā, are much stronger figures, constructed on the basis of mythical and pseudo-historical sources. These women stand in stark relief to the women of the later Sasanian period, who seem like ornamental idols locked up in their gilded cages; an idea which later critics (such as Davis) also note.[22] Kiyā likewise believes that while the women of the Kayāniyān period are all human, they owe some of their astounding nature to their failure in entirely leaving behind their mythical past.[23] She also posits that, contrary to popular belief, the tales of Rostam and his family do not arise from indigenous Sistāni tales; rather,

[19] Some more recent works on the subject of women in the *Šāhnāme* also rely on this almost encyclopedic approach. For examples, see Ḥamidi 2006 and Najjāri and Ṣafi 2012.
[20] Naderpour 1991, 465–66.
[21] Kiyā 1992, 1.
[22] Kiyā 1992, 2–3.
[23] Kiyā 1992, 4. As I will discuss in the following chapter, Khaleghi-Motlagh and Barjaste-Delforuz also touch upon this topic in their works, specifically in regard to the characters of Rudābe and Tahmine.

the stories of this warrior and his clan, which includes exceptionally strong women, actually hail from Scythian stories.[24] Both Kiyā and Naderpour couple their arguments with a variety of textual evidence from the epic. Through a dialogue with the *Šāhnāme*, the present work aims to pick up where these two scholars have left off, both theoretically and practically. I expand on their work in this project by diving further into the text and carrying out close readings. Moreover, I bring a comparative angle to the discussion by linking the text to later corresponding works.

Previous scholars, particularly those writing in Persian, have often argued that Ferdowsi is not a "misogynist" (however anachronistic this term may be), but a poet who actually exalts the position of women. Yet the reality is that Ferdowsi's epic, like any epic of substance, depicts both good and bad women. Also, while the *Šāhnāme* does include some verses that we may label as misogynistic today, Ferdowsi arguably incorporates noble female characters on which he embellishes, to show that women, like men, are not all of the same stock.[25] A number of scholars have highlighted Ferdowsi's high regard for women. By building upon their findings, this work focuses on Ferdowsi's illustrations of the archetypal women of his epic; women who arguably set the tone for later female protagonists.[26]

Dick Davis, who has not only translated an abridged version of the *Šāhnāme* into English prose but has also written extensively on the epic as literature, has likewise written on the topic of

[24] She argues that the women of the Scythian culture, which had been greatly influenced by the Eastern Iranians, were not only mothers and care takers, but also great warriors and decision makers. Similar roles and rights for women may be seen in the Hephthalite and the Kushān traditions. See Kiyā 1992, ch. 3. For more on the plausible Scythian origins of Rostam and his family and a discussion of various sources, see Hassanabadi 2011, 6–7. On the Sistani Cycle, see Gazerani 2016.

[25] Of course, almost all of these women have their roots in ancient traditions on which Ferdowsi is elaborating. Yet the embellishment of each character and the specific details of their persona that allow for the visible presence of strong female characters in the *Šāhnāme* must, to a great extent, be attributed to Ferdowsi's own imagination.

[26] Baṣṣāri, Naderpour, and Kiyā all point to the illustration of Ferdowsi as a poet who exalts the station of women; see Baṣṣāri 1971, Kiyā 1992, 3, and Naderpour 1991, 462–66. More recent works also exist that dedicate themselves either solely or in great part to this topic. As an example, see Mojaddam 2017. Dick Davis also grapples with this issue in an insightful manner when he writes, "If individual characters seem to embody or express misogyny, the narratives [of the *Šāhnāme*] as a whole frequently neutralize and deny this" (Davis 2007, 69).

women in this text. Davis focuses on the role of women and ethnicity in Ferdowsi's masterpiece in a foundational article entitled "Women in the *Shahnameh*: Exotics and Natives, Rebellious Legends, and Dutiful Histories." Here Davis discusses a topic central to this dissertation, specifically the role of nativity and, as he puts is, "foreignness" in the female characters of the epic.[27] Davis argues that foreignness and femaleness seem to go hand-in-hand with one another in Ferdowsi's epic, as most of the strong female characters who successfully exercise the agency granted them are not from the heartland. He describes the possible thought process behind this phenomenon when he writes:

> The daughter who rebels against her father in order to ally herself with a Persian is joining the Persian world as it were, and—in the poem's hierarchy of values—her desire to do so trumps any filial pieties that might be expected of her… But the *Persian* women of the legendary section are mostly invisible: the implication is that "our" daughters have to behave, even if foreign daughters may, and may be encouraged to, kick over the traces in order to join "us."[28]

Like some of his predecessors, Davis also notes the fact that the women of the *Šāhnāme*'s heroic era seem to play stronger roles and enjoy more agency, while the women of the more historical period are more constrained in the exercise of their power.

There are also a number of contemporary secondary sources that, although exceptionally important to the field of *Šāhnāme* studies, do not engage with the essential role of women in Ferdowsi's epic. Two such examples include Olga M. Davidson's *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* and Mahmoud Omidsalar's *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic,* The Shāhnāmeh. Some may argue that since such works do not focus on the subject of women, they do not merit further discussion. I believe, however, that the very problem lies in the idea that

[27] Although Davis uses the term "foreign" to refer to these women, I have opted to refer to them as women from the periphery or borderlands since, as previously mentioned, these women still hail from the larger Iranicate world—perhaps except for Neẓāmi's Širin who is distinctly Armenian.
[28] Davis 2007, 73–74.

women exist as a separate entity, apart from the male figures central to the *Šāhnāme*, and therefore do not warrant the same attention and space for discussion. In fact, even the very notion of women as a "subject" is problematic, given that men are never categorized in such ways, but rather treated as individuals. For example, both aforementioned texts discuss the character of Rostam extensively without ever confining him to the topic or arena of "men." Yet the epic's female characters rarely appear as individuals in a discussion, unless included under the "subject" or "topic" of women. Of course, one cannot deny that Rostam, as the epic's hero par excellence, deserves to be the focus of (at least some of) the aforementioned studies. Yet even if such works focused on lesser male heroes, such as Bižan, or on even kings, like Keyḵosrow, they would never treat their object of study under the "subject" or "topic" of men. By contrast, studies of a female protagonist, hero, or queen, appear in such texts under the specific "theme" or "subject" of women.[29]

This issue is further complicated by the fact that gender in the *Šāhnāme*, and in medieval Persian literature at large, does not constitute a rigid binary category. While certain activities may be seen as appropriate for women or for men—such as child-rearing for women and participating in war for men—vivid exceptions to each rule exist that illustrate the relatively fluid nature of gender roles. The warrior woman Gordāfarid, who valiantly fights against the paladin Sohrāb, Queen Homāy, who abandons her infant son so that she may rule, and the genderless Simorḡ, who acts as a much more capable father-figure in comparison to Sām in the life of Zāl are but a few examples. These characters adopt and often succeed in roles that by modern values may be seen as incongruous with their sex. As a result, the inclusion of the *Šāhnāme*'s women in discussions

[29] This is, of course, not limited to the field of *Šāhnāme* studies and can be found in other arenas of Persian literature, both classical and modern, as well. As examples, see Karimi-Hakkak 1995, 161–82 and Šafiʿi-Kadkani 2011, 81–87 and 459–65.

of the epic's characters, as well as their acceptance as key figures in the poem, is indispensable to any work that endeavors to seriously engage with the text.

Ḵosrow o Širin

Although an important figure in Persian literature and a figurative bridge between the poetry of Ferdowsi and the romances of Neẓāmi, the literary persona of Širin has not been the subject of major analytical studies. Some of this lies undoubtedly in the fact that, compared to characters from the *Šāhnāme* and Gorgāni's Vis, Širin has a more certain historical presence, having been discussed in Byzantine, Armenian, and Syriac sources.[30] Yet, given Širin's essential nature in classical Persian literature, this lacuna of study seems bizarre. Additionally, not much analysis can be gleaned from some of the earlier secondary sources that focus on the literary character of Širin, whether in the *Šāhnāme* or in Neẓāmi's epic. Such sources predominantly include a simple retelling of the story and very broad gleanings of analysis.[31]

In an article composed in 1991, Heshmat Moayyad attends to a comparison of Širin and Ḵosrow's Byzantine wife, Maryam, in Neẓāmi's epic. Moayyad argues that Širin, rather than Ḵosrow, is the true central figure of the epic, given that the characters of both Ḵosrow and Farhād revolve around her. He likewise points out that Ḵosrow ultimately abides by Širin's will in marrying her.[32] Moayyad also discusses the origins of Širin's character, quoting the German scholar Wilhelm Eilers, who declares Širin to be a re-manifestation of the legendary Assyrian queen, Semiramis. As we shall discuss, this point is further proven by Širin's affiliation with dark

[30] See Orsatti 2006.

[31] See Baṣṣāri 1971 and Saᶜidi-Sirjāni 1988. It should be noted that in the case of Saᶜidi-Sirjāni's *Simā-ye Do Zan*, the author himself admits in the preface that this work is "based on interest and not research" with the purpose of introducing interested youths to the story of Ḵosrow and Širin. See Saᶜidi-Sirjāni 1988, 5–7.

[32] Moayyad 1991, 526. Another article, which tends to the subject of *Ḵosrow o Širin* in a comparative manner is Amin Banani's "Az *Vis o Rāmin* tā *Ḵosrow o Širin*" published in 1992. However, as Banani states, the focus of this article is "to re-examine the essence of poetry and the standards and criteria of gauging poetry in Persian culture" (Banani 1992, 708).

magic, predominantly in the *Šāhnāme*, but also in two scenes in *Ḵosrow o Širin*; an attribute that Eilers argues is inherited from her connection to the magical Semiramis.[33]

In an article on Neẓāmi's use of tales from *Kelile va Demne* near the end of *Ḵosrow o Širin*, Christine van Ruymbeke notes that if one can consider *Ḵosrow o Širin* as a Mirror for Princes—as Julie Scott Meisami has argued it to be—then Širin does indeed become Ḵosrow's guide on this journey, helping him advance from his lower to his higher self.[34] As van Ruymbeke states, Širin also bestows upon Ḵosrow his "divine effulgence (*farr*)" by acting as his counselor on this path towards becoming a worthy and ideal king.[35]

Vis o Rāmin

Julie Scott Meisami, in her book *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* published in 1987, explores in depth the historical formation of classical Persian panegyrics, romance, and lyric poetry. On the subject of romance literature, Meisami discusses both Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* and Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*, emphasizing that both poems circle around the male hero's journey to self-discovery and the true understanding of love. She illustrates that in such ways these romances also act as "Mirror for Princes." But while Meisami does discuss the characters of Vis and Širin extensively, her work conveys the impression that the pivots of both texts are the male heroes of the story. Heroines, according to Meisami, serve as secondary characters who exist only to assist the male heroes on their journey towards becoming worthy kings.[36] Yet, this is not so. Of course, both Rāmin and Ḵosrow are central to the plot and, as Meisami shows, important to the tale's

[33] See Moayyad 1991, 526 and 534–35. See also Eilers 1971.
[34] *Kelile va Demne* is a series of didactic animal fables from Sanskrit origins, which has been known in Persian since the 6th century CE. On *Kelile va Demne*, see Riedel 2010. "Mirror for Princes" is both an ancient and a medieval genre of didactic literature in which the author—generally an older, more experienced member of the court—imparts wisdom on the proper methods of behavior pertaining to both a future king and the members of his court. On "Mirror for Princes," see Shaked and Safa 1985 and Khaleghi-Motlagh 1983.
[35] van Ruymbeke 2011, 145–46. For more on "farr," see Gnoli 1999.
[36] Cameron Cross also makes note of this in his "The Lives and Afterlives of *Vis and Rāmin*." See Cross 2018, 537.

movement toward the moral anecdote(s) it strives to teach. However, I argue that Vis and Širin actually dominate the tales, if by no other means than what Meisami herself identifies as the genre's defining feature: their inner monologues. It is the inner thoughts of Vis and Širin that we hear and their internal conflicts to which we become privy. Naturally, Rāmin and Ḵosrow's interiority also appears throughout the tales, but to a lesser extent compared to their female counterparts. The character transformation of both Rāmin and Ḵosrow occurs almost instantaneously at the end of the texts, whereas the heroines' character transformations (especially Vis') unfold more organically and occupy a greater portion of the texts. For this reason, I believe that while Rāmin and Ḵosrow count among these works' central characters, Vis and Širin should ultimately be considered the main characters. Whereas the men appear to be interchangeable, easily replaced by other male characters in need of a lesson, the women require specific traits in order to propel the story in the right direction.[37] In a broader sense, this is one of the key elements that evidently connect these women to their female predecessors in the *Šāhnāme*. While scholars often perceive the women to be "secondary characters," they prove quintessential to the progress of the male hero's role and to the narrative at large. Through the implementation of each of their unique characteristics and qualities, these female characters move the story in the desired direction.

In addition to Meisami's work, a great number of other secondary sources exist on the topic of Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin*. In a 2018 article entitled "The Lives and Afterlives of *Vis and Rāmin*," Cameron Cross gifts us with a repository of texts regarding Gorgāni's masterpiece, spanning from the medieval to the contemporary. He also offers the reader an insightful discussion of the

[37] In the introduction to his translation of *Vis o Rāmin* Davis similarly notes that "Ramin is undoubtedly a less-compelling character. He is usually, we can say, a serviceable cipher rather than a fully drawn character in his own right (his inner life seems to be a much simpler affair than Vis')…even when he seems believable as a person it is hard to feel as much empathy with him as the portrayal of Vis invites us to experience" (Davis 2008, xxix–xxx).

Nachleben of the epic both as a whole and as fragments.[38] From 1946 to 1962 the Russian orientalist Vladimir Minorsky wrote four articles that played a significant role in the study of the epic, especially in identifying its Parthian past.[39] In addition to this, editors' introductions in various modern editions of *Vis o Rāmin* and its translations have offered us insights into the text.[40] As introductions to the epic as a whole, the majority of these sources do not delve into analyses of each individual character for long. In the introduction to his translation, Davis states that "Vis is by far the most interesting character in the poem…she shares with a number of other eleventh century Persian heroines, whose stories were drawn from pre-Islamic lore, an articulate forthrightness that can be both surprising and very stirring."[41]

Moḥammad-ᶜAli Eslāmi Nodušān likewise positions Vis as the central character in Gorgāni's epic, arguing that she appears more developed, human, and relatable than any of the other characters.[42] In 1990, Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh produced an article on the tales of Bižan and Maniže and Vis and Rāmin that illustrates how the narrative's social structure depicts Vis as a woman who is as pure as she is carnal.[43] In contrast, Moḥammad-Jaᶜfar Maḥjub argued two years later that Vis was in actuality a virtuous woman who the Nanny and Rāmin led astray.[44] More recently, in 2003, Katāyun Mazdāpur published her book entitled *Gonāh-e Vis* (*Vis' Sin*) in which she studies the power dynamics of gender in the epic. In this work, she highlights the adverse effects that the male characters' dominance inevitably has not only on Vis, but also on the heroines

[38] Cross 2018.
[39] Minorsky 1946, 1947, 1954, and 1962.
[40] For the original Persian editions, see Minovi 1935, Maḥjub 1959, and Rowšan 1998. For some translations, see Massé 1959 and Davis 2008.
[41] Davis 2008, xxviii–xxix. It can be assumed that the other "Persian heroines" of the eleventh century to whom Davis is referring are (at least in part) none other than the women of the *Šāhnāme*, whom we will discuss in chapter one.
[42] Eslāmi Nodušān 1970.
[43] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1990.
[44] Maḥjub 1992.

of other romances.[45] Most recently, Cross has written a dissertation (2015) entitled "The Poetics of Romantic Love in *Vis and Rāmin*" and the aforementioned article on the reception of Gorgāni's epic. Not only does Cross' work—especially his dissertation—count among the most recent studies on *Vis o Rāmin*, but also one of the most comprehensive.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter one includes synopses of the tales of Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže, each followed by a short analysis, with the last analysis leading to a greater study of all of the aforementioned female protagonists of the *Šāhnāme*. In this chapter I also introduce the theory of liminality, as conceptualized in the works of Victor Turner. Using this paradigm, I further expound on these women of the epic in relation to their origins in the borderlands, which both *others* them and at the same time imbues them with greater agency. I also make note of the four women's magical origins or affiliation with/involvement in "black magic," as illustrated in the texts and attested to by other scholars. As Davis argues, women and the "foreign" can often be seen as interchangeable; a notion that allows these women of the periphery, as compared to women of the heartland, a deeper level of agency, since it is to the benefit of Iran and therefore excusable. Once they have carried out their role to the advantage of Iran and the Iranian hero or king, they typically find themselves discarded and cast back into the shadows. Nonetheless, this process inevitably establishes a space for women of agency who possess certain qualities to appear and re-appear throughout future textual horizons.

Chapter two discusses the character of Širin as manifested both in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* and in Neẓāmi Ganjavi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*. It begins with a synopsis of Ferdowsi's Širin interspersed with analysis, followed by a short discussion on the transference of the Širin character from

[45] Mazdāpur 2003.

Ferdowsi's work to Neẓāmi's. A synopsis of Neẓāmi's rendition is then given, from whence we tend to a broader examination of Širin in both sources. The chapter also delves further into the subject of liminality in conjunction with black magic, defining the "magic" often associated with female characters as nothing more than their well-honed skills and their exercise of agency through them. For Širin, as we shall see, "magic" lies in her power of utterance and the ability to assuage others through her oratory skills. The "foreign" character of Širin also confirms our theory that "other" women may exercise their agency (as long as it remains in the interest of the Iranian crown), while "our" women should stay silent in the background.

Reaffirming this notion from another perspective, we move on to the character of Gorgāni's Vis in chapter three. Following a synopsis of *Vis o Rāmin*, the chapter focuses on the character of Vis and how her "magic" lies in the power of her pen. This is significant, given that only two centuries later poets such as Owḥadi Marāġe'i, hearkening *Vis o Rāmin*, warn their menfolk that tablets and pens should only be allotted to men and that it would be better to cut off (*qalam kardan*) a vicious woman's hand than to give her a pen (*qalam*)![46] As we will discuss, Vis' uniqueness lies in her ability to break with the pattern of active women of the periphery versus passive women of the Iranian heartland, and exercise her own agency both mentally and physically. This transgression, however, costs Vis her reputation within the literary milieu, as she often becomes a symbol of ill-repute and immorality in future texts. Yet it is arguably Vis who not only further opens the arena to women of the periphery, but also to Iranian women to exercise their agency. Neẓāmi, whose heroine is undoubtedly influenced by Vis, later portrays his version of Širin as a woman whose primary form of agency (in contrast to Vis) lies in a lack of sexual activity.

[46] The passage, as translated by Domenico Ingenito, reads, "Don't give a pen [*qalam*] to a vicious woman!/ It's much better if you cut off [*qalam kunī*] her hand!/ Only men should use pens and tablets/ If she never memorized the first Sura of the Qur'an/ Why should she read *Vīs u Rāmin*?" (Ingenito 2018, 197).

Nonetheless, he cannot and does not try to constrain her as a character and ultimately renders her as the main protagonist of the poem. A final element, which to some extent appears in all three texts but is particularly highlighted in the epic of *Vis o Rāmin* and in the characters of Vis and Rāmin, is the lack of a specific gender-binary description of both the appearance and the actions of the female and male protagonists. As we see in the stories of Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, Maniže, and Širin, all of these women subvert notions of feminine passivity; yet none deviate as starkly from this norm as Vis, especially when juxtaposed with Rāmin's considerably passive behavior.

The women of the *Šāhnāme* in many ways establish a space for female agency, in which the character of Vis flourishes—to the detriment of the patriarchy. Vis violently subverts the desires that the patriarchy imposes on her as a wife (to either remain faithful to a husband that she neither chose nor loves, or to remain with him while carrying out clandestine affairs on the side). Instead, she chooses to follow her heart, to be largely forthright, and to do that which is in her own best interest, even when beset by doubts that plague her as a result of her patriarchal upbringing and the common social codes to which she is bound. In what may be seen as an intentional act, Neẓāmi bypasses the character of Vis and chooses instead to compose his epic around a character far more appeasing to the patriarchy: that of Širin. As I will argue, Širin has already been depicted by Ferdowsi as a "chaste" and "pure" female character who, contrary to what some scholars have claimed, should not be considered a "sinister" or deviant woman.[47]

[47] This can be further proven by the fact that following the death of her husband, Širin actually kills *herself*, sitting beside him, in his tomb. This act, while often perceived to be the climax of loyalty and love, may also be perceived in a much more sinister light; as a message that a good woman and a loyal wife's life should end with that of her husband!

Chapter One

Introduction to the Women of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*

As one of the oldest examples of Persian epic poetry and certainly the most complete, the *Šāhnāme*, penned by Abo'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi (940–1019/1025 CE), and completed around 1010, is an appropriate platform from which to launch a study of female characters in classical Persian epic poetry. Spanning a period from creation to the Muslim conquest of Iran in the seventh century CE, the poem is traditionally divided into two broader sections: (1) the mythological and legendary section spans from the creation of the world/universe and ending with Alexander the Great's invasion of the Persian Empire in the fourth century BCE; and (2) the pseudo-historical section, which encompasses everything following Alexander's attack until the conquest of the Muslim armies in the seventh century CE.[48] Naturally, the different tales of the *Šāhnāme* abound with a variety of female characters acting in manifold roles, such as mothers, wet-nurses, sisters, daughters, wives, lovers, concubines, princesses, queen-consorts, queens, warriors, generals, and more. While the majority of the women who wield hard power exist in the second half of the epic, it is the women of the mythical half of the *Šāhnāme* (especially the earlier portion) who succeed in bending the wheel of fortune and the will of their male counterparts to their own needs and desires. On the other hand, the women of the pseudo-historical section either fail in their attempts to confront the world on their own terms or they simply do not try.[49]

Among the women of the earlier mythical portion of the *Šāhnāme* are a number of memorable characters who play significant roles in different tales. These characters include women such as Gordāfarid, the Iranian woman-warrior who defeats Sohrāb, the son of Rostam,

[48] See Yarshater 1983, 359–77 and Nöldeke 1920, 44–74.
[49] Davis 2007, 79. For a plausible explanation of the possible reasoning behind this matter, see Davis 2007, 78.

and who foretells his violent end;[50] Katāyun, the princess of Rum, queen of Iran, and mother of the great hero Esfandiyār, who acts as a reminder to him (and to us, the audience/readers) of the ephemerality of throne and wealth and the importance of contentment;[51] and Homāy Čehrzād, the Iranian queen who disposes of her own infant son, Dārāb, in order to hold on to power, relinquishing it back to him only once he returns as a grown man.[52] Each of these women and many of their other less significant counterparts are strong, interesting, and important female characters. However, either because of the duration of their presence throughout the epic or the fact that they do not relate to the more key male heroes of the stories, many of these women do not play the pivotal roles that four specific women play in the *Šāhnāme*; namely, Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže.

This study, then, analyzes the four aforementioned characters as four of the earliest key women characters of classical Persian epic poetry, in order to glean from them a number of archetypal qualities that can represent women of this genre. It will then trace the re-emergence of these traits in key female characters of later pivotal texts of this same genre, namely Neẓāmi's Širin and Gorgāni's Vis. As will be shown, the earlier female heroines of the *Šāhnāme* may not live on to represent the ideal beloveds and archetypal female characters of the later epic and also *ḡazal* traditions, but they do establish a space for their literary female posterity to expand upon. Moreover, these earlier heroines manifest qualities which are later remanifested and embellished upon by their female inheritors.

[50] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 132–137, vv. 177–253.
[51] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 5: 293–95, vv. 17–41.
[52] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 5: 487–512, vv. 1–322.

Rudābe

Rudābe, the princess of Kābolestān and the daughter of the vassal king Mehrāb and his queen Sindoḵt, is one of the earliest key female figures of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*.[53] Rudābe is important to the epic for two reasons. First, she is a female figure who Ferdowsi describes in detail, who has a love-story dedicated to her, and who has largely remained visible in the collective Persianate psyche. Second, as companion of the hero Zāl and, perhaps most importantly, the mother of the epic's greatest hero, Rostam, she plays a key role in the narrative.[54] Zāl is the white-haired prince of Zābolestān whose father, Sām, shuns him as a baby and leaves him to die in the vicinity of Mount Alborz. He soon is discovered, however, by the mythical, magical bird Simorḡ, who raises him as one of its own offspring. Years later Sām returns to Simorḡ's dwelling to repent and, after receiving his son's forgiveness, returns him with great honor and dignity to his court. The story of "Zāl and Rudābe," then, begins when the young, valiant Zāl ventures with his entourage to the eastern parts of his father's empire. While in the vassal kingdom of Kabolestān, Zāl is greeted by the king, Mehrāb, whom Ferdowsi describes as a wise, strong and handsome man.[55] Zāl and Mehrāb grow exceedingly fond of one another and, as Zāl sings Mehrāb's praises upon his departure from their feast, a member of his entourage informs him of the beautiful daughter of the vassal king of Kābolestān:[56]

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[53] For more on the etymology of Rudābe's name and references to her as a possible historical figure in both Persian and Arabic sources, see Shahbazi 2002; more importantly, see Skjærvø, who interprets the name Rudābe as "she of the River Water." See Skjærvø 1998, 163–164.

[54] As Davis points out in his article "Women in the *Shahnameh*: Exotics and Natives, Rebellious Legends, and Dutiful Histories," while the stories of Rudābe and other female characters like her may not comprise the bulk of Ferdowsi's epic, they do constitute some of the most well-known and beloved stories and characters of the larger poem, which have influenced both "popular and educated Persian culture." For more, see Davis 2007, 72.

[55] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 182, vv. 271–73.

[56] In his article on the story of Zāl and Rudābe, Naderpour beautifully analyzes Zāl's falling in love with Rudābe through his sole encounter with Mehrāb, from both a cultural and psychoanalytical perspective. He writes that not only is the notion of falling in love and entering a union with a pair, without having ever physically encountered him/her, still a common practice in parts of Iran, but that the absence of a proper father-figure in Zāl's life also compels him to love Mehrāb and then transfer that love onto Rudābe romantically. See Naderpour 1992, 459–61.

پس پرده‌ی او یکی دخترست که رویش زخورشید نیکوترست
ز سر تا به پایش بکردار عاج به رخ چون بهشت و به بالای ساج
بران سفت سیمینش مشکین کمند سرش گشته چون حلقه‌ی پای وند
رخانش چو گلنار و لب ناردان ز سیمین برش رسته دو نار دان
دو چشمش بسان دو نرگس به باغ مژه تیرگی برده از پرّ زاغ
دو ابرو بسان کمان طراز برو توز پوشیده از مشک و ناز
بهشتست سرتاسر آراسته پر آرایش و دانش و خواسته

"'Behind his [harem's] veil there is a daughter
Whose face is more dazzling than the sun.
From head to toe [she is as white] as ivory
Her face like heaven and as tall as the teak tree.
Upon her silvern shoulders her musk-black locks
[Lay] like ensnaring fetters.
Her cheeks like pomegranate flowers and lips, pomegranate grains;
Upon her silvern chest, two pomegranate seeds have sprung!
Her eyes as two narcissi in the garden,
Her lashes shame the raven in their darkness!
Two brows like the bows of Ṭarāz,
Wrapped with musk and coquetry.
She is heaven, adorned from end to end:
Beautiful, knowledgeable and opulent.'"[57]

Upon hearing this description of Rudābe, Zāl falls madly in love with her and spends all hours thinking of a way to meet this fair-faced beauty:

برآورد مر زال را دل به جوش چنان شد کزو رفت آرام و هوش
شب آمد پر اندیشه بنشست زال به نادیده‌بر گشت بی خورد و هال

"Zāl's heart began to smolder
Such that [all] tranquility and wisdom escaped him.
Night fell and Zāl sat, deep in thought,

[57] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 183–84, vv. 287–93.

Unsettled and with no appetite, reminiscing over the unseen" [58]

Although Zāl's heart burns with his love for Rudābe, he courteously rejects Mehrāb's invitation to be a guest in his court. The king of kings, Manučehr*,* would not be pleased at such an interaction, Zāl explains, given Mehrāb's reputation as an "idol worshipper" who doesn't share the same faith as the Iranians.[59] That Mehrāb is a descendant of the deposed, magical tyrant-king Żaḥḥāk also factors into Zāl's rejection of this invitation, though he never explicitly states it.[60] He does, however, promise Mehrāb that he will give him whatever else he pleases. Mehrāb, while inwardly regarding Zāl as a follower of the "impure religion," outwardly praises him and thanks him, and retreats from his presence. Seeing how highly Zāl regards Mehrāb, Zāl's entourage begins to sing his praises once more, further fanning the flame of Zāl's love for Rudābe and his desire to meet the daughter of the king of Kābolestān.[61]

Upon Mehrāb's return to the palace, Sindoḵt enquires about Zāl. Her husband once again describes Zāl in all his glory and exalts and extols him. Her father's descriptions of Zāl ignite the spark of love in Rudābe's heart, and she is overcome by affection for the royal hero. She then retreats to her own quarters, where she shares her secret with her five handmaidens. At first, they chide her, claiming that she is far too beautiful for him and that a man who was born with white

[58] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 184, vv. 294–95.
[59] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 185, vv. 307–9.
[60] In Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* Żaḥḥāk is a clever and handsome son of an Arab (*tāzi*) king, but he is weak of character and is therefore tricked and used by Eblis (the Devil) as an instrument to wreak havoc in the world. Prompted by Eblis, Żaḥḥāk kills his own father and takes power. Eblis then deceives him again and by kissing Żaḥḥāk's shoulders, causes a snake to grow from each spot his lips have touched. These snakes must each be fed the brain of an Iranian youth every day, or else they will feast on Żaḥḥāk's own brain. After Jamšid, the Iranian king of kings' fall from power, Żaḥḥāk rallies against him and seizes the throne. Thus begins his one thousand-year rule of evil over the Iranians, which is finally brought to an end with the heroic Fereydun's defeat and capture of the serpent-king and his eternal imprisonment on Mount Damāvand. Żaḥḥāk in the *Šāhnāme,* therefore, is associated with evil and dark magic, thus causing Mehrāb (who is a descendent of Żaḥḥāk) and his line to be somewhat regarded with contempt by the Iranian monarchs and rulers. The character of Żaḥḥāk (Avestan: Aži Dahāka; Middle Persian: Aždahāg) precedes Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*, with roots in ancient Iranian folklore and myth. For more on the origins of Żaḥḥāk see, Skjaervø 1987. For the story of Aždahāg in Middle Persian writings, see Skjærvø 2008, 536–45.
[61] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 185–86, vv. 310–25.

hair and who was raised by a bird is not fit for her.[62] Their reaction infuriates Rudābe, and she rebukes them for it:

چو رودابه گفتار ایشان شنید چن از باد آتش، دلش بردمید
بریشان یکی بانک برزد به خشم بتابید روی و بخوابید چشم
وزان پس به خشم و به روی دژم به ابرو ز خشم اندرآورد خم
چنین گفت کین خام گفتارتان شنیدن نه ارزد ز پیگارتان
نه فغفور خواهم نه قیصر نه چین نه‌از تاج‌داران ایران زمین
به بالای من پور سام‌ست زال ابا بازوی شیر و با بُرز و یال
گرش پیر خوانی همی یا جوان مرا او بجای تن‌ست و روان

"When Rudābe heard all they had to say,
Like wind over fire, her heart was ablaze.
She yelled at them in anger,
Turned around and peered.
And then, angered and enraged,
She knit her brows.
Thus she said, 'Your words [are] unripe
[and] your argument unworthy of attention!
I desire neither the emperor of China, nor the Caesar, nor China [itself],
Nor any of the sovereigns of Iran!
[Only] Zāl the son of Sām is [worthy] of my stature,
With his lion-like arms, his height and his neck!
Whether you call him young or old,
He is (essential) to me as my body and soul!'" [63]

In response to Rudābe's reaction, the handmaidens submit to her will and agree to help unite her with the prince of Zābolestān. Adorned and beautified, the handmaidens set out for the meadow where Zāl and his entourage are staying, so that they might capture his attention. Zāl spots them picking flowers and sends an envoy to inquire what the women are doing. The handmaidens and

[62] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 186–89, vv. 326–70.
[63] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 189, vv. 371–77.

the envoy engage in a dialogue, by the end of which they conclude that Zāl and Rudābe must meet. They therefore set a plan to sneak Zāl into Rudābe's chamber that night.[64]

At nightfall, Zāl secretly rides towards Rudābe's chamber, where he finds her waiting for him on the palace veranda. When she sees him approaching the palace on horseback, Rudābe welcomes him. Zāl responds to her gracious welcome and then asks her for a solution that will help him reach her. At this, Rudābe throws down her jet-black locks, claiming that he should use her very hair to climb up to her. Zāl praises her and instead pulls out a rope, which he uses to climb up.[65] The two spend the night together in pleasure and merrymaking and, just before Zāl departs at the break of dawn, they proclaim their love for one another and make a pact to marry, even though they know their union will be met with some resistance due to age-old enmity.[66] As I will later discuss, this encounter proves crucial to the formation of Rudābe's character as a woman with agency and free will. Following their encounter, Zāl then writes to his father Sām and tells him of his love for Rudābe. Sām hesitates at first, but after consulting with the magi (who see Rostam's birth in the stars as a result of this union) and acknowledging his promise to never deny Zāl anything he desires, Sām accepts, on the condition that he can convince the king of kings, Manučehr.[67]

Mehrāb, meanwhile, is informed by Sindoḵt of Rudābe's clandestine meeting with Zāl. Angered by Rudābe's boldness and fearing Manučehr's wrath should he disagree to the union, Mehrāb goes into a frenzy and tells Sindoḵt to call Rudābe forth at once. Frightened that Mehrāb may harm Rudābe in his rage, Sindoḵt makes him promise that he will not hurt her in any way and, once he agrees, rushes to fetch their daughter. Upon explaining to Rudābe what has passed

[64] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 189–98, vv. 378–503.
[65] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 198–200, vv. 504–30.
[66] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 200–1, vv. 531–56.
[67] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 205–11, vv. 611–99.

between her and her father, Sindokt instructs her to unadorn herself and to run to her father, crying, as a show of her gratitude for his infinite kindness. Proud of her affection for Zāl and fearless in her love, Rudābe disregards her mother's advice and presents herself before her father, beautiful and adorned with jewels. Although beholding his daughter's beauty gladdens him, Mehrāb's rage is not easily quelled, and he chastises her for her behavior.[68]

Not long after, Manučehr learns of Zāl and Rudābe's affection for one another. Anxious of the possible outcomes of such a union, he calls for Sām and feigns ignorance of the match, commanding him to attack Mehrāb's realm.[69] Once this news reaches Zāl, he is enraged and tells Sām that if he were to do so, he would first have to kill Zāl himself and then attack Kabolestān. He also reminds his father that the day he brought him home from Simorḡ's abode, he promised to never deny him anything. Sām agrees and writes to Manučehr, recounting his own numerous victories on the king's behalf and asking him to deal kindly with Zāl's heart in return.[70]

News of Manučehr's planned attack soon reaches the court of Mehrāb. Terrified and enraged, Mehrāb calls upon Sindokt and unleashes upon her his anger towards Rudābe:

برآشفت و سیندخت را پیش خواند همه خشم رودابه بر وی براند
چنین گفت کاکنون جزین رای نیست که با شاه گیتی مرا پای نیست
که آرمت با دخت نا پاک تن کُشم زارتان بر سر انجمن
مگر شاه ایران ازین خشم و کین برآساید و رام گردد برین

"Enraged, he called forth Sindokt
And unleashed upon her his fury against Rudābe
He said, 'Now there is no choice—
For I am no match for the king of the world—
but to bring you forth with that unchaste daughter
[And] to kill you, deplorably, before the court,

[68] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 216–20, vv. 764–840.
[69] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 220–26, vv. 840–927.
[70] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 227–36, vv. 928–1056.

So that by this deed, the king of Iran
Will be calmed and put at peace!'"[71]

Observing her husband's distress at Rudābe's behavior, Sindokt decides to take action.[72] She urges Mehrāb to open the royal treasury and, attiring herself in a brocade of gold and gathering a mass of riches and opulent gifts, heads to Zābolestān to meet with Sām.[73] Bedazzled upon seeing Sindokt and her retinue along with their gifts, Sām calls her forth and asks her to identify herself. Sindokt introduces herself as the mother of Rudābe and the wife of Mehrāb. She sings Sām's praises, speaks of Rudābe, and reiterates Kābolestān's eternal sub-ordinance to Zābolestān and Sām; by the end she wins his heart over.[74] Sām then assures her that no harm will come to Mehrāb's kingdom. He informs her that he has written to the king, asking him to grant Zāl his wish to marry Rudābe.[75]

After meeting with Zāl, reading Sām's letter, and putting Zāl through a test, Manučehr finally agrees to the marriage of Zāl and Rudābe.[76] Upon the king's consent to the union, both families begin their merrymaking and wedding preparations. The two lovers receive a grand feast and their marriage is celebrated in the most regal manner. After some time Rudābe becomes pregnant with Rostam. The child's heavy build and super-human nature leads to an exceedingly arduous pregnancy filled with illness and pain, which ultimately results in an episode of fainting.[77] Finding himself helpless, Zāl summons Simorḡ by burning one of its feathers. Simorḡ consoles

[71] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 236, vv. 1058–61.
[72] Naderpour believes that while Ferdowsi paints a bold and beautiful portrait of Rudābe in his tale, she pales in comparison to her mother, Sindokt, who not only possesses Rudābe's qualities of "valor and loyalty…and patience and sacrifice," but is also an emblem of "reason and wisdom." From this, and similar situations in later mother-child relationships such as that of Tahmine and Sohrāb, Naderpour convincingly concludes that these in themselves portray Ferdowsi's "belief in the spiritual dominance of women over men in the arena of life and the supremacy of the role of mothers over that of fathers in the realm of the human race's [perseverant] existence." See Naderpour 1992, 464–66.
[73] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 238–39, vv. 1080–94.
[74] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 240–42, vv. 1114–43.
[75] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 242–43, vv. 1145–55.
[76] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 245–55, vv. 1181–320.
[77] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 265, vv. 1432–39.

Zāl and instructs him to have Rudābe heavily intoxicated and to cut open her side with a sharp knife in order to deliver the baby. Simorḡ's advice is followed and Rostam is born.[78] Once Rudābe regains consciousness, the baby is brought to her:

مران بچه را پیش او تاختند بسان سپهری برافراختند
بخندید از آن بچه سرو سهی بدید اندرو فرّ شاهنشهی
برَستم بگفتا غم آمد بسر نهادند رُستمش نام پسر

"They rushed that child to her side
[And], like the heavens, they held him up.
The tall cypress smiled because of that child
[And] saw in him the regal glory.
'I am liberated (be-rastam),' she said, 'Grief has ended!'
And him, the boy, they named Rostam."[79]

Analysis

Determination

In his earliest description of Rudābe, Ferdowsi details her physical beauty via tropes commonly used in epic masnavis to depict a desirable woman: skin as white as ivory, stature as slender and elegant as a teak or cypress tree, jet black locks, lips red as pomegranates and musk-colored brows shaped like a bow.[80] Yet the conclusion of this description bears noting:

بهشتست سرتاسر آراسته پر آرایش و دانش و خواسته

"'She is heaven, adorned from end to end:
Full of beauty, knowledgeable and purpose/opulence.'"[81]

[78] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 265–68, vv. 1440–80.
[79] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 268, vv. 1481–83.
[80] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 183–84, vv. 288–92.
[81] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 184, v. 293.

The narrator not only depicts Rudābe as a paragon of beauty, but also as "knowledgeable," thereby underscoring her intelligence as well as her beauty. The term *ḵ*^{w}*āste*, which has been translated here as "opulence," is used as a synonym for "richness and treasures" and can also mean "that which one wants."[82] And while the word certainly signifies "wealth" and "purpose" in this context, the reader cannot help but to associate with this latter meaning the notion of "desire" as well.[83] Retrospectively one can see that Rudābe is both purposeful (of independent mind), and passionate, all qualities that fall in the semantic range of *ḵ*^{w}*āste*. Determination, the act of setting one's metaphorical gaze and purpose upon a goal and enduring all manner of difficulties in order to achieve it, propels Rudābe into the arena of action and makes her the initial active element and instigator in her romance with Zāl.

Rudābe claims her agency in the epic through her determination in being with her beloved. From the instant she hears her father's description of the white-locked hero, Rudābe falls deeply in love with Zāl and begins searching for a way to meet him face to face. While we are told that Zāl yearns to meet Rudābe as well, to the extent that he loses sleep over her,[84] Rudābe ultimately initiates the meeting by sharing her secret with her handmaidens and commanding them to find a solution. Even when met with resistance from her companions, who cite her superiority to Zāl, who has white hair and was raised by a bird in the mountains, she admonishes them, declaring, "I desire neither the emperor of China (*fag̃fur*), nor the Caesar (*qeyṣar*)… nor any of the sovereigns of Iran!"[85] With this declaration, Rudābe forgoes well-established traditions, which perceived marriage mainly as a form of political alliance between two kingdoms, rather than a union based

[82] See Wolff 1935, 333: "die gewünschte Sache; Kostbarkeiten; Schätze."
[83] Steingass defines the word as, "Desired, wished, willed, wanted; meant, intended; wedded; meaning, signification; riches, possessions; the needful for travelling, requisites for carrying on war." See Steingass 2010, 480. The term in New Persian is derived from the Middle Persian (Pahlvai) *xwāstag*, which is translated as "property, wealth" by MacKenzie. See MacKenzie 1971, 96.
[84] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 184, vv. 294–95.
[85] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 188–89, vv. 358–77.

on mutual attraction and love.[86] When, upon their return from an encounter with Zāl, the handmaidens tell their lady of her beloved's strength and beauty, Rudābe mockingly declares:

چُنین گفت با بندگان سروبُن که دیگر شده‌ستی به رای و سَخُن
همان زال کو مرغ‌پرورده بود چُنان پیرسر بود و پژمرده بود
به دیدار شد چون گل ارغوان سهی قد و دیبا رخ و پهلوان

"Thus said the cypress tree to the servants,
'You have changed your tune!
That same Zāl who was 'reared by a bird'
And was 'white-haired and withered,'
After a glance has become like the flower of the Judas tree!
[He has become] tall, silk-cheeked and a champion!'"[87]

Rudābe's retort to the handmaidens makes apparent not only her unwillingness to give up her yearning for Zāl, but her sense of wit and self-confidence. This confidence also manifests in her lack of doubt that she will win Zāl's affections, despite the barriers she must overcome to be with him and the fact that the two have never met in person. She never asks the handmaidens whether they think he will love her; she simply orders them to bring the two together through any means possible.

Furthermore, when Zāl and Rudābe finally do meet, it is again Rudābe who initiates the dialogue when she sees Zāl approach the palace. From the veranda, she welcomes the hero and showers him in praise for coming forth:

چن از دور دستان سام سوار بدید، آمد آن دختر نامدار
دو بیجاده بگشاد و آواز داد که شاد آمدی ای جوانمرد و راد

[86] Of course, as Mehrāb mentions on a couple occasions, to have Zāl as a son-in-law and to create this sort of alliance with Sām and Zābolestān would be very honorable and of value to Mehrāb and his family. However, given the difficulties Rudābe has to endure in uniting with Zāl, including confronting her father's resistance, a nearly disastrous war on Kabolestān, and the measures Mehrāb even considers taking as a means to protect his realm, all support the idea that this union was not a political machination of any sorts, but based purely on the attraction and love which Zāl and Rudābe feel for one another.
[87] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 197, vv. 491–93.

درود جهان آفرین بر تو باد خم چرخ گردان زمین تو باد
پرستنده خرّم‌دل و شاد باد چنانی سراپای کو کرد یاد
پیاده بدینسان ز پرده‌سرای برنجیدت این خسروانی دو پای

"When, from afar, she saw the mounted Dastān-e Sām
That illustrious girl (Rudābe) came forth.
She parted the two rubies [of her lips] and said,
'You have come in joy, O munificent and brave youth!
May the praise of the World-Creator be upon you,
And may the arch of the spinning wheel [of fortune] be the ground you tread on!
May the One Worthy of Worship be happy-hearted and joyful
For calling into existence such [a being] from head to foot!
Great pains your regal feet have endured
Walking in such manner (coming) from the court.'"[88]

In this passage we see Rudābe exerting her agency as the hostess, who has initiated the invitation, welcoming Zāl into her private sphere. She also showers Zāl with compliments, both in regard to his beauty to the difficulties he has endured in order to meet her. Her expression of these compliments again renders her as the agent and, from a gender perspective, turns the lover-and-beloved trope on its head. Rudābe's key role in facilitating their encounter achieves further emphasis when, after responding to her welcome, *Zāl* asks Rudābe to find a way to get him into the palace. Without hesitation, Rudābe unties her hair and throws it down to the hero, inviting him to climb up to her:

بدو گفت بریاز و برکش میان برِ شیر بگشای و چنگ گیان
بگیر این سیه گیسو از یکسوام ز بهر تو باید همی گیسوام

"She said to him, 'Show resolve and girt up your loins!
Unbind your lion-like chest and regal hands
[And] seize these jet-black locks from the side of my head;

[88] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 198–99, vv. 508–12.

For for your sake all my strength lies in my locks!’”[89]

The narrator goes on to describe how Zāl is stunned by the beauty of her face and her hair and, proclaiming it to be an injustice that the sun does not shine brightly on such an occasion, takes out his lasso, anchors it on the notched parapet and climbs up toward the princess.[90] Once he reaches the veranda Rudābe praises Zāl again. Then *she* takes his hand and leads him to her quarters.[91]

Boldness

In addition to facilitating, through various means, her meeting with Zāl, Rudābe is also bold with respect to her sentiments for him, for which she feels no shame, and therefore adamantly stands her grounds. This boldness is illustrated in three scenes specifically, each during a dialogue between Rudābe and one of the figures who attempt to challenge her devotion to Zāl, namely the handmaidens, Sindokt, and Mehrāb. While telling her handmaidens about Zāl, Rudābe declares:

بدانید هر پنج و آگاه بید همه ساله با بخت همراه بید
که من عاشقی‌ام چو بحر دمان ازو برشده موج تا آسمان
پر از پور سام‌ست روشن دلم به خواب اندر اندیشه زو نگسلم
همه خانه‌ی شرم پر مهر اوست شب و روزم اندیشه‌ی چهر اوست

“‘Know, all five of you, and be aware,
[As] you have always accompanied my fortune,
That I am a lover like the raging sea
From which waves have arisen to the sky!
My radiant heart is filled with (the thought of) Sām’s son
[Even] in sleep I am not free from the thought of him.
The place of shame is [instead] all filled with his love;
Day and night, I think of nothing but his form.’”[92]

[89] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 199, vv. 523–24.
[90] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 199–200, vv. 525–29.
[91] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 200, v. 531.
[92] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 187–88, vv. 352–55.

Rudābe uses strong, forceful, and conventionally masculine language in this excerpt to describe her own love, proclaiming she has no need to hide her passion and desire for Zāl from fear of shame. She openly compares herself to a "raging sea" from which "waves" have "arisen to the sky," a strong image which arguably borders the phallic, depicting column-like waves shooting upwards, piercing the sky. As we shall discuss, this openness manifests itself again later in her conversations with Mehrāb about her love for Zāl.[93]

Although seemingly simple, the term *čehr* used by Rudābe here is actually quite profound. While to the modern reader the term may simply imply "form" or "appearance"—translating the line into, "Day and night I think of nothing but his outward appearance/likeness"—the word originally carried alternate meanings as well: "origin; seed."[94] Bearing these definitions in mind we can see how this statement could have a number of different implications. Here, Rudābe does not simply state that she spends day and night lost in the thought of Zāl's likeness, but she also expresses interest in and concern with the notions of procreation and dynastic kingship. Like

[93] Rudbābe's approach towards her love for Zāl is reminiscent of a poem by the early New Persian poetess Rābeᶜe Balḵi (d. 9th century AD) where she declares:

عشق او باز اندر آوردم به بند کوشش بسیار نامد سودمند
عشق دریایی کرانه ناپدید کی توان کردن شنا ای هوشمند
عشق را خواهی که تا پایان بری بس بباید ساخت با هر ناپسند
زشت باید دید و انگارید خوب زهر باید خورد و انگارید قند
توسنی کردم ندانستم همی کز کشیدن تنگتر گردد کمند

"Again, his love ensnared me
[And] resistance was of no use!
Love is a sea with no borders in sight;
Who can swim [in this], O wise one?
If you seek to take love to its very end,
[Then] you must make do with every [kind] of foulness!
You must see the ugly and pretend that it's pleasant;
You must drink poison and pretend that it's sugar!
I rebelled and did not know that
Pulling away only tightens the [love's] lasso around me!"
(Modabberi 1991, 74)

[94] According to Pour-e Davoud, *čehr* originally also carried the meaning of seed (*toḵme*) and origin (*nežād*). See Pour-e Davoud 1968, 2: 211. It also carried both the meaning of face/form and origin/essence in Middle Persian, according to MacKenzie 1971, 22.

Tahmine, her literary descendant and the mother of her future grandson, Rudābe is also keen to be the one through whom the great hero of her time will procreate and leave behind a physical legacy. She, likewise, knows that if she manages to intertwine her own family with that of Zāl's, she will ensure both the security and the grandeur of her own dynasty and dominion; a notion which her mother Sindoḵt also understands and works to materialize, but which her father, Mehrāb, avoids out of fear. Rudābe's mention of her infatuation with Zāl's *čehr* (in the sense of "seed") can also be read as a bold and sexual statement, for she admits that she spends day and night in the thought of amorous play in view of procreation with Zāl. Such a reading also ties into the earlier phallic imagery conjured by Rudābe of herself as a raging sea with its waves penetrating the sky. These sexualized readings invite even further analysis if we take into consideration the previous hemistich as well:

همه خانه‌ی شرم پر مهر اوست

"'The place of shame is [instead] all filled with his love'"

Once again, Rudābe's boldness springs forward when she tells us that her shame has been replaced with the love of Zāl and that she therefore feels no embarrassment about her considerable affection for him. Her reference to her *ḵāne-ye šarm*, which literally means "the house of honor" or "the house of shame" (translated here as "the place of shame") also carries a sexual undertone when she declares it to be filled with his *mehr* (love or affection).[95]

Rudābe's preoccupation with Zāl's *čehr* also has wider, over-arching implications. By striving to procreate with Zāl, she shows interest in the broader notions of dynastic kingship and succession, key themes in the *Šāhnāme*'s narrative. Through her statement she brings into

[95] Of course, as we know, Rudābe and Zāl still have not met one another in person by this point in the text, so no sexual encounter could have taken place between them.

discourse the ideal of the dynasty and kingship, which she then materializes through her marriage to Zāl and by giving birth to Rostam. She is thus largely responsible for preserving the notion of the monarchy and its continuous succession, as Rostam becomes the main guardian of this institution.

The scene in which Rudābe tells her mother of her affection for Zāl, equally reveals the boldness of expression Rudābe has exhibited before. Confessing her love, the princess of Kābolestān declares:

نخواهم بُدن زنده بی روی او جهانم نه ارزد به یک موی او
بدان! کو مرا دید و با من نشست به پیمان گرفتیم دستش بدست

"'Without his face, I have no desire to live!
To me the entire world is not worth a strand of his hair!
Know that he saw me and consorted with me,
[And] in union we took his hand in ours!'"[96]

Although confronted by Sindokt in this scene and finding herself in trouble, Rudābe still chooses to tell the truth and does so audaciously. She exclaims that she cannot live without Zāl and that the entire world pales in comparison to a strand of his hair. The imagery utilized here by Ferdowsi suggests that Rudābe's reaction deviates from gender norms. The image she uses to leverage Zāl against the entire world is a strand of his hair, an image that not only stands for his weakness but also connotes femininity. In fact, a few passages prior to this one, Ferdowsi used the image to describe Rudābe's own beauty! Likewise, if we are to accept the editor's word choice, Rudābe again seems to reinforce her agency in the progress which this relationship has made when she tells her mother, "Know that he saw me and engaged with me / And *we* took *his* hand in [promise of a] union." By highlighting the fact that *she* took his hand in order to form a pact, the princess

[96] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 214, vv. 745–46.

showcases her power in her relationship with Zāl as well as her unwillingness to surrender, regardless of circumstances.[97]

The third scene in which Rudābe illustrates her unabashedness in proclaiming her love for Zāl is after Sindoḵt has told Mehrāb of their daughter's secret encounter with Zāl and their pact of marriage. Mehrāb demands to see his daughter but Sindoḵt, out of fear that he may harm Rudābe in his fury, first makes him promise not to hurt her, and then runs to tell her daughter. Sindoḵt advises Rudābe to unadorn herself, so as to look meek and humble before her father, and to run to him in tears and thank him for his kindness. Instead, the princess responds:

بدو گفت رودابه: پیرایه چیست؟ بجای سرِ مایه بی مایه کیست
روان مرا پور سامست جفت چرا آشکارا بباید نهفت
به پیش پدر شد چو خورشید شرق به یاقوت و زر اندرون گشته غرق
بهشتی بُد آراسته پر نگار چو خورشید تابان به خرّم بهار

"To her said Rudābe, 'What adornment?
Who [here] is worthless instead of [being] worthwhile?
The son of Sām is the companion of my soul!
Why must one conceal that which is manifest?'
Like the eastern sun, she appeared before her father,
Drowned in rubies and gold.
She was a heaven, adorned in designs,
Like the shining sun in verdant spring."[98]

By speaking about worth and then declaring, "the son of Sām is the companion of [her] soul," Rudābe indirectly refers to her own self-worth and the importance of her relationship with Zāl. She sees herself not as the unwise and rash girl her father believes her to be, but as one who is

[97] For the variations in the wording of this specific hemistich in other editions of the *Šāhnāme*, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 746, n. 31.
[98] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 220, vv. 829–32.

worth every hurdle her family must overcome in order for her to join her beloved.[99] Building upon this, she describes her companionship with Zāl as extending beyond the arena of romantic love, into the realm of the spiritual. Rudābe's desire to be with Zāl doesn't stem from attraction and passion, alone, but instead emerges out of the desire to be with a companion worthy of her very soul.[100]

An analysis of Rudābe's role in the tale of "Zāl and Rudābe" reveals a fully-realized female persona endowed with numerous attractive qualities. She is knowledgeable, passionate, willing to break with traditions, witty, self-confident, and truthful. Yet the two overarching attributes that define this eternal woman character of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* are her determination (fueled by her passion) and her boldness in her love for Zāl. As a result of these two qualities, Rudābe ultimately sees the fulfillment of her heart's desire. In the final dialogue between Sindoḵt and Rudābe, which occurs prior to Rudābe's marriage to Zāl, Sindoḵt praises her daughter's determination:

همی مژده دادش به دیدار زال که تو یافتی چونک باید هَمال
زن و مرد را از بلندی منش نیابد به گیتی ز کس سرزنش
سُوی کام دل تیز بشتافتی کنون هرچه جستی همه یافتی

"She gave her the glad tidings of reunion with Zāl
Saying, 'You have found a companion, as one must!
No woman or man in the world will ever receive
Chastisement for the loftiness of their aspiration.
You unhesitatingly hastened toward your heart's desire
And now you have received all that you'd sought!'"[101]

To this Rudābe responds:

[99] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 220, v. 834.
[100] Analyzing the language used in this hemistich further proves this. If we were to translate the hemistich literally it would say, "To my soul, the son of Sām is the pair," thereby emphasizing that this union is not something which Rudābe has *chosen*, but which has come to be through higher powers and divine forces.
[101] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 257–58, vv. 1344–46.

بدو گفت رودابه: ای شاه زن سَزای ستایش بهر انجمن
من از خاک پای تو بالین کنم ز فرمانت آرایش دین کنم
ز تو چشم آهَرمَنان دور باد دل و جان تو خانه‌ی سور باد

"To her Rudābe replied, 'O Female King!
[O you] worthy of the praise of every council!
On the very dust on which you tread, I lay my head,
And from your commandments I create [my] religion!
May the eyes of the devils be far from you,
And may your heart and soul be the abode of good cheer!'"[102]

These final lines show Rudābe openly receiving praise from her mother, Sindokt, arguably the tale's wisest character and most certainly the one who saves Kābolestān from calamity and—on a broader scale—lays the groundwork for the birth of Rostam, the *Šāhnāme*'s definitive hero and the Iranian kingdom's saving grace. This praise could therefore represent enigmatic applause from Ferdowsi himself as well, honoring Rudābe for her determination and boldness in surmounting challenges posed by tradition and deep-rooted, familial animosity in order to unite with her beloved. Of course, Rudābe does not achieve this feat alone; both Zāl and Sindokt play critical roles in achieving the end goal. Nonetheless, Sindokt's final words in praise of Rudābe's actions seal the formation of a key female figure: a woman who is not only intelligent and a paragon of beauty, but also exceedingly determined and bold.[103]

[102] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 258, vv. 1347–49.
[103] Both Khaleghi-Motlagh and Naderpour agree on the greatness of the station of Rudābe within the *Šāhnāme*. Khaleghi-Motlagh refers to Rudābe as "a woman of strong will and self-esteem who can stand up for herself." See also Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 33 and Naderpour 1992, 463–64.

Tahmine

Ferdowsi also expands upon and illustrates Rudābe's qualities of determination and boldness via a character who takes us from the southeastern borders of Iran to the north: Tahmine, the princess of Samangān, a vassal kingdom in Iran's neighboring empire of Turān. Turān generally encompasses the lands to the north and northeast of the Iranian empire and is at once both Iran's cousin-empire and greatest rival.[104] In Tahmine's storyline, Rostam goes to hunt one day to raise his spirits. Reaching the outskirts of Turān, he encounters a field of onagers and sets out upon his prey. Following a successful hunt, he rests while his horse Raḵš freely roams the field. While Rostam is asleep, a group of Turānian riders passing through the field spot Raḵš and capture it to take back to Samangān.[105] Rostam awakens and, unable to find his mount, becomes frenzied and anxious. In such a state he follows the footprints left by his steed and ultimately finds himself at the gates of Samangān. Though concerned of how he will be perceived as a traveler approaching on foot and not on horseback, he nonetheless enters the city.[106] News of his arrival reaches the king, who invites him to his abode and, after assuring him that all who dwell in Samangān are his well-wishers, inquires about the reason for his visit. Rostam informs him that Raḵš is missing and that his footprints lead to Samangān. He tells the king that if he investigates the matter, he will be rewarded. But if the king instead allows Raḵš to remain hidden from Rostam, then many a head will roll.[107] The king promises Rostam that no one can steal his horse and invites him to stay as a guest in Samangān until the king manages to find and return his steed. Rostam is gladdened by the king's words and accepts his offer. He then spends the night drinking and merrymaking with the

[104] For more on the history of Turān and Iran, see Yarshater 1983, 372.
[105] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 119–20, vv. 8–21.
[106] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 120, vv. 22–28.
[107] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 120–21, vv. 29–40.

king and his nobles and generals and, after finding himself intoxicated by both wine and sleep, retreats to his chamber in the royal palace.[108]

During the dark hours of the night, a slave quietly enters Rostam's chamber with a lit candle in hand with the beautiful Tahmine, princess of Samangān, trailing behind. Gazing upon Tahmine, Rostam is fixated by her beauty and after praising her, asks her to identify herself and explain the intention with which she has set upon him at this hour of the night.[109] Tahmine introduces herself as the sole daughter of the king of Samangān, unparalleled in her beauty, of great lineage, and unseen by any outside her quarters. She recounts to him her burning passion and desire for him, ever since she first heard stories of his strength and heroism. If he will have her, Tahmine tells Rostam, she yearns to spend this night in union with him. She has spent years in longing for him and hopes to, by the will of God, become pregnant with the hero's child and bear a son in his semblance. In addition to this, she promises to return Rak̲š. Beholding Tahmine's beauty, astonished by her wisdom, and gladdened by her promise to return his steed, Rostam agrees, and the two spend the night as lovers in pleasure and merrymaking.[110]

As dawn breaks, Rostam offers his renowned armlet to Tahmine. He asks her to tie the armlet around her child's hair if she gives birth to a daughter and to wrap it around the child's arm if she has a son, so that it may be a sign and remembrance of him. Later in the morning Rostam is approached by the king, who asks him how he slept and delivers the glad tidings that Rak̲š has been found. Joyfully, Rostam receives his horse, caressing him affectionately, and once Rak̲š has been prepared, the two return to Iran. Nine months later Tahmine gives birth to a baby boy who

[108] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 121–22, vv. 41–52.
[109] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 122, vv. 53–60.
[110] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 122–24, vv. 61–89.

bears the heroic stature and figure of his father. She names him Sohrāb and raises him to become a magnificent warrior.[111]

Analysis

Wisdom

From one perspective Tahmine appears to be a pure, wise, and astonishingly independent woman. From the very beginning of Tahmine's description, Ferdowsi praises her:

پس برده اندر یکی ماه‌روی چو خورشید تابان پر از رنگ و بوی
دو ابرو کمان و دو گیسو کمند به بالا بکردار سرو بلند
روانش خرد بود و تن جانِ پاک تو گفتی که بهره ندارد ز خاک

"Behind the slave came a moon-faced [beauty]
Shining, like the sun, full of color and [sweet] scents
Two brows like bows and [her] hair plaited in two ropes
In stature resembling a tall cypress
Her soul was [all] wisdom and her body, of pure breath;
One would think that she was an ephemeral being."[112]

The poet first portrays Tahmine's physical beauty through descriptions commonly used to articulate a woman's beauty in the *Šāhnāme*—eyebrows like bows, braids like rope—and similar to the earlier descriptions of Rudābe. However, the text then quickly shifts its focus to inner qualities: her wisdom (*k̲erad*) and purity. It describes her soul as "[all] wisdom and her body, of pure breath" in one line, then expands on this initial description by adding "that she was an ephemeral being" ("one would say she was not partaking of the earthly mold").[113] The diction of the last line makes Tahmine sound almost divine, thereby exalting her station. The emphasis placed

[111] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 124–25, vv. 90–95.
[112] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 122, vv. 56–58.
[113] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 122, v. 58.

on Tahmine's wisdom and purity bears special significance given her actions in this tale. It is she who clandestinely approaches the merry and intoxicated, yet anxious and vulnerable Rostam at the midnight hour, and admits her unbridled passion for him. Thus, by explicitly declaring her wisdom and purity of character immediately after Tahmine enters the scene and before she even has the chance to speak to Rostam, the narrator communicates to the reader that the princess of Samangān should not be chastised for the agency she wields nor should she face belittlement for exercising this agency by using her sexuality as a tool.

Following the preemptive defense, Ferdowsi writes:

ازو رستم شیردل خیره ماند بروبر جهان‌آفرین را بخواند
بپرسید ازو گفت: نام تو چیست؟ چه جویی شب تیره، کام تو چیست؟
چنین داد پاسخ که تهمینه‌ام تو گویی که از غم به دو نیمه‌ام
یکی دخت شاه سمنگان منم بزشک هِزبر و پلنگان منم
به گیتی زخوبان مرا جفت نیست چو من زیر چرخ بلند اندکیست
کس از پرده بیرون ندیدی مرا نه هرگز کس آوا شنیدی مرا

"From [the sight of] her the lion-hearted Rostam was in awe
And praised the World-Creator on her account.
He asked her, 'What is your name?
What do you seek in this dark night? What is your intention?'
Thus she replied, 'I am Tahmine,
[And] you could say that from sorrow I have split in twain.
I am the sole daughter of the king of Samangān,
I am the descendent of lion- and tiger-like warriors!
[In beauty] I have no peer among the fair ones of the world,
There are very few like me under the high skies.
None has [ever] seen me outside of the harem
Nor has anybody ever heard my voice.'"[114]

[114] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 122, vv. 59–64.

In this passage we are initially faced with Rostam's admiration of her beauty, yet that which is even more essential is what follows: Rostam, the greatest male hero of the epic, asks Tahmine for *her intention* in appearing before him in the middle of the night. By way of these words Ferdowsi uses Rostam as a vehicle for highlighting Tahmine's agency and for drawing attention to it. This moment, along with the previous confirmations of Tahmine's wisdom and purity, paints the portrait of a female character who owns the power and skill of self-expression, even of her deepest desires, without acquiring the label of vixen or harlot. In Tahmine, sexuality, wisdom and an upright character intersect, not as separate, clashing forces, but as qualities that harmoniously complement one another to produce a strong female with agency.

Tahmine then honors herself, extolling her own unparalleled beauty, her heroic lineage, and her purity of character (all adding to her enigmatic allure). She emphasizes her status as the sole daughter of the king of Samangān and as one who descends from former heroes. She then recounts to Rostam details of his own adventures and declares:

چن این داستان‌ها شنیدم ز تو بسی لب به دندان گزیدم ز تو
بجستم همی کتف و یال و برت بدین شهر کرد ایزد آبشخورت
ترایم کنون گر بخواهی مرا نبیند جزین مرغ و ماهی مرا
یکی آنک بر تو چنین گشته‌ام خرد را ز بهر هوا کشته‌ام
ودیگر که از تو مگر کردگار نشاند یکی پورم اندر کنار
مگر چون تو باشد به مردی و زور سپهرش دهد بهر کیوان و هور
سدیگر که اسپت بجای آورم سمنگان همه زیر پای آورم

"'And upon hearing these tales about you,
My lips I've oft bitten [in desire] for you.
Ceaselessly I've searched for your shoulders, neck and chest!
And now God has brought you to this place.
I am yours now, if you desire me!
No creatures shall see me [in such manner] again.
For one: I am so enamored of you,

That I have killed wisdom for the sake of passion!
And on another account: perchance the Creator, from you,
Will seat a son beside me.
And thirdly: I shall restore your horse,
As I shall place all of Samangān before you.'"[115]

Tahmine freely admits to Rostam that she has heard accounts of his victories and has physically expressed, by biting her lip, the longing and desire she felt in response to the tellers' descriptions of his strong arms, hero's chest, and thick neck. Thus, we again find Tahmine using vivid imagery to openly express her physical attraction to Rostam without compromising her reputation. Like Rudābe (and Vis, as we shall see), she also assumes a more "active" (and thereby traditionally "masculine") role in this scene by complimenting (or even objectifying) Rostam for his attractive features. In other words, Ferdowdsi positions her as the lover/gazer, while positioning Rostam as the beloved/object of the gaze. In line with Cixous's theory, this reversal clearly marks a deviation from traditional gender roles that assign passivity to women and activeness to men;[116] here, Tahmine takes matters into her own hands in order to pursue the object of her yearning. And while Tahmine insists that no one outside the harem has ever seen her, and that no one else will see her after Rostam, one cannot overlook the fact that she has capitalized on this opportunity to express her longing for a stranger. She then takes this admission even further by explaining that God led Rostam to Samangān, thereby insinuating that she views their meeting as destiny and the gratification of her desires as fate. As a result of Ferdowsi's earlier descriptions of Tahmine as well as her own confidence (albeit mixed with unbridled passion), her account does not characterize her desire for the epic's hero as a vile or base inclination.

[115] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 123, vv. 72–78.
[116] Cixous 1986, 63–64.

Yet it is also noteworthy to mention that, in some other regards, Tahmine still fits Cixous's mold for stereotypical femininity: while Rostam behaves as the more "intelligible" party, Tahmine is more "palpable," and while Rostam is arguably more driven by his "head" (he wants his horse back and will do what he needs to get it), Tahmine behaves more from her "heart" (she desires this man's body and an offspring).[117] This casts an interesting light on the sheer emphasis Ferdowsi places on Tahmine's wisdom in this text, reminding us time and again of her wisdom and knowledge. Thus, Tahmine represents a breakdown of the binary that pits women's desire and emotional nature against the quality of wisdom. In fact, these reactions from the heart appear to deepen her innate sagacity and insight, especially when juxtaposed with the general rashness of a character like Rostam.

Sexuality as Agency

In addition to Tahmine's above-mentioned qualities—which alone would be sufficient to draw Rostam to her— Tahmine strikes a deal with Rostam: if he spends the night with her, she will use her ability to bring all of Samangān under her own command to return his horse to him. Her wish, she concludes, is that she may have a child from him, provided that God wills it. As Tahmine's speech draws to an end, the narrator proclaims:

چو رستم بدانسان پری چهره دید ز هر دانشی نزد او بهره دید
و دیگر که از رخش داد آگهی ندید ایچ فرجام جز فرّهی
به خشنودی و رای و فرمان اوی به خوبی بیاراست پیمان اوی
چو انباز او گشت با او به راز ببود آن شب تیره و دیریاز

"When Rostam saw the fairy-faced one in such a manner,
He saw the essence of every kind of knowledge within her.
And [as] she had given news of Raḵš as well,
He saw no conclusion save auspiciousness!

[117] Cixous 1986, 63.

In mirth and in [accordance with] her view and commands
He made the pact of union with her in goodness;
Like her companion he became intimate with her,
[And in such a manner] he spent that long, dark night."[118]

The passage above directs the reader's attention to Tahmine's mental faculties (here, *dāneš* "knowledge") for a third time as none other than Rostam himself attests to her intelligence. Rostam, in accordance with Tahmine's "view and commands" honors "her word," placing further emphasis on Tahmine's wisdom as the origin point of this union. The two then spend a long dark night with one another in rapture, as a result of which Tahmine becomes pregnant and nine months later gives birth to their son Sohrāb.

Thus, we see in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* the construction of a female character who not only exhibits the qualities of wisdom and purity, but who also exercises agency by using her sexuality to express passion and desire. However, it must be noted that, as Tahmine herself mentions to Rostam, "no creatures shall see [her in such manner] again" after she has lain with him; in other words, she will never become intimate with another man. Even given her freedom of choice and expression, Tahmine nonetheless remains limited in her actions. Upon becoming pregnant with Sohrāb, the role of mother becomes central to her identity and it is understood that she will refrain from taking another partner. Despite this adherence to the conventions of her gender, however, the end of this tale leaves the reader with the impression of a female character who possesses the agency to act on her own desires and volition in order to achieve her ambitions. Furthermore, Tahmine's actions garner praise for her wisdom and purity of character rather than accruing punitive consequences.

[118] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 123–24, vv. 79–82.

There does, however, exist another perspective from which to interpret Ferdowsi's Tahmine. One can note the praise which Ferdowsi showers upon her, but also be mindful that she is ultimately (albeit indirectly) punished for her transgression through the death of her only son at the hands of his father, the same man whom she seduced. Over the course of his life Rostam remains a force to be reckoned with, a force that keeps the Iranian king of kings on the throne, especially during the period of Keykāvus, the monarch at the time of Rostam and Tahmine's first meeting.[119] Likewise, Turān and Iran are perpetually at war with one another. Therefore, nothing would suit Samangān, as a vassal kingdom on the periphery of Iran and Turān, more than forging an alliance with Iran's champion as a means to safeguard its own interests; and no alliance would prove more beneficial and lasting than that of kinship. Thus, ordering their men to capture Rak̲š when Rostam is vulnerable can be interpreted as an effort by either Tahmine herself, her father, or the two of them in complicity to lure the hero into Samangān so that Tahmine might secure the kingdom's alliance with Iran by way of Sohrāb's conception. The certainty with which both Tahmine and her father promise the return of Rak̲š to Rostam belies their charade of ignorance as to the steed's whereabouts and lends itself even more so to the probability of such a hypothesis. In addition, Ferdowsi concludes Rostam and Tahmine's love affair in a rather abrupt and unusual manner. He writes:

همی بود آن شب بر ماه‌روی همی گفت هر گونه‌یی پیش اوی
چو خورشید رخشنده شد بر سپهر بیاراست روی زمین را به مهر
بر رستم آمد گرانمایه شاه بپرسیدش از خواب و آرامگاه
چو این گفته شد مژده دادش به رخش ازو شادمان شد دل تاج بخش
بیامد بمالید و زین برنهاد شد از رخش رخشان و از شاه شاد

[119] One of Rostam's main epitaphs, even, throughout the *Šāhnāme* is *tājbak̲š*, meaning the "Crown-Bestower." On the function of Rostam as the crown-bestower in the Šāhnāme, see Davidson 2000, 71–97; for the crown-bestower in the old Iranian traditions, see Shayegan 2012, xi–xiii, 12–13, 32–33, and 142.

بیامد سوی شهر ایران چو باد وزین داستان کرد بسیار یاد

"All that night he was with the moon-faced one
And recounted to her all manners of things.
When the sun began to shine in the heavens
And embellished the surface of the earth in love,
The great king came upon Rostam
[And] enquired as to his rest and place of repose.
When this was discussed, he gave him glad tidings of Rak̲š,
Which gladdened the heart of the Crown-Bestower!
[Rostam] went forth and rubbed [Rak̲š] and mounted [him];
[He] beamed because of Rak̲š and was gladdened by the king.
Wind-like he rode towards the land of Iran
And often reminisced on this tale."[120]

Once Rostam and Tahmine have spent the night together, the story ends with six lines that leave the reader unsettled. Why does the king show no reaction to what has transpired between Rostam and Tahmine? That it was kept a secret from him cannot be possible, given that Tahmine intended to become pregnant and give birth to Sohrāb nine months later. The fact that there is no consequence for a perhaps illegitimate child at the Turānian court may also speak to the complicity of father and daughter. Why is Tahmine not chastised for such a striking act of independence, when Rostam's own mother, Rudābe, was berated and threatened with death for simply meeting with Zāl in secret? Of course, the two women come from different vassal kingdoms with presumably unique traditions and cultures; nonetheless, Tahmine's behavior can be characterized as generally unacceptable for a woman in the world of the *Šāhnāme*. Is Tahmine, therefore, a device of the patriarchy, used as a means to forge an alliance to the benefit of her father, or is she an emblem of female agency?

[120] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 124–25, vv. 90–95.

In some other editions of the text, which Khaleghi-Motlagh also points to in the footnotes of his final version, an additional scene precedes the scene in which Rostam and Tahmine consummate their union: upon accepting Tahmine's offer, Rostam calls forth a magus who then asks the king for Tahmine's hand on behalf of Rostam. Gladdened by this proposal, the king bestows his daughter upon the hero, and all the inhabitants of Samangān rejoice.[121] The likelihood that these lines appeared in the original manuscript remain quite slim, however, given that the scene does not flow naturally within the narrative. It seems distorted and nonsensical, for instance, that Rostam would call upon a magus in the middle of the night for such a purpose and that the king would receive and approve of the news. It seems probable therefore that the scene was added later as a way to appease an audience who might regard such an act (and Ferdowsi's approval of it) as unacceptable or even sinful. Likewise, as Khaleghi-Motlagh explains in his notes on the *Šāhnāme*, the term *peymān ārāstan* (to create a union/pact) simply means to marry.[122] Therefore, as the editor states, the added lines must have been incorporated by someone who was unaware of the word's meaning and, disagreeing with Tahmine and Rostam's decision to sleep with one another out of wedlock and with Ferdowsi's curt reference to the matter, deemed it necessary to elaborate upon the topic by adding unsubstantiated details.

Ultimately, the details of whether or not Tahmine approaches Rostam purely of her own volition or because of a scheme concocted alongside her father are of minor significance. If we view Sohrāb's tragic death as a form of punishment brought upon Tahmine for wielding her agency through her intellect and sexuality, it still stands that, compared to subsequent female figures in the text who similarly use their sexuality to demonstrate agency—the prime example being

[121] For the complete lines along with editor's notes see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 124, v. 80, n. 1.
[122] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, Notes on the Shahnameh 1.1, 497, n. *be* 80 *pe* and *be 81*. Khaleghi-Motlagh equates *peymān ārāstan* to the New Persian *ᶜaqd kardan* (to perform the marriage contract).

Sudābe—Tahmine's treatment and punishment are unique. Even if her son's death does represent a form of punishment for her actions, she does not bear this penalty alone; Sohrāb's death brings even greater suffering upon Rostam. After all, it is Rostam who tricks his own son and defeats him through ruses and deception, discovering Sohrāb's identity only after he has dealt the fatal blow. Sudābe, on the other hand, experiences a solitary punishment. Furthermore, while Sudābe is mercilessly annihilated, Tahmine lives on after the "punishment," now as the mother of a martyred son.

Thus, we ultimately find Tahmine to be a woman who wields her agency through her sexuality and her wisdom, which could be synonymous with "cunning" in this context. This is why Ferdowsi continuously refers to her *k̲erad*: Tahmine uses her wisdom to fulfill her desire to be with Rostam and to bear his child. She has most likely—whether alone, but probably in conjunction with her father— used this wisdom to have Raḵš abducted and hidden so that Rostam would be led to Samangān. One could argue that, if this is done in conjunction with her father, she is not actually using her own sexuality freely, but is rather being used as a device for the patriarchy instead. Ferdowsi's continuous reference to *her* wisdom, however, solidifies the notion that Tahmine is not merely a pawn, but a character very much involved in, and perhaps even the main mastermind of, this plan. Thus, we are presented with Ferdowsi's Tahmine as a paragon of wisdom and a woman who wields her agency through (the authorized use of) her sexuality.[123]

[123] As we shall see in chapter 3, the fact that Tahmine's sexuality is authorized because it is ultimately to the benefit of Rostam to find his steed and create a progeny, is an important element, especially when compared to Vis, whose use of sexual agency is not necessarily to the benefit of the patriarchal crown and is therefore unauthorized.

Sudābe

The third and possibly most iconic female figure from the *Šāhnāme* in this analysis is the princess of Hāmāvarān (Yemen) and King Keykāvus's queen, Sudābe.[124] Her part in the *Šāhnāme* is unique in that she plays significant, albeit contrasting, roles in more than just one tale. We first encounter Sudābe after Keykāvus's second war with and defeat of the king of Hāmāvarān, when the princess's presence is made known to the Iranian king:

وزان پس به کاوس گوینده گفت که او را دختری دارد اندر نهفت
که از سرو بالاش زیباترست ز مشک سیه بر سرش افسرست
به بالا بلند و به گیسو کمند زبانش چو خنجر، لبانش چو قند
بهشتست آراسته پُرنگار چو خورشید تابان به خرّم بهار
نشاید که باشد جز از جفت شاه که نیکو بود شاه را جفت ماه

"And thereafter the speaker said unto Kāvus
That he [the king of Hāmāvarān] has a daughter hidden [in his harem],
Who is more beautiful than the tall cypress
[And] upon whose head is a crown of ebony musk.
In stature she is tall and her hair lasso-like;
Her tongue like a dagger, her lips like sugar.
She is a heaven, adorned in many designs
Like the radiant sun to verdant spring.
She is not worthy of being anything but the king's pair
For it befits the king to be paired with the moon!"[125]

Upon hearing of Sudābe, Kāvus's heart is moved and he sends a messenger to the king of Hāmāvarān to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. While distressed at hearing such a proposal,

[124] As Khaleghi-Motlagh mentions in *Women in the Shāhnāmeh* and as he renders it in his edited volumes of the *Šāhnāme*, the correct form of Sudābe's name is actually Sudāve. However, as this original form of her name is uncommon in Modern Persian to the extent that even Khaleghi-Motlagh himself refers to this character as "Sūdābeh" in his own analytical texts, I have chosen to likewise refer to her as Sudābe, both in my translations and in my analyses. For more on the etymology and history of the name Sudāve/Sudābe, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 34, n. 45.
[125] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 72, vv. 73–77.

the king, considering he has just lost two wars to Kāvus, is not in a position to deny this unwieldy request, and so is forced to concede. He nevertheless informs Sudābe of Kāvus's intentions in the hopes that she will deny the proposal and give him a better reason to attempt to hinder Kāvus's advances.[126] To the king of Hāmāvarān's great dismay, however, his daughter does not turn down the offer, but instead welcomes it with interest. Ferdowsi writes:

بدو گفت سوداوه: گر چاره نیست ازو بهتر امروز غمخواره نیست
[کسی کو بود شهریار جهان بر و بوم خواهد همی از مهان]
ز پیوند با او چه باشی دُژم؟ کسی نشمرد شادمانی به غم
بدانست سالار هاماوران که سوداوه را آن نیامد گران

"Sudābe said to him, 'If there is no recourse,
Then there is none better than him to partake of our sorrows today.
[The one who is the ruler of the world
Always asks the grandees for lot and land;]
[So] why are you grieved by [the thought of] a union with him?
No one counts [a cause for] joy with sorrow!'
[Thus] the King of Hāmāvarān knew
That this [news] did not sit heavily upon Sudābe's heart."[127]

Left with no choice, the king of Hāmāvarān consents to the marriage. After much celebration and the payment of a large dowry, Sudābe is sent to Kāvus, who upon seeing her deems her worthy of him and marries her according to the laws of the Iranian religion.[128] Ferdowsi writes:

سزا دید سوداوه را جفت خویش ببستند کاوین بر آیین و کیش
وزان پس بدو گفت: چون دیدمت به مشکوی زرّین پسندیدمت

"He saw Sudābe to be a match worthy of himself
[And thus] they wedded by the custom and religion.

[126] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 72–74, vv. 78–106.
[127] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 74, vv. 107–10.
[128] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 74–76, vv. 111–25.

Thereafter he said to her, ‘When I saw you, [instantly,]
I chose you to [reign over my] gilded harem!’”[129]

A week later, Kāvus receives an invitation from his new father-in-law asking Kāvus to honor the king with his presence and inviting him to be his guest in Hāmāvarān. Sudābe at once recognizes her father’s ruse and warns her husband that this is all a trap to capture the king and to return Sudābe back to her homeland.[130] Kāvus pays no heed to Sudābe’s warning, however:

ز سوداوه گفتار باور نکرد که کم داشت زیشان کسی را به مرد

“He believed not Sudābe’s words
For he counted very few of them (women) as [equal] to men”[131]

Kāvus and his men enjoy a week of merrymaking and pleasure in Hāmāvarān, only to be arrested one night by the king’s command and imprisoned in a high tower. The king of Hāmāvarān then orders Sudābe to be returned to her home.[132] When Sudābe lays eyes upon the female relatives who have come to collect her, she breaks into a fit of fury and grief:

چو سوداوه پوشیدگان را بدید به تن جامه‌ی خسروی بردرید
به مُشکین کمند اندرآویخت چنگ به فندق دو گل را به خون داد رنگ
بدیشان چنین گفت کین کارکرد ستوده ندارد مردان مرد
چرا روز جنگش نکردید بند که جامه‌ش زره بود و تختش سمند
فرستادگان را سگان کرد نام سمن کرد پُر خون از آن ننگ و نام
جدایی نخواهم ز کاوس— گفت— وُگر چه بود خاک ما را نهفت
چو کاوس را بند باید کشید مرا بی گنه سر بباید برید

“When Sudābe saw the veiled ones
She tore the regal dress from her body;
She pulled her musk-scented locks

[129] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 76, vv. 124–25.
[130] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 76–77, vv. 126–35.
[131] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 77, v. 136.
[132] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 77–79, vv. 146–67.

And with her nails she painted her face with [her own] blood.
Thus she said to them, 'This deed
Is unbefitting of true men!
Why did you not capture him on the day of war,
When his dress was a coat of mail and his throne a steed!'
She called the messengers dogs
And bloodied her face because of that shame.
'I want no separation from Kāvus,' she said,
'Even if we are interred into the earth!
If Kāvus is to be captive,
[Then] I, an innocent, shall be decapitated!'"[133]

Hearing of Sudābe's reaction, the King of Hāmāvarān is both hurt and angered, and orders that his daughter be imprisoned along with her husband.[134] News soon spreads across Iran and its neighboring lands that the king has been made captive and the throne left empty. Seizing this opportunity, the king of Turān—Afrāsiyāb—begins a series of attacks against Iran, which are ultimately crushed by Rostam. Rostam then writes to the king of Hāmāvarān, asking him to free Kāvus and his company or go to war. Sudābe's father refuses to free them and Rostam heads to the kingdom of Hāmāvarān with his army, via the sea. The king of Hāmāvarān, with the support of the Egyptians and the Berbers, goes into battle against Rostam, who eventually defeats them all. Left without recourse, the King of Hāmāvarān then returns Kāvus and his company, along with opulent jewels and gifts, back to Iran. From then on, Kāvus holds Sudābe in the highest regards, as she had chosen her husband over her father and had remained his companion throughout his imprisonment in Hāmāvarān.[135]

[133] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 79–80, vv. 168–76. It is interesting to note that given that Sudābe is ultimately decapitated by Rostam, one could read this line both as foreshadowing what shall befall her and, quite unorthodoxly, perhaps as Ferdowsi's way of condemning the ultimate murder of Sudābe at the hands of Rostam.
[134] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 80, vv. 176–79.
[135] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 80–94, vv. 181–356. The first part of the Sudābe story is the embodiment of Davis' theory that foreign women are allowed (or even encouraged!) to defy their fathers and menfolk and turn their

Unlike her literary predecessors—Rudābe and Tahmine, who play significant roles in a single anecdote of the *Šāhnāme*—Sudābe appears again, after the tale of Keykāvus's wars against Hāmāvarān, as a key figure in another story for which she is most remembered: the tale of Sudābe and Siyāvoš. Siyāvoš, the estranged son of Kāvus from a non-royal wife, was raised by Rostam and is famous for his beauty and virtue.[136] Upon laying eyes on him when he returns to his father's court, Sudābe falls madly in love.[137] So that she can hold company with him in private, Sudābe sends Siyāvoš a message, saying that it would not be "strange" were he to pay an unplanned visit to the harem. Siyāvoš responds to the messenger, saying:

بدو گفت: مرد شبستان نیَم مجویم، که با بند و دستان نیَم

"He said unto her, 'I am not a man of the harem.
Seek me not, for I am not one for tricks and ruses!'"[138]

When it becomes clear that Siyāvoš will not accept her invitation on his own, Sudābe suggests to Kāvus to invite his son into her harem, using her daughters' keenness to meet their distinguished brother as her excuse. The king is gladdened by the idea:

بدو گفت شاه: این سَخُن درخورست برو بر ترا مهر صد مادرست

"To her said the king, 'This is a worthy suggestion.
You show him the love of a hundred mothers!'"[139]

He thus exhorts Siyāvoš to pay his stepmother and stepsisters a visit, so that they may delight in his presence and praise his beauty. Siyāvoš, aware of his father's fickle and distrustful nature,

back on their culture and country as long as it is to the benefit of the Iranian crown and lands, while the Iranian woman should *never* commit such a sin. See Davis 2007, 73–74.

[136] Siyāvoš is at times also referred to by an older form of his name, Siyāvaḵš, in the text.

[137] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 211, vv. 133–34.

[138] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 212, vv. 137–38.

[139] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 212, v. 144.

suspects the invitation may be a test. He also senses that Sudābe's intentions are not pure. Though he declines at first, his father's insistence makes him realize that he has little choice but to accept.[140] The next day Siyāvoš enters the harem, where he is greeted by his step-sisters with much pomp and glory and ultimately by Sudābe, who holds him in a tight embrace for a long while and covers his face and eyes in kisses.[141] Ferdowsi writes:

سیاوُش بدانست کان مهر چیست چُنان دوستی نَز ره ایزدیست

"Siyāvoš knew what that love was;
That such affection was not from the godly path."[142]

That night Kāvus asks Sudābe her opinion of Siyāvoš, to which she responds favorably and suggests that he should be wedded to one of her daughters, as a means to keep Kāvus's lineage pure.[143] Delighted by the idea of Siyāvoš marrying, the king tells the prince in private the following day that he should look in the harems of the companion-warriors of the court as well. Gladdened by the opportunity to choose a wife who will not be linked to Sudābe, Siyāvoš agrees to the suggestion.[144] The next day Sudābe once again calls Siyāvoš forth to the harem and, parading her daughters before him, asks him to choose one as his companion. None of the girls catch Siyāvoš's eye and once they have all been dismissed, Sudābe seizes her chance:

بدو گفت: خورشید با ماه نو، گر ایدونک بینند بر گاه نو،
نباشد شگفت ار شود ماه خوار، تو خورشید داری خود اندر کنار
کسی کو چو من دید بر تخت عاج ز یاقوت و پیروزه بر سرش تاج
نباشد شگفت ار به مه ننگرد کسی را به خوبی به کس نشمرد
من اینک به پیش تو استاده‌ام تن و جانِ روشن ترا داده‌ام
ز من هر چه خواهی، همه کام تو برآید، نپیچم سر از دام تو

[140] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 213–14, vv. 150–66.
[141] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 215–16, vv. 179–195.
[142] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 216, v. 196.
[143] For more on *xwēdōdah*, the ancient Iranian practice of marrying one's next-of-kin, see Skjærvø 2013.
[144] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 217–18, vv. 220–39.

سرش تنگ بگرفت و یک بوسه چاک بداد و نبود آگه از شرم و باک
رُخان سیاوُش چو گل شد ز شرم بیاراست مژگان به خوناب گرم
چُنین گفت با دل که از راه دیو مرا دور دارای گیهان خدیو
نه من با پدر بی‌وفایی کنم نه با اَهرمَن آشنایی کنم
وُگر سرد گویم بدین شوخ چشم بجوشد دلَش، گرم گردد ز خشم
یکی جادوی سازد اندر نهان بدو بگرود شهریار جهان

"She said to him, 'If one were to see the sun and the new moon
At once upon the early horizon,
It would not be strange for the moon to appear inferior;
You have the sun itself by your side!
He who sees one like me [seated] upon the ivory throne
With a crown of rubies and turquoise upon her head,
Cannot be blamed for not gazing upon the moon
And for not considering another as worthy.
Now, I stand before you,
And have bestowed upon you my bright body and soul!
Whatever you seek from me will be yours;
I will not flee from your trap!'
She held his head tightly and a quick kiss
She planted on his lips, unaware of shame or fear.
From shame Siyāvoš's cheeks blushed as roses
[And] he adorned his lashes with tears.
Thus he said, in his heart, 'From the path of the demon
Keep me far, O Lord of the World!
I will neither betray my father
Nor associate with the devil (*Ahreman*)!
And if I reply coldly to this wanton one,
Her heart will well up [and] she'll boil with rage.
She'll conjure some magic in secret
And the king of the world (Keykāvus) will follow suit.'"[145]

[145] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 220–21, vv. 266–83. Here Sudābe is playing with common tropes used to describe the beautiful beloved in Persian poetry: the sun and the moon. Referring to herself as the sun, she juxtaposes her own beauty with that of her daughters and tells Siyāvoš that it would only make sense that none of her daughters

To avoid Sudābe's wrath, Siyāvoš attempts to diffuse the situation by paying compliments to Sudābe, comparing her to the sun, who is only fit for the king. He tells her that one of her daughters would suffice him. Sudābe is not pleased, but as Kāvus suddenly enters the scene, she uses the chance to tell him that Siyāvoš has agreed to marry none other than one of her daughters and they all disperse. With her burning passion left unsatisfied and anxious that Siyāvoš may abuse the feelings she has divulged, Sudābe vows to either have her way with the young prince or to slander and degrade him before the king and his council.[146]

The next day, Sudābe again calls Siyāvoš forth and makes another attempt at seducing him, not only with flirtatious advances, but also with pleas, promises of priceless jewels, and threats that she will ruin his prospects for kingship and abase him before his father if he does not abide by her wishes:

بهانه چه داری که از مهر من بپیچی ز بالای و از چهر من
که من تا تو را دیده‌ام، برده‌ام، خروشان و جوشان و آزَرده‌ام
همی روز روشن نبینم ز درد بر آنم که خورشید شد لاژورد
یکی شاد کن در نهانی مرا ببخشای روز جوانی مرا
فزون زان که دادت جهاندارشاه بیارایمت یاره و تاج و گاه
اگر سر بپیچی ز فرمان من نیاید دلت سوی پیمان من
کنم بر تو این پادشاهی تباه شود تیره روی تو بر چشم شاه

"'What is your reason for escaping my love
And turning away from my body and face?
For I have been your slave [from] the instant I saw you,
Lamenting, angry, and vexed.
Out of pain I fail to see the light of day
And think that the sun has turned blue.

(the moons) have caught his eye, when an adorned sun like herself is standing before him. She is thus at once praising and magnifying her own beauty and coyly placing herself at the forefront of his (and the reader's) attention.

[146] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 221–23, vv. 284–306.

Pleasure me—just once!—in secret;
Bestow upon me the days of youth!
More than that which the king of the world has given you
I shall adorn you with cuffs, crown, and throne.
But if you stray from my command,
And your heart accepts not my oath,
I will destroy your [prospect of] rulership
And you will be disgraced before the king!'"[147]

Siyāvoš replies that he will never betray his father thus nor will he dispense with chivalry and wisdom, and that Sudābe, as the queen, is also above such a sin. This comment infuriates Sudābe, who accuses Siyāvoš of wanting to degrade her and she begins to tear her clothes, claw at her own face, and scream. The spectacle draws the attention of the members of court and the king, all of whom hurry to see what has happened. Before Keykāvus, Sudābe accuses Siyāvoš of trying to seduce her and claims that he abused her upon her denial of his advances.[148] She also claims to be pregnant and that this incident almost caused her to have a miscarriage.[149] The king then asks his son to speak and Siyāvoš tells him the truth. Uncertain of whom to believe, Kāvus sniffs Siyāvoš to see if he smells of Sudābe's perfume and wine, and as he does not, he rebukes Sudābe for lying, proclaiming that he should cut her into pieces for such an act. However, his deep affection for her, the memories all of his struggles in Hāmāvarān, the fact that she tended to him day and night in prison there, and the thought of their young children becoming motherless all

[147] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 223–24, vv. 312–19.
[148] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 224–25, vv. 320–37.
[149] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 226, vv. 357–58.

persuade him to reconsider. He thus tells Siyāvoš not to dwell on the incident and to keep it a secret.[150]

With her plans foiled and herself degraded before her husband, Sudābe sets her sights on revenge. She calls forth one of her companions, a pregnant woman versed in black magic, and orders her to concoct a potion that will induce a miscarriage and to then give the stillborn baby to Sudābe in return for jewels and gold. The woman agrees and goes through with the miscarriage, which produces a set of dead twins.[151] She then takes the bodies to Sudābe, who places them on a golden platter by her bed in the middle of the night and then reenacts the miscarriage. Her wails and groans in the middle of the night again draw forth a crowd. Once Kāvus arrives, Sudābe shows him the stillborn twins, chastising him for not believing her and again blaming Siyāvoš's attack as the cause.[152] Once more Kāvus is made suspicious and confounded, but after some time he decides to consult the court astrologers. After looking into the stars, the astrologers conclude that the children did not belong to Sudābe and Kāvus, but to another woman. Kāvus eventually confronts Sudābe with this information, who then accuses the astrologers of lying for fear of Siyāvoš's wrath. If Kāvus refuses to believe her, she tells him, she will place her complaint before the universe. Her tears and distress make Kāvus cry as well. Confused and suspicious again, Kāvus seeks the advice of the magi, who suggest that in order to put his

[150] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 225–27, vv. 342–76.
[151] The use of the motif of twins here is interesting and is one of many manifestations of ancient Iranian religious folklore in the text. Twins were often perceived as a dualistic entity mimicking good and evil, and therefore (the evil) one would be killed after birth. Ferdowsi even hints at this folklore in the text, in v. 390, when he informs us that the witch-companion births twins. He proclaims: دو بچه چنان چون بود دیوزاد \ چه باشد چو دارد ز جادو نژاد (Two babies, as such, since they were born to a demon / What else can one expect, when they descend from a witch?). For more on twins in the mythology and legends of ancient Iran and Iranian religions, see Shayegan 2012, 43–71 and Hinnells 2004.
[152] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 227–29, vv. 377–403.

mind to rest, he should conduct the ultimate test: to have Siyāvoš ride through a massive fire. Kāvus agrees and informs both Sudābe and Siyāvoš of the plan.[153]

The test is carried out on the next day and Siyāvoš, being innocent, passes through the fire unharmed. The masses who have gathered to watch the spectacle, cheer at the young prince's triumph over the fire, while Sudābe tears out her hair and claws at her own face in anger and wails. With his mind put to rest, Kāvus congratulates his son and feasts with him for a few days. Upon his return to the court he calls Sudābe forth, heavily rebukes her, and accuses her of acting shameless and mad to such an extent that no apology can save her now; she deserves only death.[154] Sudābe responds that she would rather die than provoke his anger, and then proceeds to blame Siyāvoš's escape from the fire on "Zāl's magic."[155] Kāvus chastises her for attempting to deceive him again and orders the executioner to prepare the noose from which she will be hanged. As the guards come to take Sudābe to the gallows, however, the women and girls of the harem begin to wail and moan, bringing Kāvus (who really does not want to kill Sudābe) great anguish. Sensing his father's grief and recognizing that Kāvus would eventually blame him for Sudābe's death, Siyāvoš intercedes, asking Kāvus to forgive Sudābe on his behalf so that she may accept and follow the right path. Kāvus, though quite angry with Sudābe, agrees and she lives. However, as the narrator proclaims:

برین نیز بگذشت یک روزگار برو گرم تر شد دل شهریار
چُنان شد دلش باز پر مهر اوی که دیده نبرداشت از چهر اوی
دگر باره با شهریار جهان همی جادوی ساخت اندر نهان
بدان تا شود با سیاوخش بد بدان سان که از گوهر او سَزد
به گفتار او باز شد بدگُمان نکرد ایچ بر کس پدید آن زمان

[153] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 229–33, vv. 405–69.
[154] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 233–37, vv. 470–527.
[155] This is referring to the magical feather Simorḡ bestowed upon Zāl and also serves as a reminder that Siyāvoš was raised by Rostam, and therefore has some sort of access to this magic.

"Thus time passed from the occurrence of this event
And [Kāvus's] heart grew fonder of her.
Once more his heart brimmed so with her love
That he could not withdraw his gaze from her face.
Once again, on the king of the world
She performed [her] magic, in secret.
So that he would distrust Siyāvoš,
As was his [skeptical] nature.
By her words, he became suspicious once again
[But] revealed none [of it] to anyone then."[156]

The story of Siyāvoš continues on from here, but Sudābe's role greatly diminishes. She doesn't speak again for the remainder of the story, and she is only mentioned a couple of times. Siyāvoš ultimately flees to Turān under the pretext of a war that is brewing with Afrāsiyāb, but truly as a means to distance himself from both Sudābe and the ever-suspicious Kāvus. The prince is eventually made to seek shelter in Afrāsiyāb's dominion, from whence he often remembers the abuses Sudābe unleashed on him, thereby forcing him into exile. The innocent Siyāvoš is ultimately betrayed and killed by Afrāsiyāb, an event that marks one of the greatest tragedies of the *Šāhnāme*, parallel to that of Rostam's undignified killing of Sohrāb. When Rostam has received news of Siyāvoš's murder (which arguably amounts to the loss of a second son), he marches to Keykāvus' court, enters the harem, drags a peculiarly passive Sudābe out by her hair, and decapitates her. Ferdowsi paints the scene as such:

چو آمد بر تختِ کاوس کی سرش بود پُر خاک و پُر خاک پی
بدو گفت: خَوی بد ای شهریار پراگندی و تخمت آمد به بار
ترا مهر سوداوه و بدخوی ز سر برگرفت افسر خسروی
نگه کرد کاوس در چهر اوی چُنان اشک خونین و آن مهر اوی

[156] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 239, vv. 547–51.

نداد ایچ پاسخ مرو را ز شرم فروریخت از دیده خوناب گرم
تهمتن برفت از بر تخت اوی سُوی خان سوداوه بنهاد روی
ز پرده به گیسوش بیرون کشید ز تخت بزرگیش در خون کشید
به خنجر به دو نیمه کردش به راه نجنبید بر تخت کاوس شاه
بیامد به درگاه با سوگ و درد پُر از خون دو دیده، دو رخسار زرد
همه شهر ایران به ماتم شدند پُر از درد نزدیک رستم شدند

"When he (Rostam) came upon the throne of Kāvus, the king,
His head was filled with grief and he was covered in dust from the journey.
He said unto him, 'You sowed evil, O king,
And now your seeds have born [their] fruit!
Love of Sudābe and ill-temperedness
Snatched the kingly diadem from your head!'
Kāvus looked unto his face,
at his bloodied tears and [beheld] his love,
[And] answered him not, out of shame,
[But only] shed tears.
Tahamtan (Rostam) departed from [Kāvus'] throne
And set his sight on Sudābe's abode.
From behind the veil, he dragged her out by her hair,
[And] from her grand throne he drew her into [her own] blood.
With a dagger he split her in twain, on the path,
[While] Kāvus, the king, stirred not upon the throne.
[Rostam] returned unto the throne, in grief and pain,
His eyes filled with blood, his cheeks sallowed.
All of Irān mourned,
And came unto Rostam, filled with pain."[157]

[157] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 382, vv. 40–63.

Analysis

Magic

When introducing Sudābe's in the tales of Keykāvus's wars with Hāmāvarān, Ferdowsi's description of her physical attributes does not veer far from typical ideals of beauty, like the depictions of Rudābe and Tahmine: she is taller and fairer than a cypress tree, her hair has the color and scent of musk, her lips are as sweet as sugar, and she is likened unto the sun and spring.[158] One image used to describe only Sudābe, however, is that of her tongue representing a dagger:

زبانش چو خنجر، لبانش چو قند

"Her tongue like a dagger, her lips like sugar"[159]

This image appears long before Siyāvoš enters the storyline and in a tale where we see Sudābe represented only as a fiercely loyal and loving wife, a woman who would prefer imprisonment alongside her husband over returning to her father's palace.[160] And while the image is most likely meant to symbolize her eloquence and the power of her voice, it actually proves quite prophetic of what will follow, both within this particular tale and for the women of the epic romance genre in general. In Sudābe's case, she is accused on various occasions by both Siyāvoš and the narrator of performing black magic (*jādu*) as a means to get her way.[161] However, we are never actually presented with a scene in which Sudābe practices this magic and, aside from the verbal accusations brought against her, no proof of these powers exists. The only mention of "black magic" occurs when Sudābe asks her pregnant companion (whom we are told has magical powers) to create a

[158] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 72, vv. 74–76.
[159] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 72, v. 75.
[160] Although it is necessary to also ask how much of Sudābe's behavior stems from true love and how much of it stems from a desire to protect her autonomy as queen of Iran and not simply the princess of Hāmāvarān. It could very well be that Sudābe sees the opportunity to become Kāvus' wife as a way to gain access to greater power and to become independent of her father, which is why she is quite willing to marry him, even though he is her father's enemy. It is also suggested by some, however, that the two stories featuring Sudābe were originally about two different women, whom Ferdowsi combined into one character. For more on this, see Melville 2011, 72–83.
[161] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 221, v. 282; 230, v. 417.

concoction that would induce a miscarriage so that Sudābe can deceive Kāvus into believing that she had been pregnant, herself. This scene clearly shows that Sudābe cannot perform "magic" independently and needs her companion's help. Likewise, the companion's abortion might not be considered an act of magic but rather an act of deviance. Thus we can glean that Sudābe's "black magic" does not refer to spells and talismans, but rather to her mastery of words/language (here represented by the tongue) as a means to achieve her ambitions and to create chaos and disarray. Sudābe ultimately uses this power to manipulate Kāvus, fuel his suspicions, and exercise a charm-like control over him to the extent that he becomes willing to choose her over his own son. It can thus be argued that Sudābe's tongue functions not only as her tool for "black magic," but also as the figurative weapon with which she eventually kills Siyāvoš. Ironically, this same tool eventually kills Sudābe, herself, as well.

On a larger scale, Sudābe embodies the seed of an art and an accusation that will continue its association with women of the epic romance genre in later tales. As I will argue in chapter two, the "black magic" of which Širin is also accused later in the *Šāhnāme* is none other than her power of eloquence and conviction. This "stain" on the female character similarly follows the character of Vis in Gorgāni's poem (albeit in the form of composition, not speech). These examples, then, illustrate from the get-go that the accusations of "magic" against such women are in fact allegations against the well-honed oratory and composition skills that grant them the power to convince and pursue. And while some male characters certainly possess such powers as well, their use of these tools is not characterized as magic, perhaps because it does not deviate from or transgress the conventions of their gender.[162] In his article on women of the *Šāhnāme*, Dick Davis argues that

[162] One character who offers a complementary counter example to this model in the *Šāhnāme* is the later figure of Gordiye, the sister of Ḵosrow Parviz's treacherous general Bahrām Čubin, who attempts to convince her brother in vain not to rise up against the Sasanian king. In her tale Gordiye offers a stirring speech, which falls on deaf ears and comes to naught when her brother continues with his rebellion and is ultimately killed. Gordiye is "rewarded" then

"Despite her fidelity to her dead husband…and the elaborate descriptions of her gorgeous finery and beauty, Ferdowsi's Shirin does not wholly escape her Sudabeh-like associations; that is, as a femme-fatale, whose hold over the king has something sinister and unsavory about it. It remained for Nezami, almost two hundred years later, to vindicate her character…"[163] While I disagree with his statement that Ferdowsi's Širin still "has something sinister and unsavory about" her by the end of Ferdowsi's tale (see chapter two), it's worth noting that even Davis identifies a link between the characters of Sudābe and Širin in Ferdowsi's epic. Both women face accusations of committing a trespass when exercising their ability to dictate men's behavior through their power of speech.

Demoness of Deception and Lies

In addition to the accusation of dabbling in black magic in her tale with Siyāvoš, Sudābe is also referred to as a devil (*ahreman*), a demon (*div*), and a wanton (*šuḵ-čašm*) by Siyāvoš.[164] While confiding in her companion, Sudābe herself also admits to utilizing lies and ruses as a means to deceive Kāvus and destroy Siyāvoš:

مگر کین چُنین بند و چندین دروغ بدین بچّگان تو گیرد فروغ
به کاوس گویم که این از منست چُنین کشتهٔ ریمن آهَرمَنست

"So that such ruses and [these] few lies
May come to fruition, through your offsprings.
I shall tell Kāvus that these are mine
And that such is the filth born of Āharman's deeds!"[165]

with becoming one of the many wives in Ḵosrow's harem. As Davis declares, "The system she defends takes her to its bosom as it were, but in so doing obliterates her individuality" (Davis 2007, 83). Gordiye is never accused of practicing black magic because of her strong oratory skills, I believe, for three reasons: her speech is in favor of Iran and the Iranian crown; her speech does not yield any fruit (Bahrām still rebells); and she is, as Davis argues, ultimately swallowed up by the same system that she defends and her individuality is obliterated.

[163] Davis 2007, 84.

[164] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 221, vv. 280–81.

[165] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 228, vv. 384–85.

Likewise, detailed references to her physical beauty and the natural allure of her face are less prevalent in the second tale and are instead replaced with more elaborate descriptions of her beautiful adornments, her throne, her jewelry, and her harem:

سیاوُش چو بمیانِ ایوان رسید یکی تختِ زرّینِ رخشنده دید
بروبر ز پیروزه کرده نگار به دیبا بیاراسته شاهوار
بر آن تخت سوداوه‌ی مامروی بسان بهشتی پُر از رنگ و بوی
نشسته چو تابان سُهیل یمن سرِ زلفِ جعدش سراسر شکن
یکی تاج بر سر نِهاده بلند فروهشته تا پای مُشکین کمند
پرستار نعلین زرّین به دست به پای ایستاده، سر افگنده پست

"Once Siyāvoš reached the center of the palace
He beheld a shining, golden throne;
Decorated with turquoise
And regally adorned in silk.
Upon that throne, moon-faced Sudābe,
Like a heaven, perfumed and painted,
Was seated, like the glowing star of Yemen,
Her curled hair, all twists and turns.
A great crown, placed upon her head,
Her musken locks flowing down to her feet.
[Her] maidservant, golden slippers in hand,
Waiting upon her, with a bowed head."[166]

This shift of focus from Sudābe's natural beauty to an affected beauty created by the adornment of both her body and her space highlights the fact that the two tales associated with her represent an evolution. The first showcases her youth, when her natural beauty is manifest, while the second represents her at a riper time, when adornments may serve as an artifice to create or mimic the "fading" beauty of her youth. The adornments utilized by her in the second half act as a means of seduction and are therefore equal to artifice and perhaps even magic. Sudābe's beauty-by-

[166] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 215, vv. 185–90.

adornment in her second story stands in stark contrast to Rudābe's adorned appearance before her father, as discussed earlier. For the young Rudābe this embellished beauty acts as an antithesis to modesty and illustrates her rebellion against a patriarchal system that deems a good daughter as one who appears demure and subdued, especially when she has already committed the transgression of secretly taking a lover. For Sudābe, however, this is not the case. Such a behavior may be interpreted as the queen's attempt to cover up an otherwise ugly and foul truth. Such an act mirrors Sudābe's attempts at hiding her egregious behavior with lies.

Additionally, Kāvus, in his dialogues with Siyāvoš, refers to Sudābe's love for Siyāvoš as that of a "hundred mothers'" for their sons (therefore drawing the omniscient reader's attention to the vileness of her actual lust).[167] Meanwhile, Siyāvoš and Ferdowsi openly characterize Sudābe's affection for her stepson as unnatural and ungodly.[168] These descriptions culminate in an image of Sudābe that bears less of a resemblance to Rudābe or Tahmine than to the mythological Drauga, the old Iranian demoness of the lie and deception created by and at the service of Ahreman, who would appear in the form of a woman and harp upon licentious men.[169] Considering Sudābe from this angle also allows for an alternative interpretation of Sudābe's affiliations with black magic as a manifestation of an *ahremanian* demoness.

Despite these departures, Sudābe still represents an amalgam of Rudābe and Tahmine's key attributes. She relies on both her strong sense of determination and boldness (like Rudābe) as well as her sexuality and wisdom (like Tahmine) as a source of agency. While Rudābe and Tahmine achieve victories by the end of their tales, however, Sudābe faces punishment and ultimately annihilation. These consequences come to pass not only because of her relentless use

[167] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 212, v. 144.
[168] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 216, v. 196; 218, v. 233; 221, vv. 279–80; 224, vv. 321–22.
[169] Bane 2012, 123. See also, Kellens 1996. The New Persian term for falsity or lie (*doruḡ*) comes from this root: *drauga-* (Old Iranian) > *drōw* (Middle Persian) > *doruḡ* (New Persian).

of deception through speech (what amounts to her "black magic," as previously argued), but also because she betrays her husband and, more importantly, transgresses the bounds of nature when she pursues her stepson in order to satisfy her sexual desires.[170] Unlike her counterparts, she also forces herself upon her beloved, thereby crossing, once again, the threshold from whence the enforcement of her agency is seen as a threat in a patriarchal system.[171]

Maniže

Moving into the heart of Turānian territory brings us to another key female character of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*, a woman who at once inherits some of the qualities of her predecessors and expands upon them: Maniže; the princess of Turān, daughter of the Iranian kings' arch-nemesis, Afrāsiyāb, and the ardent lover of the Iranian hero, Bižan. After helping the Armenians on behalf of the king of Iran (Keyḵosrow) by driving off the boars that had attacked Armenian lands, Bižan is tricked by his hero-companion Gorgin into entering Turānian territory in search of Afrāsiyāb's beautiful daughter, Maniže.[172] Bižan embarks upon Turān with the aim of taking Maniže and other Turānian beauties captive and return to Keyḵosrow to further impress him. However, once Bižan sets eyes on Maniže, who has set up camp in a lush, vast field, he falls desperately in love with her.[173] Maniže, in reciprocation of his feelings, invites Bižan to be her guest in the encampment,

[170] It is interesting to note here that while Ferdowsi has presumably erased any references to incest, which may have been an original part of some of the *Šāhnāme*'s tales, given their ancient Iranian origins, Gorgāni (as we shall see in chapter three) still preserves these elements in his *Vis o Rāmin*. Even the world of *Vis o Rāmin*, however, does not include the sexual attraction of a mother to her son. While a scene of sexual intercourse between Rāmin and the Nanny (who is somewhat like his mother) does exist, the encounter is instigated by Rāmin (as a means to get Vis) and the blame is therefore not cast upon the maternal figure. In light of this, therefore, it becomes clear that Sudābe's action can be seen as even more of a transgression and she is thus punished with a brutal death. The scenario of an older woman (albeit not a mother) pursuing a younger man is again revived in Persian romance poetry in Jāmi's *Yusof o Zoleyḵā* (1483 CE), a tale rooted in the Old Testament and the Quran. This tale, however, takes on a much more mystical hue with a very different outcome.
[171] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 221, v. 277; 224, v. 323.
[172] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 307–15, vv. 46–146.
[173] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 315–17, vv. 147–66.

where they spend three unforgettable days together.[174] Upon the hour of departure, Maniže realizes that she cannot be without Bižan. In order to hide her love from her father, who abhors the Iranians, Maniže drugs Bižan and smuggles him into her apartment among her litter.[175] Upon awakening from his slumber, Bižan realizes, much to his horror, that he has been secretly brought to Afrāsiyāb's palace, and fears that he may never escape. Maniže counsels him not to be grieved by that which has not yet and may never come to pass and assures him that even warriors must enjoy life. The two then spend their days together in merrymaking.[176]

Soon, however, Afrāsiyāb hears about the presence of an Iranian in his palace and orders his immediate arrest.[177] Bižan is forcefully taken from Maniže's apartment and initially sentenced to death by the noose, before being rescued by Pirān (Afrāsiyāb's wise counselor). Pirān warns Afrāsiyāb that such an act would only repeat the horrors of the murder of Siyāvoš and incite Iran to wage a war from which Turān will never recover. Afrāsiyāb insists that he cannot let Bižan return to Iran, as the man has been acquainted with his daughter and therefore sullied his honor.[178] He therefore condemns Bižan to eternal imprisonment in a well that is covered by a magically heavy stone.[179] Maniže, meanwhile, is robbed of her crown and possessions, thrown out of her dwelling, and forced to live in the woods, from whence she visits Bižan's well and tends to him.[180]

By glancing into his world-seeing cup (Jām-e Jam), Keyḵosrow soon discovers Bižan's whereabouts and enlists the services of Rostam, the crown-bestower and crown-keeper.[181] Rostam obliges and, disguised as a jeweler, heads to Turān in the company of a number of other warriors.

[174] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 317–20, vv. 167–207.
[175] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 320, vv. 208–15.
[176] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 321, vv. 216–27.
[177] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 322–23, vv. 228–53.
[178] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 323–33, vv. 254–379.
[179] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 333–34, vv. 380–87.
[180] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 334–35, vv. 388–408.
[181] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 345–68, vv. 562–857.

There, he manages to set up an encampment near Afrāsiyāb's palace, from where he can carry out his plan to rescue Bižan.[182] Upon hearing of the arrival of an Iranian jeweler, Maniže rushes to meet him in the hopes that he may have some news of the Iranians' plans to save Bižan. Rostam at first brushes Maniže and her probing questions aside and attempts to chase her off. Once she reveals herself to him, however, and tells him of Bižan's dire conditions, Rostam hides a turquoise ring with his name engraved on the stone in some food and gives it to her to take to the imprisoned warrior.[183]

Maniže rushes back to Bižan with news of the newly arrived Iranian merchant and lowers the food into the well. Upon opening the package of food Bižan discovers Rostam's signet ring and laughs out loud, compelling Maniže to question him. He replies that he must not tell her, as women cannot be trusted with secrets. At this Maniže rebukes him for not trusting her after all that she has done for him. He apologizes and explains that the merchant is there to save him. He then asks her to return to the merchant and ask if he is indeed the master of Raḵš.[184] Again, Maniže hurries to Rostam and, thanking him, poses the question. Rostam replies that he is indeed the master of Raḵš and that she should light a great fire by Bižan's well immediately after sunset so that he can find them and save Bižan. This is done and Rostam frees Bižan from his imprisonment, on the condition that he forgive the repentant Gorgin for his trespasses.[185]

From this point on, Maniže no longer plays an active role in the tale. Rostam tells Bižan that he and Maniže should remain in the encampment together, while Rostam and the other warriors attack Afrāsiyāb's palace. Bižan refuses not to partake in the attack with his fellow

[182] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 368–71, vv. 858–908.
[183] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 372–75, vv. 909–58.
[184] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 375–77, vv. 959–99.
[185] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 377–83, vv. 1000–80.

warriors and so sends Maniže off to the encampment along with their belongings.[186] Rostam, Bižan and the others then attack Afrāsiyāb's palace, which leads to a full-blown war the next day.[187] Afrāsiyāb's forces are defeated, and he flees the battlefield to save his life.[188] The warriors and Maniže then return to Iran, where Rostam and his victory are greatly celebrated by Keyḵosrow.[189] After the jubilation and Rostam's departure back to Zābolestān, the king calls upon Bižan and asks him to recount all the hardships he endured while in Turān. Upon hearing of the distress that Maniže has faced, Keyḵosrow provides Bižan with a diadem along with fine dresses, gold, servants, carpets and other gifts, and commands that he take them to Maniže. He then entreats Bižan not to chastise her or treat her coldly, to remember all that she has endured on his account, and to spend the rest of his days with her in happiness.[190]

Analysis

Just as Tahmine shares her predecessor Rudābe's qualities of boldness and determination, Maniže too displays both Rudābe's qualities and Tahmine's manipulation of her sexuality to bring her desires to fruition. These attributes are first made apparent when Maniže initiates contact with Bižan via her nursemaid. As Ferdowsi relates:

به پرده درون دخت پوشیده روی بجنبید مهرش، نپوشید ازوی
فرستاد مر دایه را چون نوند که رو زیر آن شاخ سرو بلند
نگه کن که آن ماه‌دیدار کیست سیاوُش گُمانم که هست، ار پریست
بپرسش که چون آمدی ایدرا؟ نیایی بدین جشنگاه اندرا؟
پری‌زاده‌یی گر سیاوخشیا؟ که دل‌ها به مهرت همی بخشیا

[186] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 383, vv. 1081–88.
[187] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 384–86, vv. 1089–125.
[188] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 386–91, vv. 1126–200.
[189] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 392–96, vv. 1201–60.
[190] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 396–97, vv. 1261–78.

"Behind the [tent's] curtain, the veiled girl
Fell in love and hid it not from him.
She sent her nursemaid, like a swift steed
Saying, 'Go by the bough of that tall cypress,
Look to see who that moon-faced [beauty] is;
Methinks it's Siyāvoš, if not a sprite!
Ask him, "Why have you come hither?
Won't you come join our celebration?
Are you sprite-born, O Siyāvaḵš,
That you thus surrender all hearts to your love?'"[191]

Like Rudābe and Tahmine, Maniže sets in motion the seduction of her male counterpart and becomes—to borrow from Cixous—the agent of "activity" in her pursuit of a man she deems beautiful. Upon laying eyes on Bižan she quickly dispatches her nursemaid to bring back news of this "moon-faced" beauty. She praises and flatters him, asking questions which are meant to impress him and stroke his ego more than anything else. This further positions her as an active agent and Bižan as the passive recipient. She asks if he is Siyāvoš, a man renowned for his beauty, even though she knows this cannot be the case, given that her own father killed Siyāvoš. In doing so, Maniže renders Siyāvoš into a kind of "beauty trope" that she applies to Bižan; an act, which again, further highlights her agency and active nature and situates both Siyāvoš and Bižan as objectifiable figures. This conventionally "masculine" sense of agency is furthered when Maniže welcomes Bižan into her tent by embracing him and undoing his regal belt.[192]

Guile

In addition to the attributes of her predecessors, however, we find in Maniže the pronounced presence of two other characteristics as well, namely guile (as opposed to Sudābe's more malicious

[191] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 317, vv. 170–74.
[192] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 319, v. 197.

"deception") and sacrifice. Maniže is able to exercise resourcefulness and get Bižan to stay with her longer by utilizing her guile. As Ferdowsi states:

سه روز و سه شب شاد بودند بهم گرفته برو خواب و مستی ستم
منیژه چو بیژن دُژم‌روی ماند پرستندگان را بر خویش خواند
چو هَنگام رفتن فراز آمدش به دیدار بیژن نیاز آمدش
بفرمود تا داروی هوش‌بر پرستنده آمیخت بر نوش بر
عَماری بسیچید رفتن به راه مرآن خفته را اندرو جایگاه
ز یکسو نشستنگه کام را دگر ساخته خواب و آرام را
بگسترد کافور بر جای خواب همی ریخت بر چوب صندل گلاب
چُن آمد بنزدیک شهر اندرا بپوشید بر خفته‌بر چادَرا
نهفته به کاخ اندرآمد به شب به بیگانگان هیچ نگشاد لب

"For three days and nights they rejoiced with one another
Until sleep and drunkenness finally took its toll on him.
Like Bižan, Maniže too was saddened [at the thought of separation]
[And] hearkened the nursemaids to her presence.
When the time of departure arrived
Beholding Bižan's face became her [one] desire,
[So] she commanded that the nursemaid mix
a sleep-inducing drug in a nectar-like drink [for him].
A litter was [then] prepared to head on the road
And the slumberer (Bižan) was placed in it;
On one side was made a place for merrymaking
And on the other a place for rest and sleep.
She spread camphor on the side for sleep
And then poured rose-water upon sandalwood.
When she arrived near the city
She covered the slumberer with a sheet.
Secretly she entered the palace at night
And said nothing to those outside her company."[193]

[193] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 320, vv. 207–15.

In Maniže's ruse, we again find an element that arguably borders the magical: a drug that puts Bižan to sleep so that Maniže can sneak him into her abode. Yet it is interesting to note that she never bears the accusation of witchcraft; even when Ferdowsi refers to the soporific mixture, he refers to it as *dāru*, which can be translated as medicine, drug, or remedy.[194] This further demonstrates how only the possession of a well-honed persuasive skill (such as speech or composition) earns women false accusations of witchcraft, and not a supernatural or extraordinary act, alone.

The aforementioned passage also shows that it is specifically the ruse of drugging Bižan that allows Maniže to achieve the otherwise impossible, namely getting Bižan to join her in Afrāsiyāb's palace. The impossibility of such an act can be gleaned in the next passage when Bižan awakens to find himself in the embrace of his beloved, but in Afrāsiyāb's palace. Realizing his whereabouts, the warrior twists in agony and turns to God, complaining of the devil's deeds and begging God to exact revenge upon Gorgin, whose lies ultimately led him into Afrāsiyāb's domain.[195] When Bižan complains before God of the devil's work, however, he does not clarify whether "work" refers to Gorgin's machinations or Maniže's deceit. Regardless, Bižan's words make it known that he would not have committed such an act of his own volition, and therefore Maniže could not have fulfilled her desires by any means other than guile.

Sacrifice

Maniže does not simply represent the face of guile in the *Šāhnāme*, however. Even her cunning behavior pales in comparison to her other defining attribute, namely sacrifice. To express her love for Bižan, Maniže sacrifices family, honor, and wealth. When Afrāsiyāb advises his general, Karsivaz, on how to punish Bižan, he then instructs him on his daughter Maniže's fate:

[194] Wolff 1935, 353: "Arznei; Heilmittel; Mittel."
[195] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 321, vv. 216–23.

وُزآنجا به ایوان آن بدهنر منیژه، کزو ننگ یابد گهر،
برو با سواران و تاراج کن نگون بخت را بی سر و تاج کن
بگوی ای بنفرینِ شوریده‌بخت که بر تو نزیید همی تاج و تخت،
به ننگ از کیان پست کردی سرم به خاک اندرانداختی گوهرم
بر هنه کشانش ببر تا به چاه که در چاه بین آنک دیدی به گاه
بهارش توی، غمگسارش توی بدین تنگ زندان زَوارش توی

"'And from there go to the palace of that ill-virtued
Maniže, of whom [our very] essence is ashamed!
Go with the horsemen and pillage [her palace]
[And] take from that wretch her regal honor and crown!
Tell her, 'O you damned ill-fortuned one,
Whom crown and throne do not become!
In shame you have forever bowed my head
[And] cast my [very] essence to dust!'
Drag her—unveiled!—and take her to the pit;
Say, 'Behold in the pit the one you [once] saw on the throne!
You are his spring, you, his companion,
[And] in this confined prison, you, his attendant!'"[196]

The passage above shows Maniže's father commanding that she be robbed of her position and wealth and mocked, belittled, and punished for loving Bižan. Ferdowsi then goes on to describe how Karsivaz carries out Afrāsiyāb's orders and informs her that attending to the imprisoned Bižan will now remain her lot for eternity.[197] Thus the princess of Turān loses everything at once, even her family. But while Maniže mourns her circumstances, she never leaves Bižan alone, nor does she consider begging her father's forgiveness and forgetting Bižan in order to recover her former royal glory. Instead, she dedicates herself to caring for Bižan, finding him sustenance in the

[196] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 334, vv. 388–93.
[197] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 335, vv. 401–5.

wilderness, and ultimately seeking Iran's help in freeing her beloved.[198] She sacrifices everything to be with Bižan and to help him.

Not only does Ferdowsi discuss Maniže's sacrifice in the text, but Bižan, Keyḵosrow, and Maniže, herself, also clearly attest to her possession of this quality. She refers to it, herself, when Bižan hesitates to share with her the merchant's secret identity out of concern that, as a woman, she cannot hold her tongue. Maniže rebukes him here, reminding him of all that she has done and relinquished for him, and places her complaint before God.[199] Bižan then apologizes to her and entrusts her with the secret. Bižan likewise specifically refers to Maniže's sacrifices when she returns from her second visit to Rostam with the plan for rescuing Bižan. When Maniže shares the plan with Bižan, he tells her to light the signaling fire (as Rostam has commanded), and says:

تو ای دخت رنج‌آزموده ز من فدی کرده جان و دل و چیز و تن
بدین رنج کز من تو برداشتی غمان مرا شادی انگاشتی
بدادی به من گنج و تاجِ گهر جهاندار و خویشان و مام و پدر
اگر یابم از چنگ این اژدها بدین روزگار جوانی رها
بکردار نیکانِ یزدان پرست نپویم به پای و نیازم به دست
بسان پرستار پیشِ کَیان به پاداش نیکت ببندم میان

"'You, O girl who has suffered for my sake,
Sacrificed soul, heart, belongings, and body:
By this pain that you bore on my behalf
You turned my sorrows into joy!
You gave to me treasures and a bejeweled crown,
King, family, mother, and father!
If from the clutches of this dragon I obtain
Freedom in my days of youth,

[198] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 335, vv. 406–08.
[199] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 376–77, vv. 984–90. Maniže's response to Bižan's unjust accusation—which tends to be a common accusation made against women in the classical world—once again illustrates what many previous critics have proclaimed; namely, that while there are some misogynistic statements in Ferdowsi's epic, he actually contradicts and therefore nullifies many of these falsities through his creation of extremely admirable female characters. See Kiyā 1992, 3 and Naderpour 1991, 462–66.

In the manner of the God-worshipping, good people
I shall neither withdraw from this world, nor long for anything.
Like a servant before the king,
I will gird up my loins in rewarding you!'"[200]

This passage shows Bižan referring specifically to Maniže as one who has "suffered for [his] sake" and who has "sacrificed [her] soul, heart, belongings, and [even] body" in order to turn his "sorrows into joy." It also confronts the reader with imagery of Maniže as the "active" agent, as a king, and of Bižan as the "passive" party, the servant. The text holds Maniže's sacrifice for Bižan in such high regard that not only does Bižan, a hero, promise to make her pleasure his goal once freed, but even Keyḵosrow—the king of kings— speaks of her sacrifice to Bižan, once he has returned to court. Ferdowsi writes:

چو از کار گُردان بپرداخت شاه به آرام بنشست بر پیشگاه
بفرمود تا بیژن آمدش پیش سخن گفت از آن رنج و تیمار خویش
وزآن تنگ زندان و رنج زوار فراوان سخن گفت با شهریار
چن از گردش روزگاران بد همه داستان پیش خسرو بزد
بپیچید و بخشایش آورد سخت به درد و غم دخت گم بوده بخت
بیاورد صد جامه دیبای روم همه پیکرش گوهر و زرّ بوم
یکی تاج و ده بدره دینار نیز پرستنده و فرش و هرگونه چیز
به بیژن بفرمود کین خواسته ببر سوی ترک روان کاسته
به رنجش مفرسای و سردش مگوی نگر تا چه آوردی او را به روی
تو با او جهان را به شادی گذار نگه کن بدین گردش روزگار

"Once the king had tended to the matters regarding the heroes
In tranquility, he sat upon the throne.
He commanded so that Bižan came before him
[And] spoke of his pain and grief;
And of that confined prison and [his] attendant's pains
He said aplenty to the king.

[200] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 379, vv. 1024–29.

When he had told the king
Of all the wrongs that had come to pass,
[The king] turned [in sadness] and felt great sympathy
For that ill-fortuned girl, who had suffered such pains and sorrows.
He brought a hundred silk Roman dresses,
All golden and studded with gems;
A crown and also ten sacks of coins,
[Along with] maidservants, rugs, and all manners of things!
He commanded Bižan, 'These riches
Take to that tormented Turk.
Add not to her pain and speak not unkindly to her.
See what you have brought upon her!
Spend your days in happiness with her;
[And] behold how this [wheel of] fortune turns…'"[201]

First and foremost, Keyḵosrow's sympathetic reaction to the difficulties Maniže has endured out of love for Bižan illustrates his own greatness as a king; rather than keep himself far removed from the pains of others, he sympathizes with them and takes the necessary actions to help them.[202] More importantly, however, it illustrates the importance of Maniže's sacrifice; for although Keyḵosrow listens to Bižan's complaints about the hardships he has experienced, he only responds to that which the Turānian princess has endured. After he has made certain that Bižan will treat her well from here on forward—as he commands him to do so!—he narrates her experience as a means to teach Bižan (and by default, the listener/reader) a lesson on the fickleness of Fate and the world. Thus, Maniže becomes eternalized in the *Šāhnāme*, not simply as a symbol of guile, but even more so as a symbol of sacrifice for the sake of love.

[201] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 3: 396, vv. 1261–70.
[202] This stands in stark contrast to Keykāvus, for example, who in his arrogance denies Rostam—the one who has time and time again saved his life and his crown—a vial of his own life-saving elixir, when the paladin begs him for his assistance after having wrongly wounded his own son, Sohrāb. In his obstinance and ignorance Keykāvus allows the greatest tragedy of the *Šāhnāme* to occur with Sohrāb's unjust death; a tragedy that returns unto Keykāvus two-fold with the unjust murder of his own innocent son, Siyāvoš, and the murder of his favorite wife and companion, Sudābe.

Concluding Remarks on Women of the Earlier *Šāhnāme*

Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže are by no means the only women in Ferdowsi's epic: the poem abounds with numerous female characters throughout both its mythical and pseudo-historical sections. These four women, however, not only represent some of the most developed female characters of the text, but they also enjoy more autonomy, exercise a deeper level of agency, and show themselves to be strong individuals. They also play key roles in the narrative unfolding of the epic itself and in relation to their male counterparts—the heroes of the *Šāhnāme*—who, in one way or another, owe their very existence to each of these women. More precisely, Rudābe instigates her meeting with Zāl and sees it through, and in so doing bears the epic's most prominent hero, Rostam.[203] Tahmine, too, takes her future into her own hands and, whether through fortune or ruse, achieves her aim of enjoying Rostam's company and bearing their son Sohrāb, who himself becomes a great warrior. Sudābe, arguably the most nefarious female character in the *Šāhnāme*, certainly symbolizes deceit, yet also undoubtedly represents a strong character who, through the collective use of her determination, wisdom, sexual agency and power of persuasion, brings about the downfall of one of the *Šāhnāme*'s most beloved heroes, an event that accounts for one of the epic's greatest tragedies. Maniže demonstrates her agency by sneaking Bižan into Turān and faces an onslaught of difficulties in order to be with her beloved. She also takes on the task of saving Bižan from his impending demise, both by serving as his only link to the outside world during his imprisonment and by liaising with Rostam in plotting their escape from Turān.

[203] Some even argue that Rostam's very name stems from that of Rudābe's: if Rudābe is understood to mean "She of the River Water" (Pahlavi *rōd* (river) + *āb* (water) + *-ag* (>*-e*)), or as Skjærvø argues, Rostam could be understood as "The Strong River" (Pahlavi, *rōd* + *stahm* (power)). See Skjærvø 1998, 159–70. Thus, the hero eternally carries and displays his link to his mother through the name by which he is perpetually remembered, while his tie to his father only appear in his title, "Dastān-e Zāl." For more on the etymology of Rudābe, see Shahbazi 2002. I am indebted to Professor Yuhan Vevaina for guiding me to this definition of Rostam's name.

The key roles carried out by these women not only advance the epic's narrative, but also embody the materialization of their own will and desires as well as the integral part they play in the trajectory of the male heroes' lives. This renders invalid past claims of women's weakness in Ferdowsi's epic.[204] And while this chapter does not fundamentally contradict what many scholars have argued, it brings into relief new aspects of these female characters, drawing on each woman's specific qualities and attributes. What this work contributes to the conversation, therefore, is a detailed analysis of key qualities exhibited by each of these women from the *Šāhnāme*. We see highlighted in Rudābe's character the qualities of determination and boldness, in Tahmine, wisdom and agency through sexuality, in Sudābe, the power of persuasion, and in Maniže, sacrifice and guile. As a result of their unique circumstances and statuses, these characters become greater paragons of women in the text. The attributes they manifest become qualities and virtues that establish a template for other female figures in both the *Šāhnāme* and the epics that follow. As we shall see in the following analyses of Širin and Vis, these are also key qualities that the latter women inherit from their literary predecessors.

While these four women become important figures in the Iranian tradition, it is worth noting that none of them belong to the Persian ethnic and Zoroastrian religious majorities that seem to define "Iranian" in the *Šāhnāme*'s milieu and to which the kings and heroes of the text belong.[205] Although they are still very much connected to Iran, all of them hail from the peripheries of the

[204] In his introduction to *Women of the Shāhnāmeh*, Khaleghi-Motlagh claims that the women of the *Šāhnāme* "are not like those lustrous women in other Persian epic stories that sometimes dare to exercise liberties—and even commit sins—in their golden cages, more so than one would expect from a woman of the Islamic Orient." Although he generally claims some of them to be "lively figures with warmth, courage, intellect, and even a certain degree of independence," on the whole he seems to be somewhat doubtful of how strong and independent some of these women actually are. See Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 19. In a similar vein, but in a much stronger manner, Kiyā tells us that according to the German Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke, women do not enjoy an important status in the *Šāhnāmeh*. Kiyā critiques Nöldeke's assumptions about women in the *Šāhnāme* by demonstrating the active roles that women often assume in Ferdowsi's masterpiece. See Kiyā 1992, 1.

[205] For more on this issue, see Davis 2007, 69–71.

empire. Rudābe, a descendent of the abhorred snake-king Żaḥḥāk and an "idol worshipper," is the princess of Kābolestān (western Afghanistan); Tahmine is the daughter of a Turānian vassal-king, and therefore Turkic; Sudābe is the princess of Hāmāvarān (Yemen); and Maniže is the daughter of the cousin and archenemy of the Iranians: the king of Turān, Afrāsiyāb, and therefore also a Turkic princess.

As the seed of Żaḥḥāk, Rudābe is automatically affiliated with dark magic.[206] While Ferdowsi himself never explicitly shows Rudābe or her immediate family dabbling in black magic, he does point to the affiliation indirectly. When Sām receives Zāl's letter requesting his assistance in convincing Manučehr to bless his marriage to Rudābe, Sām ponders what the offspring between a man (Zāl) who was raised by a bird (Simorḡ) and a woman born of demons (Rudābe) would be like:

از این مرغ پرورده وان دیوزاد چه گویی چگونه برآید نژاد

> "From this one reared by a bird and the other born of demons
> What race of man do you think will come forth?"[207]

This alienation of Rudābe and her family because they are "demon-born" and different also comes into play at the beginning of the tale of Zāl and Rudābe, when Zāl refuses Mehrāb's invitation to his palace. Zāl cites that the king of kings, Manučehr, would be displeased with such a close interaction between one who is a follower of the Faith and descended from greatness and one who

[206] Professor M. Rahim Shayegan introduced me to this idea during his lectures on the *Šāhnāme* at UCLA. Rostam's supernatural strength and his magical ability to recover from all manners of attacks and defeats may also be attributed to this heritage in magic.

[207] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 208, v. 665. It is interesting to note that in a later conversation, which Sām has with the magi regarding whether or not Zāl and Rudābe's union will be fortuitous, the magi—after gazing into the stars for an answer—reply to Sām with a very similar line but with a positive twist: ازین دو هنرمند پیلی ژیان / بیاید ببندد به مردی میان From these two virtuous ones, a valiant elephant[ine hero] / will come forth and gird his loins in chivalry. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 208, v. 678.

is a worshipper of idols with demonic heritage.[208] As Behrooz Barjasteh Delforooz has argued on the basis of both mythological and linguistic sources, the character of Rudābe could also very well be regarded as a manifestation of the ancient Iranian water goddess Anāhitā, in the epic tradition.[209]If this is indeed the case, this creates yet another link between Rudābe and the supernatural (albeit not necessarily black magic).

Like Rudābe, Tahmine and Maniže too, as argued by Khaleghi-Motlagh, originally bore an affiliation with dark magic. They were, in essence, *pairikā*- ("demoness") whose "magic" seems to have faded by the time they appear in the *Šāhnāme*, even more so than those of their predecessor Rudābe.[210] The origin of the New Persian term *parī* (lit. fairy), *pairikā*- (> *parīg*) denotes a beautiful female form created by Ahreman to draw virtuous men away from the path of righteousness and the worship of Ašā, the deity of truth and justice. In addition to this definition, however, the *pairikā*- may also be a foreign woman who is an infidel.[211] This meaning helps clarify our understanding of these three women as original *pairikā*s: as women of the empire's borderlands, at least one of whom most certainly belongs to a religious tradition other than that of the empire's, they may be seen as somewhat "foreign" and, at times, appear to possess direct or indirect links to the magical. And while Sudābe may not be identifiable as a literary descendent of *pairikā*s, she, too, is most certainly a woman from periphery lands and shares an arguably strong connection with the demoness Drauga. This connection links Sudābe to Rudābe, Tahmine, and Maniže through the possibility of their descent from a magical past.

[208] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 185, vv. 304-19.
[209] Barjasteh Delforooz 2014.
[210] Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 12.
[211] Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 10, n. 75. For a thorough discussion of *pairikā*- and its derivations in various contexts (Old Iranian, Middle Iranian, and New Iranian), see Adhami 2000.

It may be argued that Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže's status as women from the periphery lands affords them the power to control their own futures, to associate more freely with the men with whom they choose to interact, and to assume the same degree of responsibility as their male beloveds (all of whom are renowned heroes) in their respective tales. In addition to the possibility of a direct affiliation with black magic in their characters' forelives, it is also the inexplicable agency that they wield as products of different cultural norms, which is translated into "magic," since it cannot be explained by the Iranian majority. In other words, and to borrow from the terminology of anthropologist Victor Turner, because these women are "liminal" figures—perhaps not entirely human, definitely not entirely "Iranian"—they have the capacity to wield more agency (especially as regards to their bodies and sexuality) and to live their lives as they please (at least until they are wedded to Iranian men). These women stand in stark contrast to their mainland, Iranian female counterparts who, for the most part, must comply with the ordinances of their Iranian, male-dominated society from the very beginning.[212] This notion of peripheral women positioned to trespass male-dominated spheres and become more independent, especially if this independence benefits the male Iranian hero, appears to be a general theme in the *Šāhnāme*. The text seems to approve of headstrong women so long as they are from the borderlands. If they are Iranian or marry into an Iranian identity, however, it becomes less likely that such liberties will be allotted them. And if they transgress this boundary, as illustrated in the case of Sudābe with Siyāvoš, they ultimately face annihilation.

Considering the patterns mentioned above, it is worth tracing the arcs of these women and the roles they play over a long period of time. Ultimately none of these women become archetypal female characters on their own. Nor are they generally remembered and regularly conjured

[212] On Turner's theory of liminality, see Turner 1967, 93–110. On the uses of it in literary theory, see Bhabha 1994. My sincerest gratitude to Professor Amy Malek for guiding me to the anthropological sources.

throughout Persian literary history. It seems as though their peripheral status and association with black magic both assists them, through the freedoms of liminality, but also holds them back from becoming enshrined in the genre as good, memorable archetypes. What is peculiar, however, is that their key qualities—determination, boldness, wisdom, sexuality as agency, persuasion, sacrifice, and guile—do remain intact throughout the progression of the genre and even find their way to the characters of Gorgāni's Vis and Neẓāmi's Širin, one of whom is Iranian and the other Armenian. It is interesting that, while marriage to a "foreign" woman did not traditionally get held in high regard within the Iranian sphere, all of the earliest strong female characters and one of the later archetypal ones are from the borderlands.

The topic of "foreign wives" is one with a lengthy and complex history in the Persian/ Zoroastrian world from which the *Šāhnāme* springs. A section dedicated to *x̱wēdoda* (next-of-kin marriages) in the *Dēnkard* (a text of tenth century knowledge of Zoroastrianism) names next-of-kin marriages as the ideal kinds of union.[213] Another section, however, expounds on the subject of Zoroastrian men marrying foreign women. It reads:

> …When she (the foreign wife) does not get what she wants and she has no other recourse, she calls him bad names and heaps upon him foulness and bad language. She has accumulated by trickery the things she owns. Secrets she divulges. Night and day, she bickers and finds fault with him (her husband), she attacks his parents' household, drags her husband to court, and incites the town against him. She will say: "Release me from this marriage!" and many other various bad, harmful, evil, ugly sins connected with this.[214]

This passage reveals a precedence for regarding "foreign wives" as untrustworthy and "evil," because, unlike mothers and sisters, they can and will speak up, cause trouble, and leave if they feel unhappy, thereby upsetting the long-established patriarchal system. As a result, engagement with foreign women and those from the periphery is highly discouraged. One could even speculate

[213] On the *Dēnkard* (lit. "Acts of the Religion"), see Gignoux 1994.
[214] Skjærvø 2011, 206.

that the women's association with evil and black magic (especially in myths) exists to ensure these marriages will not take place.[215] As wives from the empire's peripheries, they already inhabit a liminal space; their speculative affiliation with black magic and witchcraft enhances this liminality.

As Turner argues, liminal spaces cannot be eternal. As a result, it may be said that, upon marrying, the heroines of the *Šāhnāme* forgo the liminal "rights" that grant them independence. Marriage means that they leave the in-between phase and become officially enveloped by the dominating society. Davis also touches on this matter in his essay on women of the *Šāhnāme* in saying that the text allows for this female transgression precisely because these women will ultimately become "Iranian" through marriage.[216] On a larger scale, it could also be argued that in the second half of the *Šāhnāme*, the women's loss of their vibrant strength and endurance against patriarchal norms might be attributed to this idea that all liminal phases must come to an end; if the women of the earlier period exist in a liminal phase that endows them with strength, the women of the later period have stepped into the third and final stage. Here, it's compulsory that they become obedient actors in a society that caters to and is governed by the heterosexual, male, Iranian king or royal hero.

When analyzed from a wider, more general perspective it becomes clear that liminality not only links certain key female characters of the *Šāhnāme*, it is actually a concept integral to the epic's world order. The entire narrative of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* is activated by the intervention of liminal figures into the non-liminal sphere; it is this interaction that ultimately propels the epic forward. Up until the reign of Jamšid, the story reads like a monotonous account of one king passing the crown to another, while the world remains docile in a state of relative peace; any

[215] On next of kin marriages in ancient Iran, see Skjærvo 2013 and Vevaina 2018. I am indebted to Professor Vevaina for enlightening me on the topic of *kwēdoda* and foreign wives and for introducing me to the aforementioned source.
[216] Davis 2007.

violence that does erupt occurs between different "kinds" (i.e. humans vs. demons).[217] However, the arrival of Jamšid and later of Żaḥḥāk onto the scene, introduces two of the epic's earliest, key liminal figures. As an extremely successful earlier ruler with an irrepressible hubris that costs him his regal glory (*farr-e kayāni*) and dethronement, Jamshid serves as the prime example of a liminal king. He has the capacity to achieve great good for his kingdom and also to heap upon it terrible shame and degradation. Żaḥḥāk offers another such example; it is through his enthronement, long reign of terror, and the crucial interaction between him (the force of evil) and Kāve the Blacksmith, Fereydun, and the Iranian masses (all representing the forces of good), that the narrative blossoms and the tensions pushing the epic forward are set into motion.[218]

It is fascinating, then, that Rudābe, a descendent of Żaḥḥāk (one of the original intervening powers and liminal figures), acts as the next intervening character and ushers the narrative into the next stage. She accomplishes this first by marrying Zāl, thereby uniting the families of Żaḥḥāk with one of the most prominent Iranian vassal dynasties and further mixing "demon" blood with that of a "purer" lineage.[219] She also changes the course of the narrative by giving birth to the epic's greatest hero, Rostam. With the arrival of Rostam onto the scene, the focus of the epic shifts, and the spotlight predominantly shines on him; the hero who is born to a man "reared by a bird" and a woman who is "born of demons." At the same time, Rostam also has a reputation as the *tāj-baḵš* ("the Crown Bestower"), who often single-handedly and repeatedly saves the empire and its

[217] The mixing of demons and man only really happens with the character of Żaḥḥāk, when he is flattered by Eblis (the Devil) and ultimately permits him to kiss his shoulders, from whence human-brain-eating snakes spring.
[218] The formation of Iran itself as an independent empire and its juxtaposition against Rum and, more significantly, Turān, takes place as a result of the killing of Żaḥḥāk and Fereydun's marriage to Jamšid's daughter, Šahrnāz, who had been forcefully taken as Żaḥḥāk's wife after her father's murder. Both Šahrnāz and her sister Arnavāz—characters rooted in the ancient Zoroastrian traditions—are important women. They are the mothers of Salm, Tur, and Iraj, who become the forefathers of the empires of Rum, Turān, and Iran respectively; yet neither of these women plays a prominent role in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*.
[219] Interestingly enough, Zāl's own family are also rather liminal figures, as they live on the borders of the empire and earlier on in the epic must be won over to the court. Zāl himself is of course also a liminal character, having been abandoned as a baby, because of his white hair, and raised by Simorḡ.

kings from demise and who is arguably more important to the narrative and the world of the *Šāhnāme* than the *šāh*s themselves. With the death of Rostam, the epic again enters a new phase. The text's magnificent heroic age draws to a close and the pseudo-historical epoch begins.

In their association with black magic, the liminal characters of Rudābe and her literary sisters Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže also become agents of change and metamorphosis. From one perspective they are themselves the subjects of transformation, as two out of the four (Tahmine and Maniže) lose their connection to the magical by the time they appear in Ferdowsi's epic and transform into regular women from the borderlands. Even Rudābe, one of the most "magical" among them, is never said to have any access to black magic.[220] Likewise, as discussed, we ultimately find that Sudābe's "magic" is actually her strength of utterance and power of oratory conviction. More importantly than their affiliations with "magic," however, these women all act as agents of metamorphosis on a deeper level. As liminal figures, they gradually move from the periphery of their tales into center-stage, where they precipitate changes for both the narrative and for its main characters. As we shall see, it is not only their attributes that link them to their literary posterity, but also this shared, fundamental capacity.

[220] This is highlighted by the fact that when Rudābe falls unconscious during her arduous pregnancy with Rostam, it is Zāl and the magic of Simorḡ that save her through a caesarian. Neither Rudābe herself, nor her mother Sindoḵt, nor her father Mehrāb seem to have any recourse to any form of magic.

Chapter Two

Širin in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*

While the women of the first half of the *Šāhnāme* exude a mythical presence, the women of the epic's second half are more grounded in history. One such character is the figure of Širin, the beloved Christian wife of the Sassanian king Ḵosrow Parviz III (590–628 CE). Stories of Širin and Ḵosrow's love are said to date back to the Sasanian period, but no evidence remains from the Sassanian side.[221] There does exist proof, however, of Širin's presence in the chronicles of Byzantine historians. These chronicles refer to letters from Ḵosrow Parviz in which he makes mention of his Christian queen Širin and offers donations to the basilica of St. Sergius in honor of her recent pregnancy.[222] Although later sources suggest Širin has Armenian heritage, earlier sources locate her origins elsewhere. According to the seventh century Armenian historian Sebeos's writings and two Syriac chronicles, for example, Širin hails from Ḵuzestān or from a region called "Beth Aramaie" in the Syriac sources.[223] While neither Ferdowsi nor Neẓāmi explicitly refer to Širin's Christian faith, Neẓāmi's portrays her as the princess and later queen of Arman and Arrān (roughly the modern-day regions of Armenia and parts of Azerbaijan). Ḵosrow's adamant refusal to marry her despite being madly in love most likely stems from his concerns about Širin's Christian background, which would make it difficult for a Zoroastrian monarch like Kosrow to marry her without complications.[224] In the realm of myths and legends, Moayyad highlights the German scholar Eilers' claim that Širin's origins can be traced back to the tales of the magical Assyrian queen, Semiramis, via Assyrian and Babylonian narratives. As Moayyad points out, this of course does not mean that an historical Širin did not exist (after all, the

[221] Baṣṣāri 1963, 22.
[222] Orsatti 2006.
[223] Orsatti 2006.
[224] Orsatti 2006. For the description of Širin in both history and poetry, see Baṣṣāri 1971, 30–57.

aforementioned sources prove her existence), but that the character who appears in literary works as Širin the queen is most likely influenced by this legendary figure of Assyrian lore.[225]

Even before Ferdowsi's introduction of Širin into his *Šāhnāme*, she appeared at the center of two other narratives. One of these portrayed her as a passionate Armenian woman (perhaps royalty) who fought to preserve her chastity and honor at all costs until she could marry Ḵosrow. In the other narrative, she appeared as a woman of low birth and a morally ambiguous past, whose extreme jealousy drove her to poison and kill her higher-ranking co-wife. Others have argued that the latter portrayal informed Ferdowsi's version of Širin, whereas the former influenced Neẓāmi's.[226] Based on close textual analysis, however, I posit that Neẓāmi's Širin is in essence and origin the same character as the Širin in Ferdowsi's epic.

Ferdowsi begins his tale of Ḵosrow and Širin by telling us that Širin was Ḵosrow's dearest and closest companion in their youth. He held her in the highest regard, like his very sight:

وُ را بر زمین دوست شیرین بدی برو بر چو روشن جهان‌بین بدی
پسندش نبودی جز او در جهان ز خوبان و از دختران مهان

"In all the world his sole companion was Širin,
Whom he regarded as his own bright, world-beholding eyes!
Beside her, he fancied none in this world;
from among beautiful women, and the daughters of nobles."[227]

Rather than describe Širin in the ways in which he had described Rudābe or Tahmine, however, the poet abruptly informs us of Ḵosrow and Širin's lengthy separation. Ḵosrow has become preoccupied with his battles against the usurper, Bahrām Čubin and therefore stops "tending to

[225] See Moayyad 1991, 526–27. See also Eilers 1971.
[226] Orsatti 2006.
[227] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 260, vv. 3403–04.

love."[228] Yet even during this long period of separation, Širin—like Maniže—remains loyal to Ḵosrow:

چو خسرو نپردخت چندی به مهر شب و روز گریان بُدی خوب‌چهر

"When Ḵosrow no longer tended to love,
The fair-faced one spent day and night in tears"[229]

The two then do not meet again until one day when Ḵosrow sets off to hunt.[230] When Širin hears that the royal retinue will pass by her abode, she adorns herself in beautiful brocades, dons a regal crown, and awaits the king's arrival from her balcony. When Ḵosrow and his retinue arrive, Širin shows him her face, mesmerizing him with her beauty:

چو روی ورا دید برپای خاست به پرویز بنمود بالای راست
زبان کرد گویا به شیرین سَخُن همی گفت از آن روزگار کَهُن
به نرگس گلِ ارغوان را بشست —که بیمار بُد نرگس و گل درست—
بدان آبداری و آن نیکوی زبان تیز بگشاد بر پهلوی
که تهما، هزبرا، سپهبدتنا! خجسته‌گیا، گردِ شیراوزنا!
کجا آن همه مهر و خونین سرشک که دیدار شیرین بُد او را بزشک!
کجا آن همه بند و پیوند ما! کجا آن همه عهد و سوگند ما!
همی گفت و از دیده خوناب زرد همی‌ریخت بر جامه‌ی لاژورد!

"When she beheld his face, she stood up

[228] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 261, v. 3407. The second half of the *Šāhnāme* in general tends to lack the descriptive depictions of female characters that is allotted to the heroic women of the mythical section. There may be a number of contributing factors to this issue, one being the fact that these women were closer in historical proximity to the poet's period of composition and, therefore, more real/ less prone to illustrious portrayals. Another may be the simple fact that by this point in the poem the poet has already composed thousands upon thousands of lines and the weight of the endeavor may have taken its toll on him and therefore led him to opt for shorter descriptions of superfluous elements. For more on this, see Davis 2007.
[229] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 261, v. 3407.
[230] In another edition of the *Šāhnāme*, Ḵosrow and Širin meet in the hunting field and are again reunited as Ḵosrow is on his way to the hunt. Although Khaleghi-Motlagh does not include this part in the authenticated lines of his edition and only mentions them in a footnote, it is interesting to see Širin's connection to the hunting field (and later on in Neẓāmi's epic, to the polo field). In one way it can be seen as a sign of Širin's independence and that she traverses spheres that are generally masculine, while from another perspective it can be interpreted that Ḵosrow and Širin's relationship is like that of a hunter and the prey; Ḵosrow chasing Širin. For the aforementioned additional lines, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 261, v. 3407, n. 2.

And displayed her tall stature to Parviz;
She loosened her tongue in sweet utterances
[And] spoke much of the days long passed.
With [tears from her] narcissi she washed the Judas-tree flower,
for the narcissi (her eyes) were ill [with sorrow], and the rose (her face), well.
Eloquently and beautifully, she
Unleashed her tongue in Pahlavi:
'O Valiant Hero! O Lion-like Champion! O Able-bodied Warrior!
O Blessed King! O Lion-slayer!
What became of all that love and those tears of blood
To which [only] the sight of Širin was a remedy?
What became of all our ties and unions?
What became of all our pacts and promises?'
Thus she spoke and shed golden tears of sorrow,
Upon her lapis-blue garment."[231]

Here, in a scene reminiscent of Rudābe's initial encounter with Zāl, Širin leads the conversation with Ḵosrow. Not only does she speak first in the conversation, she also becomes the first character to utter a single word throughout the entire tale. Like Rudābe, her first utterances are not subdued; she addresses the king in the vocative, in an almost chastising manner, reminding him of the love they shared and of his injustice in deserting her. She recalls the fact that only *her presence* remedied his sorrows, thereby not only reminding Ḵosrow of her high station, but also informing the reader of the power that she inherently wields over the most powerful of men. She reminds us that she is not a weak character, to be easily forgotten, but one who knows her self-worth and who will rise up in time to her rightful place, even if destiny has dealt her an unfavorable hand. In response, Ḵosrow sheds tears for Širin and commands that they take her to his harem so that they can marry. Širin's earlier utterances and the reaction they provoke in the king show how Širin uses

[231] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 263–64, vv. 3437–45.

her very words (cleverly played on by Ferdowsi: *širin saḵon* (sweet words)) to conjure, for Ḵosrow, the powerful memories of the love that they shared. Due to this skillful use of words, she exercises her power over him and ascends to her rightful place (as his wife and, ultimately, his queen). Readers familiar with the story of Sudābe cannot ignore Širin's connection to Sudābe through the power of utterance.

Once Ḵosrow returns from the hunt, he beckons Širin from the harem then asks the magus to wed the two in happiness and to bring the glad tidings of this union to the entire empire.[232] The magi and the nobles, however, resist this request and instead eschew fellowship with the king for three days. Sensing trouble, Ḵosrow calls forth the magi and nobles and asks them why they have not visited him since his return from the hunt. The head magus takes it upon himself to inform the king of the reasons behind their actions:

به روز جوانی شدی شهریار بسی نیک و بد دیدی از روزگار
شنیدی بسی نیک و بد در جهان ز کار بزرگان و کار مهان
که چون تخمه‌ی مهر آلوده گشت بزرگی از آن تخمه پالوده گشت
[چنان دان که هرگز گرامی پسر نبودست یازان به خون پدر][233]
[مگر مادرش تخمه را تیره کرد پسر را به آلودگی خیره کرد]
[چو ضحاک تازی کشندهٔپدر که جمشید را زو بد آمد به سر]
[سکندر که او خون دارا بریخت چنان آتش کین به ما بر ببیخت]
پدر پاک و مادر بود بی‌هنر چنان دان که پاکی نیاید به بر!
ز کژّی نجوید کسی راستی گر از راستی برکند آستی!
دل ما غمی شد ز دیو سُتُرگ که شد یار با شهریار بزرگ!
به ایران اگر زن نبودی جزین که خسرو بدو خواندی آفرین،
نبودی چو شیرین به مُشکوی اوی به هر جا روشن بُدی جوی اوی!
نیاگانت آن دانشی‌راستان نکردند یاد از چنین داستان!

"'In the days of your youth you became king

[232] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 265, vv. 3455-57.
[233] Lines that appear in brackets in the original Persian are lines that the editor either believes may have been added later or have been misplaced. See Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: x.

Witnessing much good and evil from fortune!
You heard much good and evil [spoken] in the world
From the deeds of the nobles and the elite!
When the essence of union is sullied,
Greatness is lost from that seed.
[Know, thus, that a dear son never
Thirsts after his father's blood;]
[Lest his mother has sullied the seed
And drawn the son to corruption!]
[Like Żaḥḥāk-e Tāzi, the father-killer,
Who heaped calamity upon Jamšid's head!]
[[Or] Alexander, who spilt the blood of Darius,
And enveloped us in the fire of vengeance!]
If the father be pure and the mother impure,
Know thou that purity they shall not procure!
None seeks straightness from crookedness
Unless he is cutting a sleeve off of a garment!
Our hearts are in agony from the Great Demon (Širin)
Who has become a companion of the Great King's!
If there were no women other than her in Iran
Upon whom Ḵosrow would shower his praise;
If Širin was not in his harem,
Then his rule to every land would flow!
Your ancestors, those who were endowed with good knowledge,
Never [even] made mention of such deeds!'"[234]

Much can be gleaned from the head-magus's response. Superficially, it illustrates the clergy and the elite's concern that Ḵosrow's engagement with Širin will sully his line and ultimately destroy his dynasty. Neither Ferdowsi nor the magus explains why Širin will sully the line of Ḵosrow, but her status as a commoner may be a factor. On a deeper level, however, the magi and nobility may actually be less concerned about sullying the dynastic seed than about losing their own influence

[234] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 266–67, vv. 3468–81.

over Ḵosrow to Širin, his closest companion and someone who wields a great deal of influence over him. Likewise, the magus's calling Širin "the Great Demon" and his reference to Żaḥḥāk again (rather subconsciously) evokes the example of Rudābe, whom Manučehr refers to as demon-born (*div-zād*) and who descends from the line of Żaḥḥāk. This comparison also emphasizes Širin's liminality. Depicting her as sub-human, or perhaps even a demon in human guise, emphasizes her status as both a woman with direct access to the king, and one who originally hails from outside of the community of the elite. Such an interpretation also highlights links between Širin and the magical Semiramis, as well as Širin and Sudābe as a literary manifestation of the demoness Drauga. Additionally, the multiple references to men born of foreign mothers (Żaḥḥāk and Alexander) brings to mind the aforementioned notion of foreign women as evil beings who sully the Iranian seed; a rather absurd concept at this point in the text given that the majority of Iran's greatest warriors in the larger text are born to foreign mothers. The recurring presence of this concept, however, indicates its theoretical acceptance in the world of the *Šāhnāme*.

Ferdowsi does not tell us how Ḵosrow feels upon hearing the head magus' response. The magi and the nobility excuse themselves and say that they will return tomorrow for the king's response. When the men return the next day, Ḵosrow has a servant bring a basin to their presence and fill it with blood. The basin is then passed around the clerics and the elite, who sneer in disgust at its vile stench and look to one another in confusion, not daring to say a word. The king then asks the men what is in the basin? The head magus responds, "Disgusting blood/ Hated by all who encounter it!"[235] Ḵosrow then orders that the basin be scrubbed and washed and refilled with wine, musk, and rosewater. The king then asks if the basin is now the same as it was before? Realizing

[235] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 268, v. 3495.

the symbolism behind the act and apparently appeased by the gesture, the head magus praises the king, saying that they now understand the good from the bad. Ḵosrow replies:

چنین گفت خسرو که شیرین به شهر چنان بُد که آن بی‌منش تشتِ زهر
کنون تشتِ مِی شد به مشکوی ما برین گونه بویا شد از بوی ما!
ز من گشت بدنام شیرین نخست ز پُرمایگان دوستاری نجست!
همه مهتران خواندند آفرین که بی تاج و تخت مبادا زمین!
بهی زان فزاید که تو به کنی! مِه آن شد به گیتی که تو مِه کنی!
که هم شاه و هم موبد و هم ردی! مگر بر زمین فرّه ایزدی!

"Thus said Ḵosrow, 'Širin, in this land,
Was like that worthless basin of poison!
Now the Basin of Wine has joined our harem
And has thus been fragranced by our scent!
Širin gained ill-repute firstly because of me;
She sought not the friendship of the grandees!'
All the great ones replied in praise, saying,
'May the earth never be bereft of crown or throne!
The best is [only] that which you make better!
[And] great in this world is that which you greaten!
For you are both king and priest, and warrior, too!
[You are] the glory of God on earth!'"[236]

Ḵosrow's metaphorical comparison of the basin to Širin bears two interpretations: on the one hand, he degrades her when he says that she "was like [a] worthless basin of poison," which has now, by dint of entering Ḵosrow's harem, become a sweet-smelling basin of pure wine. In this interpretation, Širin had no worth prior to her association with Ḵosrow. In the larger spectrum of the tale, however, and upon analyzing Ḵosrow's description of Širin, it may be argued that Ḵosrow does not actually mean what he says. We are told by Ferdowsi earlier on that in their youth, "In all

[236] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 269, vv. 3505–09.

the world, [Ḵosrow's] sole companion was Širin,/ Whom he regarded as his very sight!" and that, "Beside her, he fancied none in this world;/From among beautiful women and the daughters of nobles."[237] Likewise when he again encounters Širin and she speaks of their love and past promises, her grief resonates with him, and he asks for her hand in marriage. However in the presence of the magi and the elites (whose daughters, Ferdowsi tells us, had all failed to capture Ḵosrow's interest) the king is faced with a difficult challenge; he must justify to this powerful group of courtiers—who arguably wield even more power over the empire than he does and with whom he has had to grapple to keep his own power—why he has passed up on the opportunity to marry one of their daughters and has instead chosen a woman who is not of royalty or nobility and who (supposedly) has a questionable past. It is because of this dilemma, and not because he actually believes Širin to have been a vile or lesser person, that Ḵosrow must project his own status as king and possessor of the divine glory (*farr*) onto Širin in order to initiate her into the royal circle. The head magus' response is also interesting in that although it is agreeable to Ḵosrow's parable and ultimate goal, it does not seem very genuine. The king's parable, while symbolic and poignant, is not particularly complicated and while it is rather beautiful in the way that he illustrates the transformation of Širin's social status, it does not really offer any clever solution to the problem that the nobles are presenting; it rather mimics the authoritarian logic of: I am the king and this is what I want, therefore it shall be. The acceptance by the magi and elites, then, does not come forth as a genuine understanding and acceptance of the issue (although they claim it to have made them see "the right from the wrong"), but rather a superficial acceptance of an issue, which they perhaps decide to overlook or address later.[238]

[237] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 260, vv. 3403–04.
[238] The elite's support of Širuye later in his rise to power against Ḵosrow could perhaps and in part be seen as a result of Ḵosrow's transgression in marrying Širin.

From a larger, textual perspective, and perhaps one that predominantly relates to the character of Širin, this scene is also very important. As previously stated, Ḵosrow concedes in this scene that *he* is the reason Širin gained the ill-repute allotted to her by the magi and elites. This helps clarify why Širin has a sullied reputation: most likely the fact that she took a lover (Ḵosrow) to whom she was not wedded.[239] Ḵosrow's reiteration to the magi and the elite that Širin "sought not the friendship of the grandees" also highlights Širin's faithfulness to Ḵosrow, in that she did not strive to even counteract her bad reputation through the good will of other grandees, in his absence. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, by declaring Širin's "innocence" and referring to her as "pure" (though merely through association with himself as king), on a larger, symbolic and textual scale, Ḵosrow disassociates Širin from the accusations that have been heaped against her; he essentially purifies this archetypal figure. The consequences of this purification then reverberate across later, literary manifestations of Širin—the most prominent being that of Neẓāmi's—which emphasizes her chastity and purity of character to the highest degree.

We are told that Ḵosrow's greatness increases once he and Širin marry. This frames Širin's presence as auspicious not only for Ḵosrow, but also for Iran.[240] It is here, then, that we confront a rather enigmatic situation: Ferdowsi tells us that after Širin, Ḵosrow married Maryam, the daughter of the Roman emperor, who became the head of his harem and with whom he spent all of his days.[241] This causes Širin much anguish and, succumbing to jealousy, she secretly poisons and kills Maryam:

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[239] Of course the fact that she hails from the borderlands does not help Širin's case in the eyes of the magi and nobility as an appropriate wife for the king either, but her place of origin cannot be the cause of her ill repute, especially as Ḵosrow tells us that it was brought onto her by him.

[240] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 269, v. 3510.

[241] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 269, v. 3511. The character of Maryam is rather intriguing. In both the texts of Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi, Maryam is the daughter of the Byzantine emperor and is married to Ḵosrow, when he seeks refuge in Byzantium from the usurper of his throne, Bahrām Čubin. In both Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi's renditions of the tale, Maryam's presence causes difficulties for Širin, and she ultimately dies, leaving her position for Širin to fill. In his book *Shirin: Christian—Queen—Myth of Love*, Wilhelm Baum dedicates a section to "The Myth of Maria, Alleged

ز مریم همی‌بود شیرین به درد همیشه ز رشکش دو رخسار زرد
به فرجام شیرین وُرا زهر داد شد آن نامور دختِ قیصرنژاد
[از آن چاره آگه نبد هیچ کس که او داشت آن راز تنها و بس]
چو سالی برآمد که مریم بمرد شبستانِ زرّین به شیرین سپرد

"Širin was perpetually pained by Maryam,
Her face made pale with envy.
Finally, Širin poisoned her
And the renowned daughter of Qeysar died.[242]
[None was aware of that recourse,
For she kept that secret to herself.]
When a year passed from Maryam's death,
She entrusted to Širin the golden harem."[243]

What is most intriguing about Širin's murder of Maryam is the manner in which Ferdowsi narrates the incident. In the context of this tale, the murder of Maryam is the only concrete example that exists of Širin committing an unequivocally evil act. However, Ferdowsi pays very little heed to this subject, discussing it in five lines and never returning to it again. He presents this crime, which could potentially annihilate the image of Širin as a positive figure, in a very matter-of-fact fashion. It appears as though Širin is not to be blamed for what she has done and that her crime is a mere reflection of the envy that she felt towards her rival for the king's affection, rather than a reflection on her character. While the issue of Širin's purity and chastity merits a litany of parables and explanations, her murder of Maryam is simply mentioned in passing and quickly swept under the

Daughter of the Emperor," where he ultimately argues that "Shirin is historically verifiable and was a Christian and a queen; Maria—if she was a historical figure at all—was neither [Emperor] Maurice's daughter nor a queen" (Baum 2004, 26–8). In her article in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Paola Orsatti mentions that Gianroberto Scarcia has identified the character of Maryam to be a manifestation of the Christian, Persian martyr, Saint Golinduch. See Brock 2001, Scarcia 2004, 115–35, and Orsatti 2006. For a comparison of the literary personas of Širin and Maryam in Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi, see Moayyad 1991.

[242] Qeysar, which means "Caesar," is referring to Maryam's father, the emperor of Rome.

[243] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 269–70, vv. 3512–15. "She" in the final hemistich is referring to Maryam metaphorically handing over the keys of the golden harem to Širin.

rug. This ensures that this future archetypal woman will not be remembered as a murderer (something that Neẓāmi later crystalizes in Širin's story, by making his depiction of Maryam's death more ambiguous). The attention that Ferdowsi allots the subject of Širin's reputation versus her murder of Maryam also highlights how Širin's reputation and chastity were of far greater importance in the milieu of the *Šāhnāme* in comparison to her crime.

If Ḵosrow's parable to the magi and the elite was not enough, Ferdowsi makes certain that Širin is remembered as a chaste and pure woman and a positive archetype by ultimately having *her* secure her own future reputation in the text. As the tale continues, Ḵosrow's exalted and just rule eventually decays into corruption and injustice, with various courtiers causing intrigue in Iran.[244] Eventually these courtiers manage to turn the army against the king, as well and to free Širuye, Ḵosrow's son from Maryam, whom he had imprisoned as a result of the prince's devious character. Ḵosrow flees, Širuye is made king and he eventually has Ḵosrow imprisoned and murdered.[245] Fifty-three days after the murder of Ḵosrow, Širuye sends a messenger to Širin, saying:

به شیرین فرستاد شیروی کس که ای نرّه جادویِ بی‌دسترس
همه جادوی دانی و بد خوی به ایران گنهکارترکس توی
به تُنبُل همی‌داشتی شاه را به چاره فرود آوری ماه را
بترس ای گنهکار و نزد من آی به ایوان چنین شاد و ایمن مپای

"To Širin, Širuy sent a messenger
Saying, 'O mighty [yet] forlorn witch!
Spells and wickedness you know well;
In all of Iran there's none guiltier than you!
With sorcery you kept the king;
With your tricks you can bring down the very moon!

[244] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 299–300, vv. 3839–55.
[245] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 318–19, vv. 4102–07.

Be afraid, O sinner, and come to me!
Tarry no more in the palace so safely and happily!'"[246]

Here we again find Širin accused of possessing magical powers and of being subhuman; accusations similar to those made by the magi and elite earlier on in the text, and which directly point to her liminality. Enraged by these assaults against her character, Širin responds to Širuye, denying his accusations and announcing that she will never meet with him, whether from near or afar, in celebration or in mourning. She also begins to plan her own death, fetching a powerful poison from a private chest and keeping it nearby at all times, while beginning to sew her own burial shroud.[247] Angered by her response, Širuye writes back saying that she has no choice but to appear before him. Širin finally agrees, under the condition that the meeting occurs in the presence of fifty nobles and the grandees, and not alone.[248] Donning garments of black and blue as a sign of mourning Ḵosrow, Širin appears at Širuye's court from behind the customary veil. The king then sends her a private messenger, asking for her hand in marriage. Širin answers that first he must "grant her justice" and that she would then be happy to oblige, to which Širuye responds favorably and asks her to put forth her requests. Here, for the last time and in the most eloquent fashion, Ferdowsi defends her reputation, this time through Širin's own voice, and crystalizes her character as a positive archetype.

Loosening her tongue, Širin defends her honor before both king and grandees and asks for witnesses who dare say otherwise to step forward:

زن مهتر از پرده آواز داد که ای شاه، پیروز بادی و شاد
تو گفتی که من بد تن و جادویم ز پاکی و از راستی یک سویم
بدو گفت شیرویه: بود این چنین ز تیزی جوانان نگیرند کین

[246] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 364, vv. 495–98.
[247] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 364–65, vv. 499–514.
[248] This, in itself, can be seen as a sign of Širin striving to save her reputation, as she wants to have witnesses at her meeting with Širuye, so that he cannot use accusations of immorality and lewd behavior against her later.

چنین گفت شیرین به آزادگان که بودند در گلشن شادگان،
که از من چه دیدی شما از بدی ز تاری و کژّی و نابخردی
به سی سال بانوی ایران بُدم به هر کار پشت دلیران بُدم
نجستم همیشه جز از راستی ز من دور بُد کژّی و کاستی
بسی کس به گفتار من شهر یافت به هر بارهیی از جهان بهر یافت
به ایران که دید از بُنه سایه‌ام وُگر سایه‌ی تاج و پیرایه‌ام
بگوید هر آنکس که دید و شنید همه کار از این پاسخ آمد پدید

بزرگان که بودند در پیش شاه ز شیرین به خوبی نمودند راه
که چون او زنی نیست اندر جهان چه در آشکار و چه اندر نهان
چنین گفت شیرین که ای مهتران جهاندیده و کارکرده سران
به سه چیز باشد زنان را بهی که باشند زیبایِ گاهِ مِهی:
یکی آنک با شرم و با خواسته‌ست که جفتش بدو خانه آراسته‌ست
دگر آنک فرّخ‌پسر زاید اوی ز شوی خجسته بیفزاید اوی
سدیگر که بالا و رویش بود به پوشیدگی نیز مویش بود
بدان گه که من جفت خسرو شدم به پیوستگی در جهان نو شدم
چو بی‌کام و بی‌دل بیامد ز روم نشستش نبود اندرین مرز و بوم
وُ زان پس بدان کامگاری رسید که کس در جهان آن ندید و شنید
وُ زو نیز فرزند بودم چهار بدیشان چُنان شاد بُد شهریار
چو نستود و چون شهریار و فرود چو مردان‌شه آن تاجِ چرخِ کبود
ز جمّ و فریدون چُن ایشان نزاد زبانم مباد ار بپیچم ز داد
بگفت این و بگشاد چادر ز روی همه روی ماه و همه پشت و موی
سدیگر چُنین‌ست رویم که هست یکی گر دروغست بنمای دست
مرا از هنر موی بُد در نهان که آن را ندیدی کس اندر جهان
نمودم همه، نیست این جادُوی نه از تُنبُل و مکر و از بد خُوی

“The noble woman uttered forth from behind the veil,
‘O king! May you be victorious and happy!
You claimed me to be a witch and a wanton
And far from both purity and truth!’
To her said Širuye, ‘Aye, so I did!
But of youth’s rash utterances none takes heed.’
Thus said Širin to the grandees,
Who in the Šādagān Garden were her company,
‘What evil act did you ever see from me

Of darkness, deceit, and apathy?
For thirty years I was the queen of Iran
And in every act, I supported the brave-hearted ones!
I never sought naught but the truth
Deception and lies were far from me!
By my command many gained lands
And, in every manner, a portion from this world!
Who, in Iran, gazed *even* upon my shadow?
Lest it was the [graceful] shadow of my crown and jewels!
If anyone saw or heard, speak forth!
For all shall be made manifest in this report.'

The grandees who stood before the king
Solely in praise spoke of Širin
Saying, 'There's no woman like her in the world,
Whether in public or in private!'
Thus replied Širin, 'O grandees!
You worldly and experienced lords;
Distinction of womankind comes in three
That they may beautify the seat of nobility:
One: that they may be both dignified and wealthy
So that they may adorn their husband's home.
Next: that blessed sons she may bear
To grow in abundance her husband's share.
Third that her face and stature
And her hair be covered [in the presence of strangers].
From that instant when I became Ḵosrow's pair,
Out of [this] union I was made new in the world!
Unhappy and disheartened, when he returned from Rum,
He had no repose in this land!
And from that [station] he reached such fortune
Of which none in the world had seen or heard!
And from him I also bore four sons
And by them the king was exceedingly gladdened;
Nastud, Šahriyār, and Forud,

And Mardān-Šah, who crowned the [very] heavens!
None had borne such sons, even from Jam and Fereydun,
And may I turn mute if I stray from truth!'
These she said and then unveiled herself:
Her face like the moon and flowing behind it, her [dark] hair!
'Third, my face is as you behold it;
Bring forth your proof, if you think it's a ruse!
It was out of virtue that I veiled my locks
And so none in the world beheld them!
All I have divulged; none of this is magic!
Neither spells, nor tricks nor wickedness!'"[249]

In the opening of this passage we see Širin making use of the circumstances that she herself has set up: calling upon the fifty grandees and nobles, which she has required to attend her meeting with Širuye, she utilizes them as witnesses before both the king and one another to testify to her nobility and purity of character. She reminds them (and, by dint of uttering it, informs the readers) of all the good that she did during her thirty-year reign as queen: her support of those who bravely defended Iran, her dedication to truth and rejection of deception and lies, and her munificence and generosity in helping many become land-owners. She then refers to the fact that no one ever beheld so much as her shadow, lest it was the shadow of her crown and jewels. By saying this, Širin addresses two issues: by speaking of her shadow she begins the defense of her chastity and purity of character, as the shadow here represents Širin herself. She is claiming, via this metaphor, that no one has seen her outside of the harem since her marriage to Ḵosrow. The shadow of her crown and her jewels, meanwhile, refers to her generosity and munificence which, like her shadow (an extension of her), has fallen upon her subjects and benefitted them. Following the first half of her

[249] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 367–69, vv. 531–57.

rebuttal, Širin then asks the grandees if they have anything to say against her. To this the grandees respond by confirming her words and attesting that "there is no woman like her in the world."

Širin then begins the second half of her rebuttal by listing three criteria by which a woman may achieve distinction: first, that she be dignified and wealthy, so that she may adorn her husband's home; second, that she bear sons, through whom her husband's share in life can multiply; and third, that her face, body, and hair always be covered in the presence of strangers. She then goes through each of these points to demonstrate how she meets them all: she tells us how she helped Ḵosrow reach the high status that he enjoyed as king, after he had returned disheartened and weak from Byzantium. She also tells us that she bore the king four sons, great warrior-men who were not even born to legendary kings like Jamšid or Fereydun. Finally, and perhaps most importantly and provocatively, she removes her veil and appears before the assembly uncovered in order to show them that her beauty is natural and not a result of magic and deceit.

In performing this speech Širin proves two things: she defends her honor before the grandees and against the slanders of Širuye, thereby shifting herself slowly out of the liminal space of an untrustworthy wife from the empire's peripheries and into the role of a good, chaste, and perhaps more "Iranian" one. Second, by accessing this mobility in status, she shows that in actuality her "magic" does not lie in her beauty or charm, but rather in her power of utterance: it was through her facility with speech that she worked her way into the harem and became Ḵosrow's queen, and she draws on the same source of power to save her reputation. Additionally, by declaring veiling as one of three criteria for being a good wife and then subsequently unveiling after she has proven that she meets all of these criteria, she not only proves that she is beautiful and that her beauty does not stem from magic, but also—subversively—illustrates that she is such an ideal wife that she has surpassed these measures and can, therefore, break from them in order

to crush Širuye's false accusations. As she has already proven herself innocent and chaste, by removing her veil Širin does not debase herself in any way. On the contrary she at once illustrates that she can transcend the norm as one who has perfected it, while also using the act of unveiling as means to further awe both Širuye and the grandees with her natural beauty and to perhaps win them over even more so to her own side. This unveiling adds a visual dimension to the oratory performance, which she has so perfectly carried out.

Upon beholding Širin unveiled, the nobles are stunned by her beauty. Stupefied, Širuye proclaims that he needs no one in this world other than Širin; he wants her as his wife. Seizing this opportunity, Širin eloquently offers to oblige under two conditions:[250] first, that all of her property and wealth be returned to her, and second, that she be allowed one more visit to the tomb of her beloved Ḵosrow. Širuye agrees and Širin returns to her quarters. There, she sets free her slaves, bestowing upon them and the mendicants some of her wealth, in addition to giving money to the main fire temple for celebrations such as Nowruz and Sade, and to a dilapidated church in memory of Ḵosrow, so that his spirit may be gladdened.[251] Following this, Širin gathers together all of her servants and says to them thus:

چنین گفت از آن پس به بانگ بلند که هرکس که هست از شما ارجمند
همه گوش دارید گفتار من نبیند کسی نیز دیدار من
مگویید یکسر جز از راستی نیاید ز دانندگان کاستی
کزان پس که من نزد خسرو شدم به مشکوی زرین او نو شدم
سر بانوان بودم و فرّ شاه از آن پس چه پیدا شد از من گناه؟
نباید سَخُن هیچ گفتن بروی چه رو باید اندر زنی چاره‌جوی؟
همه یکسر از جا برخاستند زبان‌ها به پاسخ بیاراستند
که ای نامورِبانوی بانوان سَخُن‌گوی و دانا و روشن‌روان
به یزدان که هرگز ترا کس ندید نه نیز از پس پرده آوا شنید

[250] The text says three conditions (see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 369, v. 563 and 372, v. 599), but we are actually only presented with two requests in later lines.
[251] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 369–70, vv. 561–74.

همانا ز هنگام هوشنگ باز چو تو نیز ننشست بر تختِ ناز
همه خادمان و پرستندگان جهانجوی و بیداردل بندگان
به آواز گفتند کای سرفراز ستوده به روم و به چین و طراز
که یارد سَخُن گفتن از تو به بد بدی کردن از روی تو کی سزد
چنین گفت شیرین که این بد کنش که چرخ بلندش کند سرزنش
پدر را بکشت از پی تاج و تخت کزین پس دو چشمش مبیناد بخت
مگر مرگ را پیش دیوار کرد که جان پدر زین نشان خوار کرد
پیامی فرستاد نزدیک من که تاریک شد جان باریک من
بدان گفتم این من که تا زنده‌ام جهان‌آفرین را پرستنده‌ام
پدیدار کردم همه راه خویش پر از درد بودم ز بدخواه خویش
پس از مرگ من بر سر انجمن زبانش مگر بد سراید ز من

“After that she spoke loudly to the gathering
Saying, ‘All of ye who are dignified
Give heed to my utterances
For none shall see me after this!
Never speak but the truth;
The wise never tell lies!
After I was paired with Ḵosrow
And I was made new by entering his harem,
I was the head of the ladies and the king’s *farr*
And from then, what sin was committed by me?
Speak not in eloquence and formality,
For what matter these to a helpless woman?’
At once [her servants] all arose
And loosened their tongues in response,
‘O most eminent lady of the ladies!
O eloquent, wise, and enlightened one!
By God we swear that none ever beheld you,
Nor even heard your voice from behind the veil!
Even since the time of Hušang,
None has sat upon the throne of sweetness, like you!’
All of the attendants and maids,
Those worldly and cognizant servants,
In unison said, ‘O noble one!

Revered from Rum to China to Tarāz!
Who could speak any ill of you?
How could any ill deed stem from you?'
Thus said Širin, 'This evil-doer (Širuye),
Whom the wheel of fortune shall punish,
Killed his father for the sake of crown and throne!
May his eyes never behold good fortune again!
Does he think that he can bypass death,
That he killed his father in such wretchedness?
He sent a message my way
From which my frail soul turned black!
To the message I responded, saying that until I am alive
I devote myself to the worship of God!
I have shown him all my 'ways,'
While suffering the inflictions of my ill-wishers!
[I fear] that after my death, before the grandees
Of me he will speak in calumny!'"[252]

This interaction represents the text's third and final attempt at securing Širin's reputation. We have seen Ḵosrow defend her against the magi and later Širin defending herself before the nobility and the king. Here, in a final attempt and using what we have identified as her true "magic" or strength—the power of her utterance—Širin gathers together her servants and handmaidens, and recounts for them all that she has done. She then asks them if she has committed any sins since entering the harem. They all respond that she has been a paragon of nobility, a woman without peers since the time of Hušang, and who is renowned the world over for her loftiness of character. Following this reassurance and divulging to them the fact that she will soon leave this mortal life, Širin ensures that they bear forth her pure and noble legacy and do not allow Širuye to sully her name in any way after her death. In this pact, we find the text's final attempt to erase the negative

[252] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 370–72, vv. 577–96.

memories of this queen's legacy and instill the good in their place. With the deed that she carries out in Ḵosrow's tomb, Širin's reputation is then sealed as that of a pure and loyal woman.

The next day Širin enters Ḵosrow's tomb for one final visit:

نگهبان در دخمه را باز کرد زن پارسا مویه آغاز کرد
بشد چهر بر چهر خسرو نهاد گذشته سَخُن‌ها برو کرد یاد
هم اندر زمان زهر هِلهِل بخورد ز شیرین‌روانش برآورد گرد
نشسته بر شاه پوشیده‌روی به تن بر یکی جامه کافور بوی
به دیوار پشتش نهاد و بمرد بمرد و ز گیتی ستایش ببرد

"The guard opened the mausoleum's gate
And the pure woman began her lament.
She entered and laid her face against Ḵosrow's
Speaking to him of the days long gone.
She then drank the fatal poison
And it cleansed her sweet soul of (this earthly) dust.
Sitting by the king, her face covered,
Wearing a dress perfumed in camphor,
She leaned against the wall and died;
She died and gained the veneration of all the world."[253]

Širin's self-immolation next to the body of her deceased beloved, secures her good repute, thereby abolishing the traces of a questionable past. This push towards the perception of Širin as a pure and chaste woman manifests in Ferdowsi's language until the very end, when he presents the reader with a crystal-clear image: Širin—to whom he now refers as "the pure/respectable woman" (*zan-e pārsā*)—has bestowed all of her wealth upon the poor and in the path of God, and has chosen to join her husband in the next life, by dispensing of her body next to his.[254] Even in the moment of

[253] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 8: 372–73, vv. 603–7.
[254] Steingass defines the term *pārsā* as, "pure, chaste, devout, pious, holy, religious, abstinent, continent, above reproach." He goes on to define *pārsā-zan* specifically as, "pure, chaste, devout woman; wife of a holy man." In his *Glossar zu Firdosis Schahname*, however, Wolff defines *pārsā* as: "rein; brav; unbescholten" (pure; brave; and respectable), which are the translations that I have opted to use. See Wolff 1936, 177.

her death, her face—the symbol of both her virtue and the impetus for accusations of sorcery—is covered with a veil as an act of modesty.

Širin Transported, Not Transformed

Many have argued that the essence of Ferdowsi's Širin differs significantly from Neẓāmi's. They characterize Ferdowsi's Širin as more rooted in semi-historical sources, while seeing Neẓāmi's Širin as entirely constructed by the author and perhaps based on his beloved late wife, Āfāq. In the introduction to his discussion of Širin in *Women in the* Shāhnāmeh, Khaleghi-Motlagh—echoing the literary critic, Jan Rypka—posits that Neẓāmi, "thinks more of his own deceased wife, Āfāq, when writing about Shīrīn, because his "Shīrīn is really none other than his very beloved Āfāq.""[255] Khaleghi-Motlagh argues that Ferdowsi, on the other hand, opts for a more historical or pseudo-historical version of Širin. He also writes that even some poets closer to Neẓāmi's own time, such as ᶜĀref Ardebili (14th century), believed Neẓāmi's Širin to be his creation, rather than Ferdowsi's, which is derived from previous sources. Similarly, and more recently, Davis writes that:

> Despite her fidelity to her dead husband, which leads to her splendid death scene, and the elaborate descriptions of her gorgeous finery and beauty, Ferdowsi's Shirin does not wholly escape her Sudabeh-like associations; that is, as a femme fatale, whose hold over the king has something sinister and unsavory about it. It remained for Nezami, almost two hundred years later, to vindicate her character, and to present her history with more unambiguous sympathy.[256]

While the two Širins in Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi's works may have originated from different sources, I posit that they are the same character. As we will see in the following analysis of Neẓāmi's Širin and as we can see in the above analysis of Ferdowsi's, the latter's Širin is purified of her sins and even referred to as a *zan-e pārsā*, by the end of the tale of Ḵosrow and Širin in the *Šāhnāme*, just like Neẓāmi's character. Through the words of both the characters of Ḵosrow and Širin herself,

[255] See Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012, 68. Rypka says, "Šīrīn ist eben niemand anders als Āfāq." See Rypka 1959, 203.
[256] Davis 2007, 84.

and by understating Širin's most egregious act (the murder of Maryam), Ferdowsi helps Širin transcend the negative aura that may have initially enveloped her character, and crystalizes her as a positive, archetypal female figure on which Neẓāmi then elaborates. I believe that Neẓāmi's Širin is rooted in the character of Širin with which we are presented in Ferdowsi's tale of Širin and Širuye. I likewise disagree with Davis' claim that Širin does not escape her role as a femme fatale; as a matter of fact, I do not believe that she—unlike Sudābe— is even cast in this role by Ferdowsi. As we have seen, nothing in the text actually points to Širin's character as a femme fatale with respect to her relationship with Ḵosrow. She never poses a threat for him. If anything, she helps him achieve greatness as a magnanimous monarch. One could perhaps argue that Širin's murder of Maryam does make her into somewhat of a femme fatale, yet, as we have discussed, this event is not dwelt on at all by Ferdowsi nor does he ever mention it again. Towards the end of Ferdowsi's portrayal of Širin, nothing but her positive attributes are embellished and defended by the poet. Therefore, in contrast to what Davis argues, it is actually not left to Neẓāmi "to vindicate her character" and to "present her history with unambiguous sympathy;" this process has already been completed by the end of Ferdowsi's rendition of the Ḵosrow and Širin romance and serves as the perfect platform on which Neẓāmi can then build his own rendition of Širin.[257]

With the shift in Širin's character, however, and the obsessive emphasis on her purity and chastity, there also lies a catch. As previously mentioned, Turner explains that a liminal space cannot be permanent; we see traces of this in the life of the Širin character. By emphasizing her purity and chastity Širin gradually enters the realm of the positive female archetype, which will

[257] Paola Orsatti also seems to be of the same mind as Davis, positing that two traditions of Širin existed (one negative and one positive) of which Ferdowsi took up the former and Neẓāmi the latter. She likewise attributes "the insistence with which [Širin] defends her good name (*niknāmi*)" in Neẓāmi's epic to the fact that she must eschew affiliations with the pre-existent negative image. While the existence of a negative and positive image of Širin is undoubtedly true, I believe— as I have proven— that indeed by the end of Ferdowsi's tale we already have a transformed, "good" Širin, who no longer needs of any defending by Neẓāmi. See Orsatti 2006.

continue to dazzle throughout the annals of Persian epic and love poetry, yet she loses some of the liminality that had initially equipped her with a strong sense of independence, especially with regard to sexuality. Of course, as a woman in a male-dominant sphere and as someone who is presumably not part of the elite though she lives among them, she still retains elements of her liminality, which thereby grant her greater access to mobility and the ability to transform herself and the plot. Yet in losing her association with dark magic, and through both her own, Ḵosrow's and Ferdowsi's attempts to prove her honorable, she manages to shed her association with "black magic" or evil and become an indisputably positive character that the text (and the patriarchal society) can digest.

The character of Širin signals a departure from the literary pillar that is Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*. It is from Ferdowsi's masterpiece that we make our way to the twelfth century CE, to engage with the equally skillful and influential master-poet, Neẓāmi Ganjavi, and his intricately detailed description of Širin.

Širin in Neẓāmi Ganjavi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*

Completed in 1191 CE in the *hazaj* meter and totaling over six thousand verses, Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin* appears second in the series of epics in his collection of five poems called *Ḵamse* (The Quintet), and is regarded the most prominent rendition of this famous romantic epic.[258] While Ḵosrow and his beloved Širin also act as protagonists in this rendition, and while Neẓāmi was clearly inspired by Ferdowsi's story and even refers to it, there exist marked differences between Neẓāmi's version and that of his predecessor.[259] As mentioned before, Širin in Neẓāmi's tale is the niece of Mahin Bānu (Šamirā)—the queen of Arrān and Arman—who upon her death bestows her crown and her throne to Širin.[260] In Neẓāmi's version, the encounter of Ḵosrow and Širin is planned by Ḵosrow's confidant, the skilled artist Šāpur, who later becomes the sole link between the two lovers. Due to these differences in circumstance and the obvious disparity in length and focus, Neẓāmi's poem includes a number of scenes that play crucial roles in his epic, that have been carved into the collective memory of the devotees of Persian epic romance, and which are not included in Ferdowsi's tale. One such example takes place upon Ḵosrow's first sighting of Širin, as she bathes in a lake en route from Armenia to Iran, when neither character recognizes the other.[261] In addition to the differences of stock characters and important scenarios, Neẓāmi expends

[258] Orsatti, 2006.
[259] Neẓāmi mentions early on in his text that Ferdowsi was one of his sources, but that his own version surpasses that of his predecessor's. He also states that whatever Ferdowsi left off in his version, he (Neẓāmi) has now incorporated into the text in memory of Ferdowsi, who was a wise man. See Dastgerdi 1954, 33, vv. 19–23.
[260] As noted previously, Arrān and Arman roughly equate to modern-day Armenia and parts of Azerbaijan. It is interesting to note that Šāpur, when first telling Ḵosrow about Širin, mentions that her aunt Šamirā is the ruler of Arrān and Arman. He then says that the *tafsir* (interpretation/definition) of Šamirā is "Mahin Bānu" (the Great Lady), by which she is then known throughout the poem (Dastgerdi 1954, 49, v. 11). As Moayyad notes, Eilers mentions this name (Šamirā or, rather, Šomeyrā) as Neẓāmi's interpretation of Semiramis's name, citing it as one evidence that Neẓāmi knew of this legendary queen and that she influenced the character of Širin, though our protagonist does not take her name. See Moayyad 1991, 526.
[261] Dastgerdi 1954, 77–81.

effort describing and embellishing the character of Širin; something which, even in comparison to his earlier female characters, lacks in Ferdowsi's rendition.

Neẓāmi begins his description of Širin as such:

پری دختی پری بگذار ماهی بزیر مقنعه صاحب کلاهی
شب افروزی چو مهتاب جوانی سیه چشمی چو آب زندگانی
بمروارید دندانهای چون نور صدفرا آب دندان داده از دور
دو شکر چون عقیق آب داده دو گیسو چون کمند تاب داده
فسونگر کرده بر خود چشم خود را زبان بسته بافسون چشم بدرا
نمک دارد لبش در خنده پیوست نمک شیرین نباشد وان او هست
رخش تقویم انجم را زده راه فشانده دست بر خورشید و بر ماه
دو پستان چون دو سیمین نار نو خیز بر آن پستان گل بستان درم ریز
زلعلش بوسه را پاسخ نخیزد که لعل ار وا گشاید در بریزد
بچشم آهوان آن چشمه نوش دهد شیر افکنانرا خوابخرگوش
شبی صد کس فزون بیند بخوابش نه بیند کسی شب چون آفتابش
بحیرت مانده مجنون در خیالش بقایم رانده لیلی با جمالش
مه از خوبیش خود را خال خوانده شب از خالش کتاب فال خوانده
رخش نسرین و بویش نیز نسرین لبش شیرین و نامش نیز شیرین
شکر لفظان لبش را نوش خوانند ولیعهد مهین بانوش دانند
پریرویان کزان کشور امیرند همه در خدمتش فرمان پذیرند
زمهتر زادگان ماه پیکر بود در خدمتش هفتاد دختر
چو باشد وقت زور آنزورمندان کنند از شیر چنگ از پیل دندان
بحمله جان عالم را بسوزند بناوک چشم کوکب را بدوزند

"A fairy! No, [rather] a moon!
Who, beneath her veil, dawns a crown.[262]
One who lights up the night, like youth's moonlight;
Her eyes jet-black, like the water of life!
Her pearly teeth that [shine] like light,
[even] from afar, put oysters to shame!

[262] Neẓāmi is a master of wordplay and imagery and, as a result, producing an English translation of his poetry that captures the variety of meanings, which his work conveys in Persian is often impossible. I believe this to be one of the main reasons why so much of his work remains untranslated. In order to capture the meaning and essence, I will utilize footnotes for some texts. In this hemistich Širin's veil represents her modesty, while the symbolic crown, which Neẓāmi says she wears under it, represents her royal lineage and her innate ability to rule.

Two sugary [lips], like polished agates,
Two braids, like twisted lassos!
Her bewitching eyes
blind the evil eye with spells!
Her ceaselessly smiling lips are salted;
Salt is never sweet, but hers is![263]
Her countenance threatens the perfect proportion of the stars,
And [in its beauty] has even transgressed against the moon and the sun!
Her two breasts, like two newly sprung, silvern pomegranates,
With a [pink] flower petal strewn on their tips![264]
Kisses are not reciprocated by her carnelians,
For if the carnelians part, pearls will fall forth![265]
With her gazelle-like eyes, that Fountain of Life,
Casts lion-fighting warriors into sweet slumber!
At night, more than a hundred men see her in their dreams
Yet, like the sun, none has ever seen her in the night![266]
From the [very] thought of her, Majnun is bewildered,
[And] in beauty she has defeated Leyli!
By her beauty the [bright] moon now calls itself a [dark] mole;
The night learns [the art of] darkness from her mole!
Her face, like the wild rose; her scent like the wild rose too;
Her lips: sweetness! And her name is Sweetness (Širin) too!
The honey-tongued call her lips "[pure] nectar,"
And know her to be heiress to Mahin Bānu's throne.
The fairy-faced [women] who are vassals of that land
Bow before her in submission!
From amongst the noble, moon-bodied beauties
Seventy girls are in her service.
At the time of battle, those able-bodied women,
Tear out the lion's claws and the elephant's tusks!

[263] In Persian, salt, when associated with someone, means "endearing" or "attractive." Here Neẓāmi is playing with the word salt to mean both "endearing" or "attractive" and also as a paradox to Širin's name, which means "sweetness."
[264] As Dastgerdi tells us, the pink flower petals on the tip of the breasts insinuate how pink her nipples are. Dastgerdi 1954, 51, fn. 4.
[265] The carnelians are in reference to her lips and the pearls to her teeth.
[266] This is, again, referring to her chastity; she has never been with anyone.

By their attacks they can burn [to ashes] the whole world,
And with their arrows, sew together the stars' [very] eyes!"[267]

Neẓāmi's descriptions of Širin, in line with the usual manner of describing the beloved, are quite elaborate and detailed. This stands in stark contrast to Ferdowsi's descriptions of Širin, which, even in comparison to the earlier female characters of the *Šāhnāme*, are quite sparse. Neẓāmi, in line with both his predecessors and his followers, likens his heroine's beauty to that of a fairy; and while this, on its own, does not necessarily signify a connection to "magic," it nonetheless stands as a reminder of that general theme for the conscious reader. Likewise, Neẓāmi compares Širin to other heavenly bodies and supernatural phenomena, such as the moon and the Fountain of Life, and describes her as one whose eyes can cast spells. Unlike her former manifestation in the *Šāhnāme*, however, none of these descriptions are used to vilify her or associate her with black magic; on the contrary, these comparisons to the supernatural are cast in a positive light and are often simply common tropes used to describe her matchless physical beauty.[268]

Neẓāmi also declares that "beneath her veil" Širin "dons a crown," pointing both to her modesty and chastity (signified by the veil), but also to the fact that she is a woman fit for rulership and descends from royalty (signified by the crown). Both her desirability and her chastity are reiterated in the following lines: "at night, more than a hundred men see her in their dreams," yet "like the sun, none has ever seen her in the night." The poet inserts another playful line in which he describes Majnun as "bewildered" by the thought of Širin and that her beauty has left Leyli "defeated" and abject. This cross-comparison of lovers and beloveds is also a common tactic, as we will see later with Širin and Vis; yet what is particularly interesting here is that Leyli and

[267] Dastgerdi 1954, 50–53.
[268] On "licit" magic, especially in relation to the poetry of Neẓāmi, see Bürgel 1988, particularly ch. 3. For the use of magic in romance literature, see Seyed-Gohrab 1999, 71–97.

Majnun are the protagonists of one of Neẓāmi's own later romantic epics in the *Ḵamse*, thereby making the comparison more personal, as if to show favor toward Širin over Leyli.[269] The poet then goes on to discuss Širin's status as Mahin Bānu's heir to the throne. He explains how Širin and her maidservants are not only beautiful maidens, but also capable, valiant warriors who could "tear out the lion's claws and elephant's tusk" and such skilled archers that they could "sew together the stars' [very] eyes" with their arrows. Such descriptions underscore not only Širin's physical beauty, but also her independence, fitness for rulership, and prowess.

Throughout the epic, Širin's strength, independence, and—in particular—her determination are illustrated time and again. When the princess learns of the handsome crown-prince of her neighboring empire through portraits and detailed descriptions rendered unto her by Šāpur, she tricks her handmaidens into joining her for a hunt, with the intention of secretly straying from the group and heading to Iran to find Ḵosrow. The handmaidens oblige, and all the women don men's clothing, as was customary before a hunt, and head to the field.[270] In the midst of their hunt, Širin, seated upon her trusty steed Šabdiz, strays from the group and swiftly gallops away, launching her independent journey to Iran in search of her beloved. Neẓāmi tells us that Širin encounters much hardship and difficulty on this journey, but that when a woman casts off her soft femininity and takes on the burden of suffering, she becomes as strong as the mountains and the forest. He states:

نپوشد بر تو آن افسانه را راز که در راهی زنی شد جادویی ساز
یکی آیینه و شانه درافکند بافسونی براهش کرد در بند
فلک این آینه وان شانه را جست کزین کوه آمد و زان بیشه بررست

[269] In his *Simā-ye Do Zan*, Saᶜidi-Sirjāni tends to a thorough comparison between Neẓāmi's characters of Širin and Leyli. And although the work can often serve as a helpful reference to the lives of the two different characters, it very clearly illustrates a sense of bias for the "Iranian" society/world and against its Bedouin, "Arab" counterpart. See Saᶜidi-Sirjāni 1988.
[270] Dastgerdi 1954, 74, vv. 1–7.

زنی کو شانه و آیینه بفکند زسختی شد بکوه و بیشه مانند

"The secret of that legend should not be kept from you:
That once a woman performed magic while en route;
She threw away her mirror and her comb
Unto the road, so to cast a spell.
The heavens sought this mirror and comb
From one raising a mountain, from the other a forest!
A woman who casts aside her comb and mirror
In endurance will become like the mountain and the forest."[271]

Neẓāmi's rendition of this "legend" is fascinating on a number of levels. From one perspective, he magnifies Širin's strength and determination by showing her willingness to forego the comforts of the palace in order to find her beloved, roaming the deserted mountains and planes alone and unguarded. Given that Ḵosrow is essentially doing the same from the other side (traveling from Iran to Armenia in order to find Širin), the two mirror one another, implying a sense of equality between the two. Thus— at least initially in Neẓāmi's epic— Širin is no less than or different from Ḵosrow; she can hunt, fight, and love as she pleases. From another angle, Širin, as a woman, is compared to two elements often associated with her gender: nature and magic. This is, of course, also seen in Neẓāmi's descriptions of Širin's beauty; but what is particularly of interest to us here is the reference to magic. Once again, unlike the magi and Širuye's accusations of black magic against Širin in the *Šāhnāme*, this association with the supernatural and the occult has positive overtones: it illustrates the strength and unwavering quality of Širin's will.

It is in the midst of this journey to Iran when Ḵosrow secretly spies on Širin as she bathes half-naked in a lake, unaware of her audience.[272] Once Širin realizes that she is being watched she

[271] Dastgerdi 1954, 76, vv. 12–15.
[272] Dastgerdi 1954, 77–82.

blushes in shame and covers her breasts with her hair; a symbolic image, given that hair itself is often covered to preserve a woman's modesty.[273] This subtle act in itself subverts the idea of modesty, as Širin uses one symbol of beauty and seduction to cover yet another. It is interesting to note that, while Širin's virginity and chastity are obsessively recalled by Neẓāmi as well as Širin herself, both in this scene and later on in the text, she still often behaves in a sexually provocative manner.[274] This play on the sexualized chaste female, reminiscent of the idea of veiling as a form of intensifying seduction, enhances Širin's attractiveness in the eyes of Ḵosrow and the "male gaze" and, as we shall discuss, further intensifies her sexual agency. In this scene Neẓāmi depicts Širin's beautiful, white body, her jet-black locks, and bare breasts in detail, then writes of Ḵosrow's reaction:

پرندی آسمان گون بر میان زد شد اندر آب و آتش بر جهان زد
تن سیمینش میغلطید در آب چو غلطد قاقمی بر روی سنجاب
چو لختی دید ازان دیدن خطر دید که بیش آشفته شد تا بیشتر دید
عروسی دید چون ماهی مهیا که باشد جای آن مه بر ثریا
ز هر سو شاخ گیسو شانه می‌کرد بنفشه بر سر گل دانه می‌کرد
اگر زلفش غلط می‌کرد کاری که دارم در بن هر موی ماری
نهان با شاه می‌گفت از بنا گوش که مولای توام هان حلقه در گوش
چو گنجی بود گنجش کیمیاسنج ببازی زلف او چون مار بر گنج
فسونگر مار را نگرفته در مشت گمان بردی که مار افسایرا کشت
کلید از دست بستانبان فتاده ز بستان نار پستان درگشاده
دلی کان نار شیرین کار دیده ز حسرت گشته چون نار کفیده
تنش چون کوه برفین تاب می‌داد زحسرت شاه را برفاب می‌داد
شه از دیدار آن بلور دلکش شده خورشید یعنی دل پر آتش

"A sky-hued brocade she tied around her waist
And, in entering the water, set fire to the world!
Her silvern body moved in the water,

[273] Dastgerdi 1954, 82, vv. 7–9.
[274] Dastgerdi 1954, 326–27.

Like the ermine moves upon a stoat!
When [Ḵosrow] caught a glimpse, he sensed danger,
For the more he saw, the more he was bewildered!
He beheld a bride, like a fair moon,
Who belonged on the arc of Pleiades,
Brushing her strands of hair, on every side
As if plucking the petals of a violet.
— If her hair was not the essence of perfection,
[Then] may my own hair grow into snakes from the very root! —
Secretly, from behind her ears, her hair whispered to the king,
'I am your master, O slave!'
She was a treasury; her treasure itself an alchemist!
And her hair in coquettish [twists], like snakes upon a trove!
No snake-charmer had ever touched these snakes;
You'd suspect that they'd killed their very charmer!
The garden-key had slipped from the gardener's hand;
From [within] the garden the pomegranate-breasts had unlocked the gate!
The heart that beheld those sweet pomegranates
Out of envy was like a bursting pomegranate!
Her body, like a snowy peak, shimmered,
Making the king break into cold sweat out of longing!
From the sight of that crystal-like beauty
The king was like the sun: his heart on fire!"[275]

In his marvelous and detailed description of Širin's beauty as she bathes in the lake, her unspoken interaction with Ḵosrow, and Ḵosrow's internal reaction—all of which have been the subject of numerous artworks throughout the ages—the author reveals and conceals Širin's sexual desirability at the same time.[276] Neẓāmi depicts Širin fully naked, going into the water with only a

[275] Dastgerdi 1954, 77–81.
[276] For a 16th-century tapestry representation of this scene, see accession number 1978.60 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For a 16th-century miniature representation, see accession number 13.228.7.3 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For a 17th-century miniature representation, see museum number MSL/1885/364 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. For a 19th-century tile representation, see museum number 228-1887 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. My sincerest gratitude to Ms. Fuchsia Hart for guiding me to these specific artifacts. On illustrated manuscripts of Neẓāmi's *Ḵamse*, see Soucek 1971. I am very grateful to Dr. Teresa Fitzherbert for introducing me to this source.

thin veil covering her midriff. Her body is so beautiful that when it touches the water, it seems as though it sets the world on fire; a juxtaposition that brims with sensuality, a sense that by beholding this spectacle even the water itself will be set ablaze. The shimmering of her silvern body is depicted in detail and the sight of it causes the king to break into a cold sweat out of desire, his passion ascending to the height of the sun. Set in the forest, the scene exudes a wild sensuality that is simultaneously reeled in by a sense of customary, superficial chastity. Catching a glimpse of Širin's naked body, Ḵosrow senses danger, for the more he sees the more bewildered he becomes, like a blaze of fire burning its way through the woods. Thus, when their eyes finally meet and Širin reacts in bashfulness, he lowers his gaze out of respect and chivalry. Expanding on the theme of the wild and untamable, Širin's chest is compared to a garden the gates of which have been opened by the pomegranates of her breasts while her hair is compared to coiling snakes, each luring the king towards itself. In the heat of this deeply lustful, yet oddly innocent encounter, Neẓāmi goes so far as to even turn the power dynamic between the characters on its head: the snakes of Širin's alluring locks address the king of kings as their very slave, declaring that they (and, by default, she) are his master. Returning to Cixous, this specific instance subverts the pairing of "active" with male and "passive" with female. This is especially interesting during this scene, in which Ḵosrow serves as the active onlooker and Širin as the passive object of his gaze.

When Ḵosrow lowers his gaze, Širin quickly runs out of the water, gets dressed, and escapes the scene.[277] As she flees, however, she experiences mixed feelings: it appears as though her heart recognizes this stranger as her beloved, but her mind, meanwhile, advises her to take caution. In a telling line, she comes to the ultimate conclusion that:

وگر هست این جوان آن نازنین شاه نه جای پرسش است او را در این راه

[277] Dastgerdi 1954, 83–84.

مرا به کز درون پرده بیند که بر بی‌پردگان گردی نشیند

"And if this youth is indeed that sweet prince,
This is not the place to enquire this of him!
It is more befitting that he meets me from behind the veil,
For the dust [of shame] settles upon those who are unveiled!"[278]

Just a few lines after the detailed description of her nude body and of her body's effect on Ḵosrow, Širin's virtue and chastity take precedence. She decides that it even if this youth were to be her beloved, it would be more proper for him to meet her from behind a veil. This decision sets up a recurring motif: that it is preferable for her to suffer a long and arduous journey to reunite with her beloved, were it only to preserve her chastity and reputation. Yet to the conscious reader, the juxtaposition of manifestation and obfuscation, sexualization and modesty, veiling and unveiling remains ever-present until the couple finally unite in marriage.

Ultimately Širin arrives at Ḵosrow's palace, only to realize that he has left, and Ḵosrow arrives in Armenia, only to be informed by Šāpur that Širin has set out to find him.[279] Šāpur then heads to Iran to retrieve Širin and bring her back to Armenia to meet Ḵosrow; the couple are not destined to meet, however, as Ḵosrow's father is killed and Ḵosrow must return to Iran to assume the throne.[280] Following Ḵosrow's enthronement, his general Bahrām Čubin rebels against him forcing Ḵosrow to flee to Armenia, where he and Širin finally meet one another for the first time in the hunting field.[281] Neẓāmi opens the scene of their initial encounter with the following lines:

دو صیدافکن بیکجا باز خوردند بصید یکدیگر پرواز کردند
دو تیرانداز چون سرو جوانه زبهر یکدیگر کرده نشانه
دو یار از عشق خود مخمور مانده بعشق اندر ز یاران دور مانده

[278] Dastgerdi 1954, 82, vv. 6–7.
[279] Dastgerdi 1954, 88–102.
[280] Dastgerdi 1954, 102–12.
[281] Dastgerdi 1954, 113–118.

یکی را دست شاهی تاج داده یکی صد تاج را تاراج داده
نه از شیرین جدا میگشت پرویز نه از گلگون گذر میکرد شبدیز

"Two hunters descended upon the same grounds
And set out in the hunt for one another!
Two archers, like young cypresses,
For one another had set their aim!
Two lovers, left drunken in their love,
Straying far from their company, out of love.
One having just received a crown from the hand of royalty,
The other having plundered a hundred kingdoms [with her beauty]!
Neither would Parviz leave the side of Širin,
Nor would Šabdiz leave Golgun alone."[282]

The decision to set the lovers first meeting to the backdrop of a hunting field is pregnant with meaning: it emphasizes Ḵosrow and Širin's equality, utilizes the common trope of love as a hunt, often found in Persian poetry, and foreshadows Ḵosrow and Širin's relationship throughout the majority of the tale. By mirroring one another, the lovers appear as equals; rather than fill the roles of hunter and hunted, they *both* hunt one another, thereby being of equal footing in the sport. The scene also foreshadows the back-and-forth nature of Ḵosrow and Širin's relationship as it unfolds throughout the narrative: at one point Ḵosrow pursues Širin, and at another Širin pursues Ḵosrow, until the two finally end up together.

Following their initial encounter Širin takes the initiative to invite Ḵosrow to her abode.[283] With this action, Širin follows in the footsteps of her female predecessors: Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže. Just as in prior scenes of female seduction, this invitation exhibits an essential element of agency. The heroine of the tale initiates closer (or in some cases, any) contact between

[282] Dastgerdi 1954, 115, v. 5; 16, vv. 1–8.
[283] Dastgerdi 1954, 117, vv. 11–16.

herself and her lover. Unlike any of her predecessors in the *Šāhnāme*, however, this scene prompts another key occurrence. Gladdened by Širin and Ḵosrow's relationship, but also wisely aware of Ḵosrow's fickleness, Mahin Bānu meets with Širin in private and advises her on her interactions with Ḵosrow. She says:

چنانم در دل آید کاین جهانگیر به پیوند تو دارد رأی و تدبیر
گر این صاحب جهان دلداده تست شکاری بس شگرف افتاده توست
ولیکن گرچه بینی ناشکیبش نه بینم گوش داری بر فریبش
نباید کز سر شیرین زبانی خورد حلوای شیرین رایگانی
فرو ماند ترا آلوده خویش هوای دیگری گیرد فرا پیش
شنیدم ده هزارش خوبرویند همه شکر لب و زنجیر مویند
دلش چون زانهمه گلها بخندد چگوئی در گلی چونمهر بندد
بلی گر دست بر گوهر نیابد سر از گوهر خریدن بر نتابد
چو بیند نیکعهد و نیکنامت ز من خواهد به آیینی تمامت
فلک را پارسائی بر تو گردد جهان را پادشائی بر تو گردد
چو تو در گوهر خود پاک باشی بجای زهر او تریاک باشی
وگر در عشق بر تو دست یابد ترا هم غافل و هم مست یابد
چو ویس از نیکنامی دور گردی بزشتی در جهان مشهور گردی
گر او ماهست ما نیز آفتابیم وگر کیخسرو است افراسیابیم

"'My heart tells me that this world-conquerer
Intends and plans to marry you;
If this king has offered his heart to you
Then a great prey has fallen in your snare!
But, though you may find him ever restless,
You mustn't fall for his tricks!
With his sweet words he mustn't
Partake of Širin's sweetmeat for free!
Having sullied you, he will leave
And go in search of another!
I've heard that he holds thousands of beauties [in his harem],
All with lips of sugar and enticing locks.
When his heart is gladdened by all those roses,

Why would he set his heart upon a single rose?
Yet, if he does not gain access to the treasure,
Then he will not tire of his treasure-hunt!
When he finds you to be loyal and virtuous,
He will ask me for your hand in the best of ways.
You'll be the most pious in all the world,
And the world's dominion will be at your feet!
If you remain pure in your own essence,
Then to his poison you'll be a remedy.
And if, in passion, he gets his way with you
He will find you both heedless and drunk.
Then, like Vis, you'll be far from good repute
And become infamous the world over for your obscenity.
He may be the moon, but we are the sun!
And if he be Keyḵosrow, we are Afrāsiyāb!'"[284]

In general, it is possible to identify this instant in the text as the moment when the obsession with virginity and chastity, which is ever-present in both this rendition of the Širin story and in that of Ferdowsi, takes shape in this tale. References to Širin's virtue are of course intimated from the very beginning of Neẓāmi's descriptions of the princess. Yet it is in this scene that the subject is brought to the fore of both Širin's and the reader's attention and is made the key element necessary to preserve in order for Širin to achieve her goal. Mahin Bānu's promise to Širin that preserving her virginity for marriage to Ḵosrow will make her "the most pious in the world/and the world's dominion will be at [her] feet" echoes Ferdowsi's final reference to Širin as "the pure/respectable woman" (*zan-e pārsā*), especially given the fact that both lines use the word *pārsā(yī)* ("unblemished; unblemishedness") to describe Širin. On a meta-textual level, Mahin Bānu (and,

[284] Dastgerdi 1954, 119, vv. 11–13; 120, vv. 1–12.

in effect, Neẓāmi) assures Širin that preserving her virtue and chastity in this epic will erase the ill-repute that sullied her name in the previous text.

In another meta-textual reference, Mahin Bānu warns Širin that if she gives in to Ḵosrow's advances, then "like Vis, [she] will be far from good repute/ and [will] become infamous the world over for [her] obscenity." The reference to Vis carries multiple layers of meaning: for one, it demonstrates that Neẓāmi is well acquainted with *Vis o Rāmin* and has deliberately decided not to compose a rendition of that romance instead of *Ḵosrow o Širin*; a choice which ultimately plays a vital role in the passing of *Vis o Rāmin* as a full text into oblivion, never to be emulated and re-written by later literary figures. The reference to Vis also brings to the fore Neẓāmi's active decision not to name Gorgāni's romance as an inspiration for his own *Ḵosrow o Širin*, even when the influence of the former on the plot of the latter is obvious. More significant to our own analysis, it illustrates how the story of Vis lay on the horizon of readers'/listeners' minds as the scandalous tale of an obscene and wanton woman who was "far from good repute," showing how only two decades later Vis had already become—as she herself argues in the text—"a sign [of infamy] in the world!"[285] To some extent this points to a shift in the moral horizon from Ferdowsi and Gorgāni's time, which still seems to hold space for a positive portrayal of a woman with sexual agency, to Neẓāmi's time, which locates Širin's "purity" and "goodness" of character in her virginity. Neẓāmi's reference to Vis also proves that by this point in time the character of Vis had already been misunderstood; removed from the context of her story and no longer supported by Gorgāni's explanations of her innocence, she is cast as the mere prototype of an infamously lascivious woman.

[285] Minovi 1935, 306, v. 36.

Another point of significance is the relationship between Mahin Bānu and Širin, which hearkens back to another relationship we encountered early on in the *Šāhnāme*: namely that of Rudābe and her mother Sindoḵt. Just as we find Mahin Bānu helping Širin catch "a great prey," we also saw Sindoḵt struggle and strive to secure the best outcome for her daughter. A similar relationship is also present in *Vis o Rāmin*, between Vis and the Nanny. Although a much more controversial figure than Sindoḵt or Mahin Bānu, as we shall discuss in chapter three, the Nanny plays a pivotal role in uniting Vis with Rāmin and bringing their love to fruition. Such relationships are of great importance, as the older women pass down to the young heroines the notions of independent female agency along with guidance on how to behave in their own best interest in a male-dominated world. As we shall see this is especially significant in the case of Širin, as Mahin Bānu awakens in her a sense of her own self-worth, which sustains the heroine throughout the epic even as Ḵosrow attempts to treat her like one of the many women in his harem and not like the strong, determined, steadfast women of royal lineage that she is.

The Queen's reference to Ḵosrow as "a great prey," which has fallen in Širin's "snare" is also intriguing, as it turns on its head the common trope of the male lover as the hunter and the female beloved as the hunted. The inverted trope thus signifies the emergence of Širin's nascent understanding of her own agency in this love affair. As such, this reversal offers another great example of the breakdown of common gender binaries through the subversion of familiar tropes.

Mahin Bānu concludes her didactic soliloquy with a powerful line:

گر او ماهست ما نیز آفتابیم وگر کیخسرو است افراسیابیم

"'He may be the moon, but we are the sun!
And if he is Keyḵosrow, then we are Afrāsiyāb!'"

Though a positive image in Persianate poetic culture that often serves as a symbol of the fair beloved, the moon is, in reality, much less majestic, powerful and regal than the sun—the celestial symbol of monarchy—from which the moon gets its light. Mahin Bānu also proclaims that while Ḵosrow may be Keyḵosrow—one of the most renowned Iranian kings—she and Širin are Afrāsiyāb, an equally powerful Turānian monarch and a strong adversary of the Iranians. Mahin Bānu's declaration here is quite dramatic. She challenges the epic's most royal figure—the king of Iran—by declaring that she and Širin are actually much greater than him (and, perhaps, the source of his shine and luster, just as the moon receives its light from the sun).[286] Her claim that while he may be Keyḵosrow, they are Afrāsiyāb, operates in the same vein, at least with regard to their power as kings.[287]

Širin takes Mahin Bānu's advice to heart and agrees to follow her counsel.[288] She then returns to her merrymaking with Ḵosrow and the two continue to enjoy each other's company. One episode that stands out amidst their merriments is when Širin defeats Ḵosrow in a game of polo.[289] The depiction of Širin as the winning party in this match is symbolically empowering, as polo is often associated with royalty and regarded as a kingly sport. Širin's triumph is both a mark of her strength and of her independence as a female character. It also suggests that she will

[286] This could also be symbolic of the fact that at this point Ḵosrow is essentially being protected by Mahin Bānu in her realm, as he has fled his own kingdom for his life, due to Bahrām Čubin's rebellion.
[287] The comparison of Keyḵosrow and Afrāsiyāb, however, is also problematic, given the fact that Afrāsiyāb is actually represented as quite a villainous character in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*, based on previous representations in older Iranian sources. But I believe that what is being compared here is their projections of strength as rulers and kings, and not their characters. It is also interesting to note that Afrāsiyāb is, like Širin, is from the periphery of the Iranian world (he is a Turānian), as well as the most consequential threat to the empire of the Iranians, while Keyḵosrow, like Ḵosrow, is an Iranian.
[288] Dastgerdi 1954, 121, vv. 5–11.
[289] Dastgerdi 1954, 121–25.

naturally be a better ruler than Ḵosrow[290] and also reinforces the inversion of the traditional gender-binary, with the female defeating the male in a regal sport.

The couple's merrymaking days end, however, when Širin refuses to give into Ḵosrow's advances. She instead tells him that she will not become any more intimate with him until he has regained his throne from the usurper Bahrām Čubin and properly taken her as his wife. Ḵosrow, enraged by Širin, blames her and her love for all the ills that have befallen him, and leaves her.[291] He then travels to Rum (Byzantium) where he seeks Caesar's aid in regaining control of his kingdom. Caesar (Qeysar) agrees to help Ḵosrow regain his throne and, in exchange, Ḵosrow marries Caesar's daughter, Maryam.[292] Although Maryam's presence causes Ḵosrow's rule to flourish, he nonetheless misses Širin constantly and cannot forget her.[293] Meanwhile, Mahin Bānu dies and leaves her kingdom to Širin, who becomes the queen of Armenia where she is renowned for her generosity and justice; she cannot, however, forget Ḵosrow and finds herself distracted by thoughts of him:

مهین‌بانو دلش دادی شب و روز بداند تا نشکند ماه دل افروز
یکی روزش بخلوت پیش خود خواند که عمرش آستین بر دولت افشاند
کلید گنجها دادش که برگیر که پیشت مُرد خواهد مادر پیر
چو روزی چند بروی رنج شد چیر تن از جان سیر شد جان از جهان سیر
جهان از جان شیرینش جدا کرد بشیرین هم جهان هم جان رها کرد
چنین است آفرینش را ولایت که باشد هر بهاری را نهایت
چنین گفتند دانایان هشیار که نیک و بد بمرگ آید پدیدار
بسا زن نام کانجا مرد یابی بسا مردا که رویش زرد یابی
چو بر شیرین مقرر گشت شاهی فروغ ملک بر مه شد ز ماهی
بانصافش رعیت شاد گشتند همه زندانیان آزاد گشتند
ز مظلومان عالم جور برداشت همه آیین جور از دُور برداشت

[290] This also connects to Meisami's discussion of how the tale of *Ḵosrow o Širin* may, from one angle, be seen as a journey for Ḵosrow to learn to become a good and true monarch. See Meisami 1987, ch. 5.
[291] Dastgerdi 1954, 157–59.
[292] Dastgerdi 1954, 160, vv. 2–11.
[293] Dastgerdi 1954, 166, v. 15; 168–175.

مسلم کرد شهر و روستا را که بهتر داشت از دنیا دعا را
زعدلش باز با تیهو شده خویش بیک جا آب خورده گرگ با میش
رعیت هر چه بود از دور و پیوند بدین و داد او خوردند سوگند
نیت چون نیک باشد پادشا را گهر خیزد بجای گل گیا را
درخت بد نیت خوشیده شاخست شه نیکو نیت را پی فراخست
فراخیها و تنگی‌های اطراف زرای پادشاه خود زند لاف
زچشم پادشاه افتاد رائی که بد رائی کند در پادشائی
چو شیرین از شهنشه بی‌خبر بود در آن شاهی دلش زیر و زبر بود
اگرچه دولت کیخسروی داشت چو مدهوشان سر صحرا روی داشت

"Mahin Bānu gave her heart, both day and night
So that bright moon would not shatter [from sadness].
One day she called her to her chambers,
For her life had turned against fate.
The keys to the treasuries she gave to her, saying,
'Take these, for your old mother shall [soon] expire before you.'
When pain overcame her for a few days—
Her body tired of life, and her soul of the world—
Her sweet soul departed from the world,
And she entrusted both the world and life to Širin!
The wise sages have said thus:
That both good and bad shall be made manifest [only] upon death!
Then, many a "woman" you'll find to be a man;
And many a "man" you'll find sallowed by fear![294]
When kingship was conferred upon Širin
The light of dominion passed from one moon to the next.
By her justice the subjects were gladdened
[And] all the prisoners set free!
She freed the innocent from tyranny;
[Nay rather] she abolished tyranny altogether!
She exempted both city and village from taxes,
For she preferred [the people's] blessings to worldly goods.
By her justice the partridge and the falcon became friends,

[294] This line, again, very visibly demonstrates a reversal of stereotypical gender binaries.

And the ewe and the wolf drank from the same spring.
Subjects from both near and far
Swore by her faith and fairness!
[Verily,] when a monarch's intentions are pure
Gems will grow from plants in lieu of flowers!
An ill-intentioned tree [renders] dry branches;
[But] a well-intentioned king [grows] abundant roots!
Both abundance and dearth in a kingdom
Are signs of the monarch's mentality.
The minister who dispenses ill advice
Will be cast in abjection in the king's sight.
As Širin had no news from the king,
Her heart was uneasy in that monarchy.
Though she reigned over a kingdom,
Like the dazed, she had the mind of a desert wanderer."[295]

The passage above mentions the passing of the monarchy from one female ruler to the next, thereby highlighting the importance of female lineage and the transference of power by women from one generation to the other. Like Sindoḵt and Vis' nanny before her, Mahin Bānu serves as Širin's confidant and guide; however, her role also extends beyond this. In Neẓāmi's epic, Mahin Bānu provides Širin with earthly power and dominion: she leaves her kingdom for Širin to rule, thereby crowning her as a queen and as an equal in status to her beloved Ḵosrow. As noted previously, the late queen is also a manifestation of Širin's intrinsic value: it is she who awakens in Širin the notion of her self-worth and the importance of protecting herself from Ḵosrow's potential abuse.[296]

[295] Dastgerdi 1954, 175–181. As we can see Širin is naturally a just and good ruler, in contrast to Ḵosrow, who encounters multiple problems as a king, some stemming from his own injustice. Yet, as we shall discuss, Širin is made to forego her monarchy for fear of acting unjustly as a result of being in love, while Ḵosrow is allowed to stay seated upon the throne and commit as much injustice as he pleases, at least initially.
[296] Dastgerdi 1954, 120, v. 12. If we compare this to Ḵosrow, who succumbs to injustices, we are left with even more proof of Širin's supremacy as a ruler over Ḵosrow.

The aforementioned excerpt likewise characterizes Širin's rule as a source of justice and fairness for her people: she sets free the prisoners, exempts her people from taxation, and, as Neẓāmi says, "abolish[es] tyranny all together!" It is worth noting that Ḵosrow does not garner similar praise when instated and then re-instated upon the throne. As previously mentioned, however, Širin's longing for Ḵosrow interferes with her ability to rule. Out of fear that her yearning for her beloved will make her prone to tyranny, she entrusts her kingdom to a confidant and travels to Iran, where she settles in the hopes of reuniting with Ḵosrow,[297] despite knowing of his marriage to Maryam, who has forbidden him from taking additional wives.[298] Širin's decision to vacate the throne highlights two points: first that Širin, unlike Ḵosrow, is not willing to sacrifice the good of her subjects— or her own heart— for the sake of earthly power. Second, as we shall see by the end of the story, when Ḵosrow bestows Širin's kingdom unto Šāpur as a gift, the text seems determined to deny Širin the right to rule directly as a woman.

Upon hearing of Širin's arrival in Iran, Ḵosrow's yearning for her grows exponentially. He asks Šāpur to find her and ask if she would be amenable to a secret rendezvous.[299] When Šāpur iterates Ḵosrow's request to Širin, she becomes furious and begins a long, beautiful and vibrant soliloquy in which she laments her own state, responds to Ḵosrow's requests with cutting sarcasm, and chastises and threatens him.[300] This soliloquy (parts of which will be analyzed shortly) is the first and perhaps strongest moment of the narrative in which Širin expresses her self-worth and magnanimity in relation to Ḵosrow's maltreatment of her.

Following this, Neẓāmi begins the story of Farhād's love for Širin. Desolate, anguished, and uncomfortable in her new abode, in a palace in western Iran, Širin loses her appetite, craving

[297] Dastgerdi 1954, 182, vv. 8–12.
[298] Dastgerdi 1954, 182, v. 3.
[299] Dastgerdi 1954, 198–99.
[300] Dastgerdi 1954, 199–215.

nothing but milk. Given the castle's distance from the shepherds' plains, however, procuring the sweet drink proves diffiult. When she complains of this to Šāpur, the artist remembers his childhood friend Farhād, who studied art with him in China and is the most masterful of sculptors, capable of carving stone as though it were wax.[301] Farhād is summoned to Širin's presence so that she may inform him of her need and he can find a solution. Upon meeting Širin and, more specifically, upon listening to her speak, Farhād falls madly in love with her. Neẓāmi tells us:

درآمد کوهکن مانند کوهی کز او آمد خلایق را شکوهی
چو یک پیل از ستبری و بلندی بمقدار دو پیلش زورمندی
برون پرده فرهاد ایستاده میان دربسته و بازو گشاده
در اندیشه که لعبت باز گردون چه بازی آردش زان پرده بیرون
جهان ناگه شبیخون سازیی کرد پس آن پرده لعبت بازیی کرد
بشیرین خنده‌های شگرین ساز درآمد شکر شیرین بآواز
شنیدم نام او شیرین از آن بود که در گفتن عجب شیرین زبان بود
در آن مجلس که او لب برگشادی نبودی کس که حالی جان ندادی
کسی را کان سخن در گوش رفتی گر افلاطون بدی از هوش رفتی
زشیرین گفتن و گفتار شیرین شده هوش از سر فرهاد مسکین
سخن‌ها را شنیدن میتوانست ولیکن فهم کردن می‌ندانست

"The mountain-carver appeared, like a mountain;
He from whom [artistic] splendors were rendered unto creation!
Like an elephant in thickness and stature,
[And] in strength greater than two elephants.
Farhād, standing on the other side of the veil,
His midriff covered, his bulging arms bare,
Wondering what trick the playful heavens
Will manifest [this time] from behind its veil.
Suddenly the universe sprung on him a surprise,
And performed a shadow play from behind the veil!
In sweet laughter of sugared melodies,
Širin's sugared voice arose [from behind the veil].

[301] Dastgerdi 1954, 215–17.

I've heard that her name was Širin (sweetness)
For in speech she was exceptionally sweet!
In the gathering where she parted her lips [in speech]
There was none who wouldn't give his life in an instant!
He whose ears her utterance penetrated,
Even if he were Plato, he'd be dumbfounded!
By sweet speech and Širin's utterances
All discernment escaped poor Farhād.
He could hear [all of] the words,
But couldn't understand [a thing]."[302]

An exceptionally noteworthy moment in the passage above is Neẓāmi's claim that Širin earns her name, not from the sweetness of her physical beauty, but because of the sweetness of her eloquent speech (*dar goftan ʿajab širin zabān bud* "For in speech she was exceptionally sweet!"). In other words, while the author does expend line upon line describing Širin's physical beauty, it is instead the power of speech and utterance that wins her the title for which she becomes renowned throughout the world. This hearkens back to what we gleaned from both Ferdowsi's Sudābe and Širin: the real "magic" exercised by these women resides not in their physical beauty, but in their voices and their power of speech. To claim that even a philosopher like Plato would be dumbfounded by the sweetness of her utterances further hints at the magical quality of Širin's speech, which mimics a spell capable of subduing the wisest of men. Thus, we see this subtle argument revisited, brought out, and emphasized here in Neẓāmi's rendition of Širin.

Following this encounter, Farhād sets out to fulfill Širin's request. His love for Širin drives him mad and thus further fuels his drive in completing her request.[303] News of Farhād's ardent love for Širin reaches Ḵosrow's court, infuriating the king and instilling jealousy and the fear of

[302] Dastgerdi 1954, 218–19.
[303] Dastgerdi 1954, 22–26.

losing Širin in him.[304] He takes counsel with the magi, who recommend his summoning Farhād to court in an attempt to dissuade him from acting on his love for Širin by bestowing lavish gifts upon him.[305] Farhād is called to court and thus begins a beautiful exchange between the stone-mason and the king, in which Ḵosrow tries to test Farhād's love and deter his affection for Širin. Farhād's responses to Ḵosrow's almost threatening inquiries suggest that Farhād's love for the heroine has exceeded the physical and romantic, becoming an almost mystical love.[306] Finding himself helpless against the force of Farhād's love, Ḵosrow resorts to a small ruse: believing Farhād incapable of accomplishing such a deed, Ḵosrow tells him that if he can carve a path for him through a specific mountain by which he often passes, he can have Širin.[307] Farhād agrees and begins his work, all the while remembering Širin and crying in longing for her.[308] Meanwhile, Širin decides one day to visit Farhād in the mountains:

بخنده گفت با یاران دل افروز علم بر بیستون خواهم زد امروز
به بینم کاهنین بازوی فرهاد چگونه سنگ می‌برد بپولاد
مگر زان سنگ و آهن روزگاری بدلگرمی فتد بر من شراری

> "Smiling, the sweetheart said to her companions,
> 'Today I shall pitch my tent upon Mount Bisotun,
> That I may better see the iron arm of Farhād;
> How it cuts through the rock with steel,
> So that perhaps from that rock and steel,
> A spark may inflame my heart!'"[309]

These lines illustrate two significant components of Širin's character: her sweet coquettish ways, which, although perhaps "transgressive," actually complement the virtue that the text repeatedly

[304] Dastgerdi 1954, 226–27.
[305] Dastgerdi 1954, 227–28.
[306] Dastgerdi 1954, 228–35.
[307] Dastgerdi 1954, 236.
[308] Dastgerdi 1954, 238–48.
[309] Dastgerdi 1954, 249, vv. 1–3.

attributes to her;[310] and the subject of her agency in romantic love, as she now genuinely considers Farhād as a potential lover, given Ḵosrow's own infidelities and inconsistencies. As Širin sets out to leave after a short visit to Farhād, her horse falls and is unable to make the journey back. At this, Farhād carries both Širin and her horse upon his shoulders and returns them to her palace.[311]

Ḵosrow learns of Širin's visit to Farhād in the mountains, of how he has carried her and her steed back to her abode, and of how Širin's visit to the stonemason has energized him to complete the impossible task Ḵosrow has set before him. At this Ḵosrow takes counsel with his trusted advisors once more. They suggest that if he desires to solve this problem, he should dispatch an envoy to inform Farhād that Širin has died. The force of Farhād's love for her would bring about his demise if he were to think she had perished.[312] Ḵosrow acts accordingly and the devastating lie prompts Farhād to end his own life by throwing himself off the mountain.[313] Neẓāmi uses the opportunity of Farhād's tragic and unjust death to cite the fickleness of fortune and the faithlessness of this world.[314] He also chastises Ḵosrow for the evil he has committed and links his ultimate murder at the hands of his own son to fortune's vengeance for the wrongs he committed against Farhād.[315]

Devastated by news of Farhād's death, Širin builds a mausoleum over his burial site in his honor.[316] Hearing of this, Ḵosrow regrets his actions but decides to write a letter to Širin in which he sarcastically offers his condolences while blaming Širin for causing Farhād's demise with her love. Upon receiving the letter, Širin is at first so elated, she kisses the scroll out of respect and

[310] In truth, Širin's coquettish behavior and flirtatious ways are actually not transgressive at all; they are the common and expected ways of the beloved.
[311] Dastgerdi 1954, 253, vv. 1–9.
[312] Dastgerdi 1954, 254-55.
[313] Dastgerdi 1954, 256–58.
[314] Dastgerdi 1954, 258–62.
[315] Dastgerdi 1954, 263, vv. 3–4.
[316] Dastgerdi 1954, 262, vv. 10–14.

love. Yet, as Neẓāmi explains, she soon discovers the letter to be an act of cruelty disguised as kindness:

قصب‌هائی در او پیچیده صد مار رطب‌هائی در او پوشیده صدخار

"[Rolls] of silken brocades stuffed with snakes,
Fresh dates stuffed with thorns!"[317]

Soon after Farhād's untimely death, however, Ḵosrow's Maryam also dies. Širin is gladdened by this news in one regard, for it means she need no longer envy Maryam and can be with Ḵosrow. At the same time, the news saddens her, because she knows that death will one day visit her as well; a reaction which again illustrates her substantial wisdom compared to Ḵosrow. Out of respect for Ḵosrow, Širin refrains from celebrations for one month. Yet at the end of this short period of commiseration, she seizes the opportunity to respond to Ḵosrow's bitter and sarcastic letter with one of equal derision and venom. She writes:

عروس شاه اگر در زیر خاکست عروسان دگر دارد چه باکست
از او به گرچه شه را همدمی نیست شهنشه زود سیر آمد غمی نیست
نظر بر گلستانی دیگر آرد وزو به دلستانی در بر آرد
مرنج ایشاه نازکدل بدینرنج که گنج است آنصنم در خاک به گنج

"Though the king's bride is now under the ground;
What fear!? For he has many other brides!
And while there's no companion for the king better than her,
Sorrow not! For the king is easily appeased!
His gaze shall fall upon another garden
And [surely] he will find an even better beloved!
Be not saddened by this grief, O delicate king;
That idol was a treasure-trove, and treasure is best kept buried in the ground!"[318]

[317] Dastgerdi 1954, 266, v. 1.
[318] Dastgerdi 1954, 269, vv. 5–10.

Initially infuriated by Širin's response, Ḵosrow soon concedes that this reply befits the letter he had sent her; he deserves such derision.[319] Soon after, Ḵosrow pursues Širin once again, and while his advances please Širin, she is put off by his refusal to make her his wife, instead desiring to take her as his mistress. As a result, Širin does not give in to Ḵosrow's advances. Frustrated by her resistance, Ḵosrow begins searching for another beloved in hopes that this may ultimately entice Širin to give in.[320] Soon after, he hears of the beautiful Šekar of Isfahan, with whom he at first becomes romantically involved and then marries and takes to his harem.[321]

Ḵosrow's love for Šekar soon wears off, however, and he finds himself once again enthralled in the pangs of love for Širin. Neẓāmi devotes quite a few lines to describing Širin's superiority to Šekar, cleverly using the meaning of the women's respective names to demonstrate the stark difference between them:

شکر هرگز نگیرد جای شیرین بچربد بر شکر حلوای شیرین
چمن خاکست چون نسرین نباشد شکر تلخست چون شیرین نباشد
مگو شیرین و شکر هست یکسان زنی خیزد شکر شیرینی از جان
ز شیرینی بزرگان ناشکیبند بشکر طفل و طوطی را فریبند
زشیرین تا شکر فرقی عیانست که شیرین جان و شکر جای جانست
بداند اینقدر هرکش تمیز است که شکر بهر شیرینی عزیز است

"Sugar (Šekar) can never replace sweetness (Širin),
The sweetmeats of sweetness vanquish sugar!
Grass is nothing but dirt without the wild rose [in its midst];
[And] sugar is bitter without its sweetness!

[319] Dastgerdi 1954, 271, vv. 4–5.
[320] Dastgerdi 1954, 272–73.
[321] In yet another motif, which Neẓāmi borrows from Gorgāni's romance, the Ganjavi poet introduces the character of Šekar; a beautiful courtesan in Isfahan, who wins the heart of Ḵosrow and whom he marries. As we shall see, such a character also exists in the story of Vis and Rāmin, by the name of Gol (lit. Rose). Yet, unlike Gol whose name bears no relationship unto Vis, Neẓāmi chooses the name of Šekar (sugar) for Širin's rival. He then, through the juxtaposition of Šekar (sugar) and Širin (sweetness), begins a beautiful and clever word play (as seen in the following passage in the text) where he compares the two women, with Širin naturally being the ultimate winner, for indeed what is sugar without sweetness?

Say not that sweetness and sugar are equals;
Sugar stems from the cane, sweetness from the soul!
By sweetness the greats are driven to restlessness;
[While] with sugar children and parrots are kept busy.
A great difference lies between Širin and Šekar;
For sweetness is the soul; sugar its holder!
Whoever is intelligent knows this much:
That sugar is only made dear by its sweetness!"[322]

Though lovelorn for Širin, Ḵosrow decides it would be in his best interest not to approach her, in order not to make himself appear abject.[323] He also summons Šāpur from Širin's presence to his own court, in order to isolate Širin and make her situation more difficult.[324] Širin is eventually overcome by her loneliness and grief, and having spent the dark night in lamentation, she turns to God in fervent prayer at the break of dawn. Uttered in the most heartfelt manner, Širin's invocation to God is one of the rawest and most beautiful parts of the epic:

خداوندا شبم را روز گردان چو روزم بر جهان پیروز گردان
شبی دارم سیاه از صبح نومید درین شب روسپیدم کن چو خورشید
غمی دارم هلاک شیر مردان برین غم چون نشاطم چیر گردان
ندارم طاقت این کوره تنگ خلاصی ده مرا چون لعل ازین سنگ
بآب دیده طفلان محروم بسوز سینه پیران مظلوم
بداور داور فریاد خواهان بیارب یا رب صاحب گناهان

[322] Dastgerdi, 1954, 285–86.
[323] Dastgerdi 1954, 287–89. The conclusion that Ḵosrow reaches is that if he were to abject himself by going to seek Širin, it would dishonor him and decrease from his "manliness," for he would be dealing with a woman in "the manner of women." At first, he asks that why should he, as a lion, allow a gazelle (meaning Širin) to conquer him? He then admits that he is actually a "shaven sheep," but concludes that it is better for him to be such a weak creature in his own kingdom and under the guise of his monarchy, than in a foreign land ruled by his beloved. Drawing the episode to a close, Neẓāmi then plunges into a few lines of advice in which he counsels the reader to "not beat a woman, but if she quarrels/then beat her such that she can never get up again!" In an epic that includes such a strong, independent female heroine, such utterances, though scarce, come across as shocking and also telling of the milieu in which they were composed. A similarly slanderous section may be found in the utterances of Maryam, when Ḵosrow tells her about the arrival of Širin to Madā'en. See Dastgerdi 1954, 197, vv. 1–5. Yet the episode also tells us a great deal about Ḵosrow, as a person, versus Širin. While Širin is in this relationship/ dilemma for the sake of love and she is being true to herself, Ḵosrow is still behaving out of a place of immaturity and pomp, unwilling to break his hubris for the sake of love.
[324] Dastgerdi 1954, 289, vv. 11–12.

بریحان نثار اشک ریزان بقرآن و چراغ صبح خیزان
بتصدیقی که دارد راهب دیر بتوفیقی که بخشد واهب خیر
که رحمی بر دل پر خونم آور وزین غرقاب غم بیرونم آور
اگر هرموی من گردد زبانی شود هر یک ترا تسبیح خوانی
هنوز از بی‌زبانی خفته باشم زصد شکرت یکی ناگفته باشم
تو آن هستی که با تو کیستی نیست توئی هست آندگر جز نیستی نیست
بدرگاه تو در امید و در بیم نشاید راه بردن جز بتسلیم
زتو چون پوشم این راز نهانی وگر پوشم تو خود پوشیده دانی
چو خواهش کرد بسیار از دل پاک چو آب چشم خود غلتید بر خاک
فراخی دادش ایزد در دل تنگ کلیدش را برآورد آهن از سنگ
جوان شد گلبن دولت دیگربار زتلخی رست شیرین شکربار
نیایش در دل خسرو اثر کرد دلش را چون فلک زیر و زبر کرد

"'O Lord, turn my [dark] night into day,
And, like the morn, render me victorious over the world!
My night is black, with no hope of dawn;
Make me triumphant in this night, like the sun!
My pain would kill [even] the bravest of men;
Like joy, render me triumphant over this sorrow!
I can no longer bear this cramped kiln;
Free me! Like a ruby from this mine!
By the tears of innocent children,
By the burning [sighs] of the poor elderly!
By the oppressed's cries of 'O Judge! O Judge!'
By the sinners' pleas of 'O Lord! O Lord!'
By the tears shed by those who are crying!
By the Qurʿān and the lamp of those who rise in prayer at dawn!
By the testimony of the convent's nun!
By the grace the giver bestows in his alms!
Cast mercy upon my bloodied heart,
And pull me out of this whirlpool of grief!
If each strand of my hair became a tongue
Each one would sing Thy praise;
[And] still I'd be like a slumberer in my silence,
As though, from Thine myriad blessings, I hadn't even praised one!

Thou art He Who is known by none!
Thou art He Who exists; all else are naught!
At Thy threshold, in both fear and in hope,
One can only [bow] in submission.
How can I keep a secret from Thee?
For Thou knowest all that is hidden!'
Since she begged incessantly with a pure heart,
Since tears fell from her eyes upon the earth;
God granted her sore heart relief;
Iron conjured the key from inside the stone!
Fortune's rose-garden was once again renewed
And sweet Širin was freed from bitterness.
The prayer exercised its influence upon Ḵosrow's heart
[And], like the wheel of fortune, his heart turned!"[325]

Ḵosrow then uses the hunt as an excuse to visit Širin's abode on his return to the palace. In a state of drunkenness, he approaches Širin's castle. While Širin is gladdened by his impending visit, she also fears for her virtue and for what people will say should Ḵosrow enter her abode in such a state. She thus commands that a feast be prepared for the king outside, but that the castle gates be firmly shut. Upon his arrival Ḵosrow is distraught to find the castle closed off to him and voices his displeasure to Širin, who grandly welcomes him from above the parapets. Thus begins a long and beautiful dialogue between Širin and Ḵosrow— one visibly influenced by *Vis o Rāmin*— in which the epic's heroine delivers to Ḵosrow her complaints regarding his treatment of her thus far. In response, Ḵosrow apologizes, defends himself, and attempts to respond to every accusation. Though appearing under different circumstances and concluding with disparate endings, this scene may be regarded as the equivalent to the scene in Ferdowsi's rendition in which Ḵosrow approaches Širin's palace and, hearing her complaints and remembering their love, takes her as his

[325] Dastgerdi 1954, 294–96. Širin's sincerity here is starkly juxtaposed against Ḵosrow's hubris and unwillingness to be honest about his emotions, as illustrated by the previous passage.

wife. Neẓāmi's scene, however, ends with Ḵosrow making countless attempts to win Širin over and to enter her abode; once he realizes that it is impossible, however, he gives up and returns to Madā'en.

Immediately after Ḵosrow's departure, Širin regrets her bold and tempestuous responses to his requests. Fearing that she may lose him once again, she saddles her steed and gallops to Madā'en (following the literary example of Vis). With the help of Šāpur in Madā'en, Širin and Ḵosrow converse through the court singers Nakisā and Bārbad, a scene which culminates with Širin bursting out from behind the veil and revealing her presence to Ḵosrow who, enthralled and captivated by her love, takes Širin in his arms and vows to marry her. The couple finally wed and Ḵosrow's reign flourishes with Širin as his queen, further illustrating her positive influence on him, as a talented ruler herself. Širin then encourages Ḵosrow to be just and to seek knowledge, for the acquisition of which the couple turn to Ḵosrow's learned vizier, Bozorg Omid.[326]

Ḵosrow and Širin's days of happiness are cut short, however, once Širuye—Ḵosrow's son from Maryam—reaches maturity. Dark-natured and ill-tempered, Širuye turns against his father and finally has him killed one night as he lies asleep next to his beloved Širin. Jolting awake from the fatal wound, Ḵosrow cannot bring himself to disturb Širin and decides to let her remain in her sweet slumber as he dies. This instant, I believe, marks the point when Ḵosrow's character comes to fruition; when his love for Širin becomes genuine, free from the fetters of beauty, pomp, or power; when he chooses Širin's happiness and ease over his own desire. It is at this point that Ḵosrow and Širin's love for one another stands on an equal footing at last. This scene could also

[326] In her article "What is it Khusraw learns from the *Kalīla-Dimna* stories?" van Ruymbeke argues that the inclusion of the few stories from *Kelile o Demne* into the stories, which Širin asks Bozorg Omid to tell herself and Ḵosrow, is ultimately nothing more than "a literary tour-de-force introduced for the intellectual recreation of Nizāmī's cultured audience" (van Ruymbeke 162). Nevertheless, what this does illustrate is the depth of Širin's knowledge, her wisdom in trying to help Ḵosrow advance his own knowledge and understanding, and the general positive influence she has on the king.

be interpreted as the point at which the story of *Ḵosrow o Širin* transcends a narrative of romantic love and—figuratively paving the way for Neẓāmi's *Leyli o Majnun*—demonstrates an almost transcendental love and devotion between the two lovers.

Shortly after Ḵosrow dies, Širin awakens and finds her bed soaked in her beloved's blood. Grief-stricken and shocked, Širin mourns the loss of Ḵosrow but ultimately gathers her strength to wash and prepare his body for burial. Similar to Ferdowsi's rendition, Širin is soon after approached on Širuye's behalf with an offer of marriage and greater favors than any which Ḵosrow had previously bestowed upon her. Širin feigns acceptance but asks to pay her last respects to Ḵosrow alone in his mausoleum on the day of his burial. At the appointed hour Širin, donning a beautiful yellow dress with a red brocade and faking indifference to her late-husband's death throughout the funerary procession, enters the burial cellar alone, closing the gates behind her. There, kneeling before the body of her beloved, Širin kisses his wound and, producing a dagger that she has procured for the purpose of suicide, stabs herself in the exact same spot as Ḵosrow's wound. Neẓāmi writes:

بخون گرم شست آنخوابگه را جراحت تازه کرد اندام شه را
پس آورد آنگهی شه را در آغوش لبش بر لب نهاد و دوش بر دوش
به نیروی بلند آواز برداشت چنان کان قوم از آوازش خبر داشت
که جان با جان و تن با تن بهپیوست تن از دوری و جان از داوری رست
ببزم خسرو آن شمع جهانتاب مبارک باد شیرین را شکر خواب
بآمرزش رساند آن آشنائی که چون اینجا رسد گوید دعائی
کالهی تازه دار این خاکدان را بیامرز این دو یار مهربان را
زهی شیرین و شیرین مردن او زهی جان دادن و جان بردن او
چنین واجب کند در عشق مردن بجانان جان چنین باید سپردن
نه هر کو زن بود نامرد باشد زن آنمرد است کو بیدرد باشد
بسا رعنا زنا کو شیر مرد است بسا دیبا که شیرین در نورد است

"She washed that bedchamber in [her] warm blood,
[And it was as though] she renewed the king's wound!

She then took the king onto her bosom
Pressing her lips upon his and her shoulders against his.
With great force she screamed,
Such that everyone realized what had happened!
For soul with soul and body with body were united in one,
The body was freed from separation, and the soul from judgement!
At the feast of Ḵosrow, that world-illuminating candle,
May Širin's sweet slumber be blessed!
[God] bless that man who,
Whenever he arrives here (at their grave), says such a prayer:
O God, bless this earthen grave,
[And] gladden these two loving companions!
Blessed be Širin and her sweet death!
Blessed be her bestowal of life and the giving of it!
This is that which dying in love necessitates;
This is how one must bestow [her] life unto the beloved!
Not everyone who is a woman is unmanly;
A "woman" is a man with no sense of duty!
How many graceful women who are [in truth] lions!
How many silken [beauties] who are [like] Širin in the battlefield!"[327]

Unlike her death scene in the *Šāhnāme*, which bears hints of self-immolation as an act of sacrifice, the death of Neẓāmi's Širin does not signal sacrifice so much as it represents an act born of unspeakable sorrow and tortured love. By dint of Ḵosrow's final act, which demonstrates his true love for Širin, Širin's suicide then too loses any hints of a sacrifice and becomes an act of true love from one lover for her equal beloved.

[327] Dastgerdi 1954, 423–24.

Analysis

Self-Worth

One of the key elements of Neẓāmi's rendition of Širin is the significant reiterations of her inherent self-worth. Like her earlier predecessors in the *Šāhnāme* and Gorgāni's Vis, Širin is well-aware of who she is, from whence she hails, and what she deserves, and she carries forth this notion unapologetically for the majority of the epic. This sense of dignity and self-respect is sparked in Širin through the character of Mahin Bānu in the aforementioned passage with which the queen concludes that if Ḵosrow may be likened unto the moon and the great Iranian king, Keyḵosrow, then they themselves may also be compared to the sun and the powerful Turānian monarch, Afrāsiyāb.[328] With these words, the older, wiser, and more experienced female character, who serves as an all-powerful ruler in her own realm—inspires an undying flame of self-confidence and dignity in the heart of the epic's young heroine; a flame which, arguably, burns in Širin's heart and manifests its splendor in her every action until the very end. We see this self-perception and understanding best manifested in the scene where Šāpur approaches Širin on behalf of Ḵosrow to ask if she will meet with the king in secret, so as to satisfy the king's desire to be with Širin without upsetting Maryam. Širin's bold and unadulterated response to such a request convinces even Šāpur, who ultimately agrees with her, apologizes, and conveys her refusal to such an offer to the king. Neẓāmi writes:

به تندی برزد آزازی بشاپور که از خود شرم داری از خدا دور
مگو چندین که مغزم را برفتی کفایت کن تمام است آنچه گفتی
نه هر گوهر که پیش آید توان سفت نه هرچ آن بر زبان آید توان گفت
نیاید هیچ از انصاف تو یادم به بی انصافیت انصاف دادم
برآوردی مرا از شهریاری کنون خواهی که از جانم برآری
کسادی چون کشم گوهرنژادم نخوانده چون روم آخر نه بادم

[328] Dastgerdi 1954, 120, v. 12.

چو آن درگاه را درخور نیفتم بزور آن به که از در درنیفتم
یکی را گفتم این جان و جهانست جهان بستد کنون در بند جانست
من اینک زنده او با یار دیگر زمهر انگیخته بازار دیگر
گرفتم سگ صفت کردندم آخر بشیر سگ نپروردندم آخر
گر آید دختر قیصر نه شاپور ازین قصرش برسوائی کنم دور
بدستان می‌فریبندم نه مستم نیارند از ره دستان بدستم
اگر هوش مرا در دل ندانند من آن دانم که در بابل ندانند
سراینجا به بود سرکش نه آنجا که نعل اینجاست در آتش نه آنجا
اگر خسرو نه کیخسرو بود شاه نباید کردنش سرپنجه با ماه
به ار پهلو کند زین نرگس مست نهد پیشم چو سوسن دست بردست
وگر با جوش گرمم برستیزد چنان جوشم کز او جوشن بریزد
فرستم زلف را تا یک فن آرد شکیبش را رسن در گردن آرد
بگویم غمزه را تا وقت شبگیر سمندش را برقص آرد بیک تیر
ز گیسو مشک بر آتش فشانم چو عودش بر سر آتش نشانم
ز تاب زلف خویش آرم بتابش فرو بندم بسحر غمزه خوابش
خیالم را بفرمایم که در خواب بدین خاکش دواند تیز چون آب
گرآید خسرو از بتخانه چین زشورستان نیابد شهد شیرین
وگر مریم درخت قند گشته‌است رطب‌های مرا مریم سرشته‌است
گر او را دعوی صاحب کلاهیست مرا نیز از قصب سربند شاهیست
نخواهم کردن این تلخی فراموش که جان شیرین کند مریم کند نوش

“In rage she yelled at Šāpur, [saying,]
‘Have shame, O ungodly one!
Speak no more! You’ve exhausted me!
Stop! You have said enough!
Not every newfound gem is fit for piercing;
And not everything that can be said should be uttered!
I recall no justice from you (Ḵosrow);
[Even as] I tried to justify your injustices!
My dominion you have taken from me,
And now my life you aim to take too?
Why should I bear austerity? I descend from royalty!
Why should I go uninvited? I am not the wind!
If I am not fit [to appear before Ḵosrow’s] throne,
Then it’s better that I not force myself in through the backdoor!

I said that he is my world and my [very] life;
My world he gave away [to Maryam], and is now set upon my life!
Now I am here—alive and well!—and he with another,
Busy with his love games!
He won me over and, like a dog, made me loyal;
But I was not reared on the milk of dogs![329]
[Nay,] even if the daughter of Qeysar comes—not Šāpur!—
I will run her off from this palace in disgrace!
[Why] do you deceive me with tricks? I am no fool!
You will not win me over through deceit.
While of my intellect they may be unaware,
I know that [magic], which they know not even in Babylon!
Unruliness is more fit for me, and not for him!
For the horseshoe (of magic) [lies with me] here, not there![330]
Even if Ḵosrow—nay rather Keyḵosrow!—be king,
he mustn't be cruel to the moon![331]
It's wiser that he abstains from these drunken, narcissus eyes
[And instead] surrender before me, like the lily, hand-in-hand.
But if he continues to engage my rage,
Then I will boil so hot that [even] his mail-armor will melt away!
I will cause my hair to conjure a trick
That will ensnare his patience by the neck!
I will instruct coquetry, at the hour of dawn
To spook his horse with an arrow!
From my locks I will cast musk into fire,
And like incense he'll be set ablaze!
By the curls of my locks I will bring him to his knees,
And by the magic of my wink I'll chase away his sleep!

[329] What is meant by not being "reared by the milk of dogs" here is that Širin is much worthier than Ḵosrow's treatment of her suggests. She is saying that he is treating her as though she is common, while in fact, she is a queen.
[330] Unruliness is one of the quintessential qualities of the beloved; by saying that unruliness is better with her than with Ḵosrow, Širin is saying that *she* is the beloved and not Ḵosrow and, as a result, she should be the one playing games and being coquettish, not him! The "horseshoe" is of course used as a magical instrument. By stating that it lies here with her and not with Ḵosrow, Širin again alludes to the fact that power lies in her court as the beloved, not with Ḵosrow as the lover.
[331] The moon again acts as a reference to the beloved, i.e Širin. The reference to Keyḵosrow also hearkens back to Mahin Bānu's earlier speech, in which she claims that if Ḵosrow is Keyḵosrow, then they are Afrāsiyāb.

> While he sleeps, I'll command my phantom
> Swiftly—like water!— to bring him to me!
> Even if Ḵosrow [is a beauty] from the idol houses of China,
> By dint of his bitter behavior, he will be unable to taste of Širin's sweet honey.
> And though Maryam may now be like a sugar tree,
> My dates were wrought by the hands of the Virgin Mary [herself]![332]
> If [Maryam] has a claim to monarchy,
> My lineage too boasts of many monarchs!
> I shall not forget this bitterness:
> That Širin should give her life, so Maryam can enjoy its sweetness!'"[333]

Throughout this and similar passages in the text, Širin emphasizes her self-worth, citing the purity of her love for Ḵosrow. She is not just *anyone*, someone who can be easily ill-treated, but a queen of illustrious origins who deserves dignity and honor. She compares herself to a gem that is so valuable that it is unfit to be pierced and strung up with other gems, and boldly declares that she should not be forced to bear austerity, given that she descends from the line of kings. She demands that if she visits Ḵosrow's palace, then she must be officially invited and not secretly snuck in through the backdoor. She also bravely bears witness to Ḵosrow's ill-behavior, asserting that he has not treated her fairly, even as she has tried to turn a blind eye to his misdeeds. She reminds Ḵosrow of his place, insisting that as the "lover" he should not be cruel to her and that, as the "beloved," it is her prerogative. In this regard she utilizes the gender-binary trope of the female's "objectifiable" role as the receiver of actions and advances to her own benefit. Here, the beloved wields power over the lover rather than the inverse. She goes so far even as to threaten Ḵosrow, telling him he would do better to approach her in subservience than to continue fighting with her,

[332] Here Širin is playing with the fact that Maryam's name is the same as that of the Virgin Mary (Maryam is the Arabic/Persian equivalent of Mary) and the fact that both Maryam and she are Christian. She is saying that while this new Maryam may be the apple of the king's eye, she (Širin) hails from the seed of the true and original Maryam (the Virgin Mary).
[333] Dastgerdi 1954, 199–206.

for if she pleases, she can unleash her beauty in such ways as to wreak havoc on his soul (we will analyze the use of magic here, shortly). She also draws Maryam into the equation, claiming that Maryam is in no way superior to her, even though she today enjoys all of the benefits meant for bestowal upon Širin. By comparing Maryam to herself, Širin in fact exalts herself above Qeysar's daughter by explaining that while Maryam may be treated like a "sugar tree" (an endless source of sweetness), Širin is actually the more authentic of the two, as her "dates" were wrought by the hands of the Virgin Mary herself.[334]

Širin's awareness and proclamations of her own self-worth manifest throughout other parts of the text as well. Another primary example of this manifestation appears in the scene when Ḵosrow approaches Širin's palace in the heart of winter, on his way back to his own palace after the hunt. Denying Ḵosrow's pleas, Širin refuses to open the castle gates and allow him to enter her palace in a state of utter drunkenness, fearing for her virtue. Instead, she berates and chastises Ḵosrow—from the balcony—in sheer eloquence. She explains how he has treated her throughout the years, accuses him of trying to have his way without having to marry her, and reassures him that his desire will never come to pass:

بدارائی که تن‌ها را خورش داد بمعبودی که جان را پرورش داد
که بی‌کاوین اگرچه پادشاهی زمن برنایدت کامی که خواهی

"'By the Possessor Who granted sustenance unto man!
By the Worshipped-One who nurtured the soul:
Without a dowry—though you may be king!—
You will not get from me that which you desire!'"[335]

[334] Dates here serve two purposes: first that they juxtapose Širin also as a "tree," against Maryam who is being compared to a "sugar tree," and secondly, they are used because the palm tree and its fruit, the date, are often associated with the Virgin Mary.
[335] Dastgerdi 1954, 343, vv. 13–14.

Širin's staunchness of manner ultimately convinces Ḵosrow to give up and return to his palace in frustration.

Širin on a Spiritual Journey? And as Ḵosrow's Spiritual Guide?

There is no doubt that in the battle between Ḵosrow and Širin regarding their romantic relationship, Širin is the ultimate winner. She endures every hardship until she finally achieves her goal, namely, to be with her beloved Ḵosrow in the most virtuous of manners: as his wife and queen. From this perspective Širin relentlessly wields her own agency and ultimately achieves her aims without succumbing to Ḵosrow's "carnal" advances. Širin does seem to capitulate to Ḵosrow towards the end of the epic, when she regrets her obstinance and harshness during their conversation outside of her palace and rushes to Madā'en to find Ḵosrow and to apologize. That said, she still does not waver in her dedication to preserving her own chastity by refusing to be with Ḵosrow without the promise that he will marry her.

In *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, Meisami argues that Neẓāmi's tale of Ḵosrow and Širin can actually be read as a kind of "Mirror for Princes." She believes that the epic's narrative circles around Ḵosrow and his journey toward a kind of enlightenment (or maturity), in order to become the "ideal" king.[336] If we view Neẓāmi's epic from this perspective, then it may be argued that in Ḵosrow's journey towards this ideal, Širin acts as his spiritual guide or adviser who helps lead him away from attachment to the ego and towards knowledge of the truth and a state of higher existence. Širin acts as a guide to Ḵosrow, not only at the end of the tale when she calls upon him to reign more justly and with greater concern for his people, but throughout the entire text. It is, to a great extent, through his interactions with Širin and through both her tireless efforts at preserving the sanctity of their relationship and her steadfastness in their love while Ḵosrow gallivants about,

[336] See Meisami 1987, ch. 5.

that the king manages to mature as a lover. Širin then continues to teach Ḵosrow. Once they marry and he has achieved the station of maturity as a lover, she can then partake in diagnosing and healing him, no longer as a lover, but now as a king. It is because of Širin that Ḵosrow is able to unlock his own potential to be a mature, and therefore just, monarch.

Perhaps even more interesting, however, is the idea of Širin's role as not only a guide, but also a seeker. For while she certainly acts as a capable guide to Ḵosrow, she herself also embarks on an even greater journey of self-discovery in the epic. This personal quest, which is heavily intertwined with her notion of self-worth, is sparked by Mahin Bānu's exhortations that Širin guard her chastity and ensure that Ḵosrow treats her as she ought to be treated, and not as yet another idol in his harem of women. This foundational idea, accompanied by the very earthly, physical, and real love and desire that Širin has for Ḵosrow, creates a dual goal for the heroine's journey. One goal is that she must not debase herself by giving into Ḵosrow's advances and must continue to transcend the limitations of a mortal life to achieve illumination. The second goal is that she must be physically united in her love with Ḵosrow and to become his lawful companion. The quest, as illustrated, does ultimately result in her beloved's reform; yet even more importantly, it leads to Širin reforming herself as the lover. Her abdication of the throne out of fear that she may rule unjustly as a result of being lovelorn, her independent journey to, and predominantly lonely stay, in a desolate castle in Iran, her abstaining from reckless pleasures (such as meeting Ḵosrow behind Maryam's back), and even her diet of plain milk create an almost ascetic image of Širin. This notion is further highlighted by the power of Magnetism that Neẓāmi associates with her (which the poet himself even links with ascetics in India), as well as by Širin's ability to ultimately penetrate Ḵosrow's heart and mind through the power of her utterance. Her heart-felt invocations to God for His assistance in softening Ḵosrow's heart towards her and the ensuing shift in

Ḵosrow's character further prove such a hypothesis and leads to a culmination of sorts in her dialogue with Ḵosrow from atop the locked palace. Širin's stoic death, naturally, also presents a perhaps appropriate ending to this quest, as a lover whose life is linked to that of her beloved's. Such a hypothesis recasts not only Širin's role throughout the text, as both the beloved and the lover, the guide and the seeker, but it also alters our perspective of the romance at large as not only a tale of earthly love, but as one that also includes underlying, mystical currents. As such, Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin* could then perhaps be perceived as a predecessor of sorts to his *Leyli o Majnun*.

While Meisami's aforementioned perception of the poem as a kind of "Mirror for Princes" is intriguing and certainly carries some weight, I cannot see Širin as a secondary character in Neẓāmi's epic. On the contrary, I believe the tale to be as focused on her (or perhaps even more so focused on her!) as it is on Ḵosrow.[337] Three factors support my claim: Neẓāmi allots the same amount of attention in the text to Širin as he does to Ḵosrow; Neẓāmi's Širin is far too embellished and detailed a character to serve only as a subsidiary to Ḵosrow, whose intrinsic battles and emotions are described in less detail when compared to Širin; and, the fact that without Širin, the narrative would not in any way move forward.[338] This hypothesis is further substantiated when we take into account the recently discussed notion of Širin as a seeker and her dualistic goals. Such intricately detailed nuances of a character's journey throughout the entirety of the text, which are

[337] In the opening line of his article on Širin and Maryam, Moayyad also states that, "The hero of Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*, whose character is the central nucleus and pivot of the incidents of this story, is not the Sasanian king Ḵosrow Parviz, but his wife Širin" (قهرمان منظومه خسرو و شیرین نظامی که شخصیت او هسته مرکزی و محور پیشامدهای این داستان است، نه خسرو پرویز پادشاه ساسانی بلکه شیرین همسر اوست.) (Moayyad 1991, 526). He also declares Maryam to be the only other woman in Neẓāmi's romance who, if not better than Širin, is at least her equal. See Moayyad 1991, 531.

[338] In this manner Neẓāmi's Širin is once again directly influenced by Gorgāni's Vis, who, as we know, is the first literary figure in New Persian whose depth of character and internal battles are thoroughly described in the text. Meisami write, "The psychological depth that both these early romances (*Vāmeq o ᶜAḏrā* and *Varqe o Golšāh*) lack is not achieved until a few decades later, with *Vīs u Rāmīn*, in which Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī at last succeeds in creating another dimension, one which coexists with that of the narrated action: a dimension encompassing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters, as they (and we) ponder the meaning of their experience" (Meisami 1987, 87). As I will argue in chapter three, I also see Vis as the main protagonist of Gorgāni's tale—"the central nucleus" of the story, to borrow from Moayyad—for it is predominantly her inner world to which we as the readers have intimate access.

not nearly as manifest in her male counterpart, further prove her role as the main pivot around which the narrative turns.

Abstinence as Agency

Širin's "agency" in Neẓāmi's epic may also be interpreted as a lack thereof. From this perspective, the heroine's agency lies solely in the incessant and obsessive protection of her virtue, at the expense of power, pleasure, and happiness; something that stands in stark contrast to her predecessors in the *Šāhnāme* and to Vis. While Ḵosrow has permission to marry Maryam in order to strengthen his alliance with Caesar (and we are told that Širin understands this is for the good of the crown, not out of infidelity), Širin is not allotted the same rights.[339] She, who is renowned as a just and benevolent ruler and under whose short dominion Armenia flourishes and who, as a queen in her own right, is arguably more Ḵosrow's equal, must relinquish her crown and throne in order to retreat to a secluded palace in the mountains of western Iran, where she is perpetually unhappy and disheartened, solely because "she may give way to injustice" if she continues to rule with a heart that seeks her lover.[340] In the meantime, Ḵosrow, who was encouraged *by Širin* to take back his kingdom from Bahrām Čubin, remains king and continues to accrue greater power. When another enthralled and captivated lover appears before Širin in the form of Farhād (whose love for her is arguably much purer and stronger than Ḵosrow's, initially), he is punished through trickery

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[339] Neẓāmi writes:

از آن بازیچه حیران گشت شیرین که بی او چون شکیید شاه چندین
دلش دانست کان نز بیوفائیست شکیبش بر صلاح پادشائیست

"Širin was dumfounded by [Ḵosrow's] games
Wondering how the king could endure separation from her.
[But] her heart knew that it was not out of infidelity;
That his forbearance was out of duty to the monarchy!"
(Dastgerdi 1954, 198, vv. 2–3).

The first line in the above passage also once again demonstrates the genuine love that Širin has for Ḵosrow, as well as her deeper sense of wisdom and maturity, which leave her dumbfounded as to how Ḵosrow can play such games with her and their love.

[340] Dastgerdi 1954, 182, vv. 8–12.

and deceit at the hands of the unripe king. When she is finally wedded to her beloved Ḵosrow and becomes his queen, Ḵosrow bestows her dominion unto Šāpur![341]

Is this Širin's exit from the liminal and into the new "normal" where she loses her agency? From one angle it may be seen as such, as she is forfeiting her right to rule a kingdom that she inherited from another woman; a land the ownership of which runs through her blood as a result of her link to Mahin Bānu and her dynasty. She forfeits all of this simply out of fear that her love will lead her to tyranny. In a way this surrender appears incredibly noble, but it also reflects poorly on her; as though she, by dint of being a woman, cannot juggle both love and the rule of land, or that she does not possess the mental stamina to endure the difficulties of both without resorting to tyranny. Meanwhile, Ḵosrow has remained king and has not only not forfeited his power for love of Širin but has even married another princess as a means to further consecrate his own power.

From another angle, however, it may be said that Širin does not entirely lose her agency, but that her ultimate form of agency—by contrast to the women preceding her in the *Šāhnāme*—lies, to a great extent, in the protection of her virginity and the relentless efforts to deny Ḵosrow's advances as well as her own burning desire to be with him. In other words, it may be argued that her ultimate goal and struggle becomes to uphold that which society deems as virtuous, rather than fighting for what would simply constitute her happiness and satisfy her carnal desires.[342] When analyzed through the angle of a guide for Ḵosrow and a seeker on the quest of self-discovery, however, we can see that Širin's decision to practice abstinence is in fact a much stronger tool and form of agency than previously imagined. Rather than lying in the negative and springing from a place of self-abnegation as a means to appease patriarchal perceptions of the "ideal" woman,

[341] Dastgerdi 1954, 394, v. 14.
[342] For example, she could have continued to rule as queen of Armenia, and simply carried out an affair with Ḵosrow, or attempted to still have him take her as wife, but not give up her kingdom. She relinquishes her own power as a means to fit into Ḵosrow's world and to abide by a patriarchal society's expectations of a (perhaps "Iranian") woman.

Širin's abstinence may be seen as an intentional act meant to both serve as a pedagogical model of the ideal lover, while also serving as a means for her own further transcendence and advancement on her journey of illumination.

The Magic of Speech

Another important element regarding Neẓāmi's Širin, and one which is subtly carried over from Ferdowsi's rendition of the character, is the subject of Širin's "magic."As previously discussed in Ferdowsi's tale, Širin is accused—directly by Širuye and indirectly by the magi of Ḵosrow's court—of having affiliations with dark magic. In the *Šāhnāme*, this accusation is disproven by Širin both verbally and in the act of unveiling before Širuye and the grandees. Likewise, scholars such as Davis have argued that Širin's character in the *Šāhnāme* leaves us with a rather "sinister" feeling, as though she possesses a magical control over the king.[343] As discussed previously, I argue that Ferdowsi actually illustrates that Širin's true magic does not lie in her beauty, but in the power of her utterance and eloquence.

While Neẓāmi's Širin further proves this point, she also complicates the matter. Širin's access to the occult is described as a threat to Ḵosrow, when Šāpur invites her to meet the king in private.[344] Here Širin claims to have access to that magic "which they know not even in Babylon" and that "the horseshoe [of magic]," a talismanic device, lies with her rather than with Ḵosrow.[345] Threatening the king, she informs him that should he continue to torment her she will "cause [her] hair to conjure a trick" and will "ensnare his patience by the neck," therefore making it impossible for him to bear his separation from her.[346] With the use of personification, Širin brings to life her

[343] Davis 2007, 84.
[344] Dastgerdi 1954, 199–206.
[345] Dastgerdi 1954, 204, vv. 6–7.
[346] Dastgerdi 1954, 204, v. 11.

own hair, her coquetry, her curls, her wink, and even her own "phantom."[347] In this way, she showcases the gifts she has at her disposal, ready to attack her obstinate lover. Širin is affiliated with "Babylon" (as a symbol of magic) once more in the text as well, when Neẓāmi states that Ḵosrow, finding Širin immovable in her decision to keep the castle gates closed to him, tries to conjure another "spell" (metaphorically) with his pleas:

فسونی چند با خواهش برآمود فسون بردن ببابل کی کند سود

"He strung a few spells along with his pleas;
[But] what use is there in taking spells to Babylon?"[348]

The link to Babylon, although undoubtedly used as a metaphor here for magic, nevertheless recalls Eilers' retracing of Širin to the legendary Assyrian queen Semiramis.[349] In truth, Semiramis the legend is often believed to be a character projected onto the historical Assyrian queen Shammurāmat, who ruled the Neo-Assyrian Empire (911–605 BCE) for five years after the death of her husband, King Shamshi-Adad in 811 BCE. Shammurāmat's reign was so successful that little by little her character entered the realm of myths, where it merged with the legendary Semiramis, who was associated with the goddess Ishtar.[350] The multiple mysterious references to Babylon in relation to Širin, and perhaps even Sebeos's claim that she originates from Ḵuzestān (not far from "Babylon"), intimate that—like Tahmine and Maniže, who stemmed from fairylike beings, and Sudābe, who may be seen as a manifestation of Drauga—Širin is associated with the mythical, magical figure of Semiramis, also known for her magical powers.[351] Yet, as illustrated

[347] Dastgerdi 1954, 204, v. 12–15.
[348] Dastgerdi 1954, 336, v. 2. Babylon, as a land associated with magic, is being used here to refer to Širin as the pinnacle of "magic." This is not black magic, however, but rather the magic that the beloved wields over the lover by dint of who s/he is.
[349] See also Moayyad 1991, 526.
[350] Robertson Smith 1887, 307.
[351] Particularly in an Armenian legend, Semiramis has very strong ties to magic. In love with the Armenian king Ara the Beautiful, Semiramis is enraged when he denies her advances, and she gathers the armies of Assyria in war against

by the three following factors, it is quite clear that Širin does not actually have access to any form of black magic. First, because Širin never casts any spells throughout the text, even in her direst moments.[352] Second, because most of the magical elements to which she refers are physical manifestations of her beauty and seduction (such as her hair, her coquetry, and her wink). Third, by dint of the fact that the beloved's charm and coquetry are often referred to as a "spell," which s/he casts over the lover. The case of Maryam's death further proves Širin's disassociation from any black magic.

In beginning the rather short section about the death of Maryam, Neẓāmi tells us that while "they say" (certainly referencing Ferdowsi) that Maryam was killed by the poison that Širin administered to her, there was in fact no physical poison, but rather Širin's "poisonous will":

چنان افتاد تقدیر الهی که بر مریم سرآمد پادشاهی
چنین گویند شیرین تلخ زهری بخوردش داد از آن کو خورد بهری
و گر می راست خواهی بگذر از زهر بزهر آلود همت بردش از دهر
بهمت هندوان چون برستیزند زشاخ خشک برگ تر بریزند
فسون سازان که از ماه مهره سازند بچشم افسای همت حقه بازند

"Divine decree came to pass as such
That kingship came to an end for Maryam.
Thus they say that Širin, a bitter poison
Fed to Maryam; of which [Maryam] she took a portion.
But if you seek the truth, forget the poison;
She took her from this world through her poisonous will!
The Hindu [ascetics], when enraged, through their will

him. Semiramis is victorious, yet Ara dies in the battle (against Semiramis's orders to bring him to her untouched). Heart-broken, Semiramis returns Ara to her chambers, where she prays to the gods to bring him back to life. Her prayers go unanswered and when the Armenians advance against her and her troops to avenge Ara's death, Semiramis disguises one of her lovers as Ara so as to appease the Armenian soldiers and spreads a rumor that he has come back to life, in order to end the war. In a popular Armenian tradition, Ara actually returns to life. See Hackiyan 2000, 37–38.

[352] In fact, at her lowest moment she turns toward God in prayer at dawn, crying over her desolation and loneliness. See Dastgerdi 1954, 289–96. There is never any mention of her performing black magic.

[Can cause] fresh leaves to fall off a dry branch!
The spellbinders, who create chessmen from the moon,
Perform such tricks through magic of the will!"[353]

In the above passage Neẓāmi challenges a long-standing idea, namely that Širin was physically responsible for Maryam's death. He begins the passage by explaining that "divine decree" made the Byzantine princess's death imminent; this information immediately washes Širin's hands of murder. He then states that what Ferdowsi and others have said of Širin's murder of Maryam by way of poisoning her is actually not true. Širin did not poison Maryam using a physical toxin, but instead by applying her "poisonous will." He then mentions how "will" (*hemmat*) is that which the ascetics of India use to cause wonders and by which spellbinders can summon pieces of the moon to their own presence to use as chess or backgammon pieces.[354] These statements suggest that Maryam's passing was decreed by God and that Širin's distaste for her as well as the negative energy put out by her towards Maryam helped speed up the process. While this does denote some measure of blame toward Širin, it is much less serious and deserving of judgement than that which Ferdowsi had associated with Širin (namely, murder; albeit even he seemed to gloss over and ignore it in an attempt to represent her as innocent). As a result, Širin is once again absolved of any accusations of black magic, even if she did encourage Maryam's demise by way of her thoughts. Finally, the association of Širin with ascetics again highlights her own almost ascetic-like presence as the seeker on the path toward illumination.

[353] Dastgerdi 1954, 266–67.
[354] Dastgerdi further elaborates on this in the footnotes, stating that in referring to "will," Neẓāmi is actually referring to the art of Magnetism, in which one can control outside elements through one's thoughts, an art at which, Dastgerdi oddly claims, Neẓāmi was himself a master! Magnetism, also referred to as Animal Magnetism or Mesmerism, is a theory that—in the Western context—has been attributed to Franz Mesmer, a German doctor who lived in the 18th century. He claimed that all living beings have access to an invisible power by which they can influence and manipulate the physical. As previously stated, it is not witchcraft, per se, but rather an energetic power that all beings possess. For more on Magnetism, see Deleuze 1843. Also see Dastgerdi 1954, 266, n. 2.

Like his literary predecessor, Neẓāmi also illustrates how Širin's "magic" (or strength, if you will) lies not in black magic or her beauty, but in the power of her utterance and her eloquence of speech. As previously mentioned, he distinctly states that he "has heard" that Širin was named "sweetness" by dint of the sweetness of her speech.[355] The statement that he has "heard" this from somewhere else may be referencing Ferdowsi who, although he does not claim it as openly as Neẓāmi, still illustrates this through Širin's character. Neẓāmi even tells us that Farhād is confounded and unable to speak once Širin parts her lips; a condition which resembles being "charmed" or "spellbound," underscoring the notion that Širin's "magic" indeed lies in her speech.[356]

A vivid example of Širin's eloquent charm may be found in the scene in which she refuses to open the castle gates unto the drunken Ḵosrow. Confounded as to why Širin has not opened the gates before him—her guest and the king of kings!—Ḵosrow inquires as to what kind of hospitality allows for the host to remain above (a position of respect) the castle, while the guest remains standing below (a position of lowliness), outside of the castle gates in the snow. In Širin's response, Neẓāmi illustrates the uniqueness and pure grace of Širin's eloquence and magnifies her cleverness by showing how she uses this opportunity to keep the gates shut and her guest well outside of the castle, while also presenting herself as humble yet dignified before the king. She likewise takes the opportunity to remind him of his infidelities. Širin declares:

علم گشتم بتو در مهربانی علم بالای سر بهتر تو دانی
من آن گردم که از راه تو آید اگر گرد تو بالا رفت شاید
تو هستی از سر صاحب کلاهی نشسته بر سریر پادشاهی

[355] Dastgerdi 1954, 218, v. 12.
[356] Dastgerdi 1954, 219, vv. 1–16. Another interesting element is how Širin's speech renders Farhād mute, while whenever Širin speaks with Ḵosrow, he is fully capable of responding. This can either denote an equality of status between Ḵosrow and Širin, which is lacking in the relationship of Širin and Farhād, as the sculptor is not of royal lineage, or it might infer to the purity of Farhād's love for Širin versus the initial superficiality of Ḵosrow's affinity for her, which eventually transforms into true love.

من از عشقت برآورده فغانی ببامی بر چو هندو پاسبانی
دگر گفتی که آنان کارجمندند چنین بر روی مهمان در نبندند
نه مهمانی توئی باز شکاری طمع داری بکبک کوهساری
وگر مهمانی اینک دادمت جای من اینک چون کنیزان پیش برپای
حدیث آنکه در بستم روا بود که سرمست آمدن پیشم خطا بود
چو من خلوت نشین باشم تو مخمور زتهمت رأی مردم کی بود دور
ترا بایست پیری چند هشیار گزین کردن فرستادن بدین کار
مرا بردن بمهد خسرو آیین شبستان را بمن کردن نو آیین
تو می‌خواهی مگر کز راه دستان بنقلانم خوری چون نقل مستان
مکن پرده دری در مهد شاهان ترا آن بس که کردی در سپاهان
تو با شکر توانی کرد این شور نه با شیرین که بر شکر زند زور
دو دلبر داشتن از یکدلی نیست دو دل بودن طریق عاقلی نیست
سزاوار عطارد شد دو پیکر تو خورشیدی ترا یک برج بهتر
رها کن نام شیرین از لب خویش که شیرینی دهانت را کند ریش
مزن شمشیر بر شیرین مظلوم ترا آن بس که بردی نیزه در روم
چو سلطان شو که با یک گوی سازد نه چون هندو که با ده گوی بازد
مرا از روی تو یک قبله در پیش ترا قبله هزار از روی من بیش

"'Out of kindness I have become a standard for you,
And banners are better [waving] above [one's] head; this you know better than I!
I am that dust, which rises from your path;
It is befitting that your dust rises above [you]!
You are, by dint of your power,
Seated upon the throne of kingship!
I have wailed out of love for you
From the rooftops, like a Hindu guard.[357]
You also said that "The grandees
Never shut the door before their guests, as such!"
You are no guest; you're a hunting falcon
That lusts after the partridge!
And if indeed you are a guest; then I have bestowed upon you a place;
And I stand before you here, like a maidservant.
Shutting the gates before you was the right thing to do,

[357] The term "Hindu" in this passage, and in general in classical Persian poetry, refers to slaves of darker complexion.

For visiting me in [utter] drunkenness was a mistake!
If we were alone together, while you were drunk,
What would people say about us?
You must choose a few wisemen,
To send for this deed;
To take me to [that] cradle of royalty,
To renew [your] harem by my presence!
Or is it that you want—through deceit!—
To eat of my sweetmeats as a canapé?
Do no more disgracing in this cradle of kings;
What you did in Sepāhān was more than enough!
You may be able to wreak such havoc with Šekar,
But not with Širin, who's stronger than she![358]
Having two lovers is far from honesty,
[And] wavering [in love] is not the way of the wise!
Having two bodies befits Mercury;
You are the Sun! [Possessing] one constellation suits you better![359]
Release the name of Širin from your lips!
For [its] sweetness will [at last] lacerate your mouth.
Don't stab innocent Širin with your sword;
The spear you cast in Rum was enough![360]
Be like a sultan, who plays with [only] one ball [in the polo field];
Not like the Hindus who play with ten![361]
To me there is only one point of adoration in your face;
But for you there are a thousand more than mine!'"[362]

[358] The reference to Sepāhān (Isfahan) is referring back to Ḵosrow's affairs with Šekar and his ultimate union with her. The term Neẓāmi uses for "disgracing" here is *parde-dari*, which literally means "veil-tearing;" a term which Širin is cleverly using to also refer to the fact that Ḵosrow took Šekar's virginity and is now trying to take Širin's without a proper marriage, too. What has been translated as "calamity" here is *šur* in Persian, which can also mean "saltiness;" a play on words, contrasting with the širin/šekar duo. It is a good example of Neẓāmi's brilliance, which can rarely be rendered well and manifested in any translation.
[359] As Mercury is the planet affiliated with the zodiac Gemini (whose symbol is the twin; therefore "two bodies"), it is being used in place of the constellation's name.
[360] The reference to Rum (Byzantium) refers back to Maryam, with the sword/spear imagery invoking phallic imagery and hinting at the fact that Ḵosrow also took Maryam's virginity and should leave Širin's intact.
[361] This may certainly also be read as a jab by Širin at Ḵosrow's tumultuous rule.
[362] Dastgerdi 1954, 307–9.

The passage above offers a prime example of Širin's "magic": her unbridled eloquence; a trait that has subtly accompanied yet consistently defined and ultimately saved this literary character of classical Persian poetry. While, like her many predecessors in the *Šāhnāme* and Vis, Širin is also a manifestation of physical beauty, it is truly her power of utterance and eloquence that makes her unique. In the aforementioned passage we see how she, while instating her own will and agency by keeping her guest outside of the confines of her palace in order to protect her own honor, initially welcomes him with utmost elegance and humility; at once implementing her own agency but also ensuring she has not caused him too much offense to feel unwelcome. As her speech progresses, however, she also reveals her uncanny ability to be at once eloquent and quick-witted and sharp. She chastises Ḵosrow in his faithlessness to her and declares that while he can "wreak…havoc with Šekar" and "cast [his spear] in Rum" (referencing Maryam), he should not (and really, cannot) play such games with her.

Returning to Meisami's reading of the tale, in which the story represents Ḵosrow's journey towards becoming a good and just king, Širin demonstrates to us in this passage how she acts as the vital catalyst and, in truth, spiritual guide in leading him on his journey. She rebukes him for his foolishness in approaching her palace in such a state of drunkenness, when in fact he should send a group of wisemen to properly ask for her hand in marriage on his behalf and to "renew" his harem through her presence. In referencing her own presence in the royal harem as a source of renwal and rejuvenation, Širin once again signals her own value and worth. The topic of self-worth is again indirectly addressed when she reminds Ḵosrow that a true lover must be single-hearted. By encouraging him to be like "the sun" and "a sultan," as opposed to like "gemini" and a slave, Širin casts the issue of self-awareness on the horizon of Ḵosrow's mind and admonishes him to behave in suchwise as befits his station (just as she does!). She concludes that while he is her only

object of desire, he seems to worship in a thousand different directions. In positioning herself in stark contrast to Ḵosrow and encouraging him to follow in her footsteps, Širin materializes herself as Ḵosrow's guide toward illumination, while also awakening in him a sense of self-awareness.

Širin's admonitions and appeals to Ḵosrow also act as markers of her own illumination, for her acute sense of self-worth reflects a keen sense of self-awareness. Likewise, her eloquence and uncanny ability to influence with her words act as positive signs of her illumination, since the artifice of speech and speechmaking in itself is an intimate craft of the illumined, the intellectual, and the one who is seeking truth. Neẓāmi's deep affinity for the character of Širin and her unmatchable eloquence reaches its pinnacle of expression in the following lines, when he declares:

دگر ره لعبت طاوس پیکر گشاده از درج لؤلؤ تنگ شکر
روان کرد از عقیق آن نقش زیبا سخن‌هائی نگارین‌تر ز دیبا

"Once more that peacock-bodied idol
Brought forth the sugar-bowl from [that] trove of pearls!
From those agate [lips], that beauty
Let loose words more embellished than brocades of silk!"[363]

Širin and the Women of the Šāhnāme

While most closely linked to Ferdowsi's Širin, Neẓāmi's heroine of *Ḵosrow o Širin* is also not far removed from her other literary predecessors in the *Šāhnāme*. Like Rudābe, Širin demonstrates a great deal of determination and boldness: in the face of challenges presented to her by Ḵosrow, she continues to work towards achieving what she wants and does so with the utmost sense of dignity and, in return, boldness. She is independent and travels alone from Armenia to Iran on horseback in order to find her beloved, defying an at times confining system put in place through

[363] Dastgerdi 1954, 313–14. The symbolism used to describe Širin is a testament to Neẓāmi's incredible and unmatchable skill as a poet; the "sugar-bowl" in this line is in reference to Širin's words, while the "trove" is referring to her mouth and the "pearls" are referencing her teeth.

her handmaidens and Mahin Bānu. Neẓāmi even hearkens back to the balcony love scene between Zāl and Rudābe when, in the midst of Ḵosrow and Širin's long dialogue from below and atop Širin's castle, Širin declares:

اگر بر در گشادن نیستم دست توانم بر تو از گیسو رسن بست
گرم باید چو می در جامت آرم بزلف چون رسن بر بامت آرم

"'Though I may not be able to open the gates before you
I can create a lasso for you from my locks!
If I must, like wine, bring you into my chalice,
Then with my lasso-like locks I'll bring you to the roof!'"[364]

To any reader familiar with the story of Zāl and Rudābe these lines immediately conjure the memory of a similar scene in that story, when Rudābe offers Zāl her long, beautiful, black hair as a rope so that he might climb toward her.

Like Maniže, Širin sacrifices her own ease and comfort for love, forfeiting her dominion in order to be with her beloved and consenting to live under horrid conditions for the chance to be closer to Ḵosrow in the hopes that they can finally be united. Širin, like Maniže and Sudābe, is also guileful; while she works at maintaining her honor and chastity, she nonetheless does not miss the opportunity to seduce Ḵosrow in any way she can, whether it be through her words or through her body language. A great example of this is rendered by Neẓāmi in the scene where Širin is conversing with Ḵosrow from above the castle balcony. The poet writes:

بگفت این و چو سرو از جای برخاست جبین را کج گرفت و فرق را راست
پرند افشاند و از طرف پرندش جهان پر شد ز قالبهای قندش
بدان آیین که خوبانرا بود دست زنخدان میگشاد و زلف میبست
جمال خویش را در خزو خارا بپوشیدن همی کرد آشکارا
زگیسو گه کمر میکرد و گه تاج بدان تاج و کمر شه گشته محتاج

[364] Dastgerdi 1954, 325, vv. 9–10.

در آنحلوا پزی کرد آتشی نرم که حلوا را بسوزد آتش گرم
بشوخی پشت بر شه کرد حالی زخورشید آسمان را کرد خالی
در آن پیچش که زلفش تاب میداد سرینش ساق را سیماب میداد
بهردستان که دل شاید ربودن نمود آنچ از فسون باید نمودن
عملهائی که عاشق را کند سست عجب چست آید از معشوقه چست

"This she said and, like the cypress, she arose
Tilting her head coquettishly.
She shook her veil and from the quivering of her veil
The world was filled [with sweet forms] through the sweetness of her form!
In the manner that beseemeth the fair ones,
She would reveal her neck, while covering her hair;
She would repeatedly reveal her beauty,
While feigning attempts to cover it with [her] silk brocades.
Her long braids she would use at times as a belt, at times as a crown;
The king [was] now a slave to [that] head and [that] waist.
In her sweetness and coquetry, she used a slow-burning fire;
For a fast-burning flame burns the sweetmeat![365]
In coquetry she then turned her back unto the king
[And in doing so] bereaved the sky of the sun![366]
In that undulation that made her locks sway,
Her buttocks would brandish her silvern thighs!
With fitting ruses for stealing a heart
She cast that which is expected from a spell![367]
[O] how nimbly deeds that debilitate the lover
Rise forth from a clever beloved!"[368]

[365] As Dastgerdi tells us, Neẓāmi is using the terms *halvā* (a sweetmeat) and *halvā-pazi* (the making of the sweetmeat) to refer to Širin's coquettish games and show how, like cooking actual *halvā*, Širin is playing with the king's heart slowly so as not to burn the end result. See Dastgerdi 1954, 326, n. 6.
[366] In this line the poet is playing with the comparison of Širin's round buttocks to the sun.
[367] Here we again see a reference to magic simply being used as a means to describe her "bewitching" beauty; further proof that the references to magic are purely symbolic and have no link to black magic.
[368] Dastgerdi 1954, 326–27.

In this passage we see how the character of Širin, whose chastity and honor creates a constant source of anxiety for both Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi, is also represented—like some of her literary female predecessors—as both an agent of "guile" (like Maniže) and also as someone who can use her "sexuality" as a source of agency and power, to the extent that Tahmine does in her affair with Rostam or that Sudābe does with Keykāvus and attempts to do with Siyāvoš. While Širin may use the tactic of veiling and unveiling to induce more desire in the king's heart and to bring him closer to a formal proposition of marriage, it may also be argued that she, unlike Tahmine and Sudābe, most often uses a subverted form of sexuality as a tool for agency. In other words, while Tahmine uses sex and the pleasure of a one-night fling as bait to achieve what she wants (a child from the seed of Rostam) and Sudābe attempts to use her sex appeal to gain Siyāvoš's favor, Neẓāmi's Širin uses the absence of sexual intercourse, the "protection" of her virginity and, by dint of it, dignity and honor, and the golden promise of consummation as the means to ultimately get what she wants from Ḵosrow: a proper marriage.

Such scenes like the above also highlight Širin's dualistic nature. While she is indeed on a quest of ultimate self-discovery and illumination, which requires of her an almost ascetic-like character, the main driving force behind this quest is the desire and love that she holds in her heart for Ḵosrow. This love—while arguably pure—is initiated and very much so propelled into action through their physical attraction to one another. In addition to the above passage, this notion can be visibly seen in the lovers' initial, accidental encounter, when Širin is bathing in the lake. In a scene that perfectly encapsulates Širin's duality and the intensity of their love, Širin covers her breasts with her locks (thereby covering one source of seduction with another) in an attempt to be modest. Yet this only works to further intensify her allure and to captivate Ḵosrow, as each strand of her hair seems to transform into a serpent calling the king forward to Širin as her slave! In this

dualistic nature it may be argued that Širin resembles Tahmine, who is at once a character who is allotted her earthliness (her desire for Rostam), while also represented as an illumined being and the epitome of wisdom.

Much like Tahmine, Širin is also an emblem of wisdom, for which she is remembered on multiple occasions by Neẓāmi. While her emotions run deep and she is capable of eloquently expressing her desires, Širin, unlike Ḵosrow, is not prone to rashness nor does she act without thinking things through. Rather, she is wise in her actions and in her words, even if she does ultimately apologize for speaking boldly to the king. Towards the end of her dialogue with Ḵosrow from atop the castle balcony, Širin proclaims:

بس است اینز هر شکرگون فشاندن برافسون خوانده‌ای افسانه خواندن
تو آنرودی که پایانت ندانم چو دریا راز پنهانت ندانم
من آن خانیچه‌ام کابم عیانست هرانچم در دل آید بر زبانست
شکر گفتاریت را چون نیوشم که من خود شهد و شکر فروشم
زبانی تیز می‌بینم دگر هیچ جگر سوزی و جز سوز جگر هیچ
سخن تا کی ز تاج و تخت گوئی نگوئی سخته اما سخت گوئی
سخن را تلخ گفتن تلخ رائیست که هر کسرا درینغار اژدهائیست
سخن با تو نگویم تا نسنجم نسنجیده مگو تا من نرنجم
قرار کارها دیر اوفتد دیر که من آیینه بردارم تو شمشیر

"'Cease spreading your sugar-coated poison
And charming one who's already spellbound!
You are that river the mouth of which I know not;
Like the sea, I know not your hidden secrets.
I am that small spring whose water is clear;
Whatever comes to my heart is uttered by my tongue.
Why should I believe your sweet words?
For I myself dispense both nectar and sugar!
All I see [in you] is a sharp tongue, and naught else;
Bitterness! And naught else but grief.
Harsh words show a bitter spirit,

For all of us hold a dragon within this cave.[369]
I never speak to you before gauging my words;
So speak not to me in rashness, that I may not be hurt!
Reaching any compromise will be impossible,
If I approach with a mirror, while you wield a sword!'"[370]

Here Širin embodies the voice of wisdom; she asks Ḵosrow to cease with his wordplay and to be, like her, honest and clear in his intention. She even goes so far as to compare the king to a river, whose end she does not know and a sea, which holds in its breast myriad dark mysteries, while she herself is a clear spring that expresses her true sentiments and feelings. Again, acting as the voice of wisdom, she instructs Ḵosrow in the art of speech and reminds him to speak with kindness and courtesy—but also with honesty—when addressing her, so that she will not be hurt by his harsh words. In what is a refreshingly candid statement (and one which reflects the emotions of any reader who has traversed this journey with the star-crossed lovers) she explains that if he continues to approach her with a sword (a symbol of contention and war), while she approaches him with a mirror (symbolizing softness, self-reflection, and enlightenment) then the two will never come to terms and be with one another. Širin's allotment of the mirror to herself in the conjured image of her encounter with Ḵosrow on the battlefield is also fascinating in that it furthers the idea of Širin as an emblem of wisdom and the one who guides Ḵosrow in his journey of introspection and reflection, self-discovery, and ultimately of becoming a better monarch.

Following their marriage and the long celebrations that follow, Širin encourages Ḵosrow in the pursuit of knowledge and justice. Neẓāmi writes:

زمین بوسید شیرین کای خداوند زرامش سوی دانش کوش یکچند
بسی کوشیده‌ای در کامرانی بسی دیگر بکام دل برانی

[369] As Dastgerdi points out the dragon is a reference to the tongue and the cave symbolizes the mouth. See Dastgerdi 1954, 323, n. 2.
[370] Dastgerdi 1954, 331–32.

جهان را کرده‌ای از نعمت آباد خرابش چون توان کردن ببیداد
جهانسوزی بد است و جورسازی ترا به گر رعیت را نوازی
ببین دور از تو شاهانی که مردند ز مال و ملک شاهی هیچ بردند؟
بمانی، مال بدخواه تو باشد ببخشی، شحنه‌ی راه تو باشد

"Širin kissed the ground, saying, 'O lord!
Having sought pleasure, now pursue knowledge.
You've expended much effort in merriment;
And much more may you achieve in your heart's desire!
The world you have made abundant with your blessings;
Why ruin it with injustice?
Tyranny and oppression are bad;
It is better for you if you *tend* to your subjects.
Behold the kings who—far may death be from you!—died before you:
Of their kingly wealth and possessions what did they take with themselves?
Wealth, if it's kept, will be your undoer;
But if bestowed [upon the people], it will be your protector!'"[371]

Širin's role as an emblem of wisdom and, beyond that, of justice is vibrantly manifested in these lines. Here she surpasses even her own previous presence as a sign of wisdom and takes on an almost advisory role with the king, guiding him toward what will benefit both his kingdom and himself. In her encouragement of his pursuit of knowledge and his striving towards justice, Širin subconsciously reminds the reader of what Neẓāmi revealed much earlier: that this woman was a paragon of queenship during the short period of her own reign, during which she helped the life of her country and her countrymen to flourish. In this regard Širin once again showcases her role as a guide whose wisdom and maturity help lead Ḵosrow to become the best king that he can be.

Neẓāmi's Širin is also, without a doubt, heavily influenced by Gorgāni's Vis, just as the poet of Ganje's romance is greatly colored by that of his literary forerunner. The following chapter

[371] Dastgerdi 1954, 398–99.

will, after a discussion of Vis, tend to a detailed comparison between Vis and Neẓāmi's Širin. Naturally, Širin shares much of her agency and strength of character with the persona of Vis; yet in some ways, I would argue, Širin may have been created as a reaction to Vis, rather than as a character distinctly modeled after her. For while Širin is a paragon of strength and a woman who exercises much of her agency, she does at times seem much more demure compared to the lovelorn and rebellious Vis.

Concluding Remarks on Širin

While Neẓāmi's Širin is of course a far more embellished and elaborate character than that of Ferdowsi, the two characters are in essence the same and Neẓāmi's Širin stems from her own earlier incarnation in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*. In his tale, Ferdowsi's primary concern and greatest anxiety centers on proving Širin's chastity and virtue and clearing the stain of black magic from her name. A deeper analysis of Ferdowsi's anecdote also vividly demonstrates that Širin's true "magic"—through which she exercises her agency—is situated in her eloquence and power of speech. These same themes run through Neẓāmi's epic. He creates his Širin based upon an earlier version of her that appears in the *Šāhnāme*—namely, a chaste and virtuous woman who utilizes this virtue and the protection of her virginity as a means to achieve her goal of becoming Ḵosrow's lawful wife and gaining a secure position. She likewise illustrates the same strength and eloquence of speech, which Neẓāmi refers to as the main impetus behind why she is called "Širin". In highlighting these points I have aimed to show how, by contrast to what previous scholars such as Davis have argued, Ferdowsi's Širin does not exit her narrative as a character with "Sudabeh-like associations," "a femme-fatale," or a woman "whose hold over the king had something sinister

and unsavory about it." Nor is she left for Neẓāmi to "vindicate" two hundred years later.[372] The Širin that Neẓāmi creates is based on a character who has already been "vindicated" and whose purity and chastity have been proven by Ferdowsi in his rendition of her tale.

Additionally, I believe Širin to be influenced by her predecessors, the earlier heroines of the *Šāhnāme*, who we identified and discussed in the previous chapter, as she exhibits the same qualities and virtues they embodied; namely boldness and determination; wisdom and the use of sexuality as a form of agency; and sacrifice and guile. In this regard, while Širin differs considerably from Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže, she nevertheless inherits the same "horizon of expectations" set out by her literary predecessors. As a result, she inherits their key qualities as a new model of the quintessential "Iranian" heroine, who actually originates from a place that makes her "other" to Iran. In the *Šāhnāme* she is represented as sub-human by the magi and believed to belong to a lower social stratum, possess a wanton past, and perhaps practice a non-Zoroastrian tradition. In Neẓāmi's rendition, where she is marked as Armenian and, therefore, most-likely Christian or non-Zoroastrian, Širin carries forward the legacy of Rudābe, Tahmine, and Maniže by becoming an iconic female character in the Iranian world without coming from Iranian (or Iranian enough) origins.

From one perspective, Širin, like her literary predecessors, finds herself stripped of independence and agency as she moves out of the arena of otherness and into the sphere of becoming a "good" (and perhaps subservient?) Iranian wife. In other words, and as Turner would frame it, Širin leaves her stage of liminality (which offers her more freedom and agency) and steps

[372] As previously noted, Davis writes, "Despite her fidelity to her dead husband…and the elaborate descriptions of her gorgeous finery and beauty, Ferdowsi's Shirin does not wholly escape her Sudabeh-like associations; that is, as a femme-fatale, whose hold over the king has something sinister and unsavory about it. It remained for Nezami, almost two hundred years later, to vindicate her character…" See Davis 2007, 84. Orsatti also points to this, highlighting the fact that Neẓāmi, in contrast to Ferdowsi, "follows a tradition in favor of Širin." See Orsatti 2006.

into the arena of "normalcy," or the majority, where she must surrender quite a bit of agency. It could be argued that little by little throughout the text, Širin, who initially shows herself to be bold in both action and speech, becomes increasingly subdued and meek, dispensing with her kingdom, foregoing pleasure, and ultimately apologizing for her courageous, truthful words in order to ensure that she does not lose Ḵosrow.

Towards the end of the epic, when Širin arrives at Ḵosrow's castle in Madā'en and confesses to Šāpur what has transpired between herself and Ḵosrow as she stood atop the castle's balcony and he at the castle gates, Neẓāmi says:

گرفتش دست و یکسو برد از آن پیش حکایت کرد با او قصه‌ی خویش
از آن شوخی و نادانی نمودن خجل گشتن پشیمانی فزودن
وزان افسانه‌های خام گفتن سخن چون مرغ بی‌هنگام گفتن

"She took his (Šāpur's) hand and pulling him aside
Told him her story;
Of her impudence and insolence,
Her embarrassment and endless regret!
Of [how] she'd told stupid tales
[And], like a bird, called out at the wrong times!"[373]

In these lines we are confronted with a much weaker Širin, one who regrets her words and berates herself as foolish and ignorant for speaking to the king as she does. Neẓāmi, much to our chagrin, also seems to agree with her. Later, when Ḵosrow and Širin converse with one another through Bārbad and Nakisā, the latter minstrel declares on behalf of Širin:

دهانم گر ز خردی کرد یک ناز بخرده در میان آوردمش باز
زبان گر بر زد از آتش زبانه نهادم با دو لعلش در میانه

"'If my mouth, by its delicateness, behaved coquettishly

[373] Dastgerdi 1954, 352, vv. 8–10.

I have reined it back in because of its sin!
If my tongue burned [anything] with its tongues of flame,
I have now secured it between the two rubies [of my lips]!'"[374]

Here Širin apologizes directly to Ḵosrow for speaking out of line. By stating that she has now "secured [her tongue] between the two rubies [of her lips]" she seems to essentially promise that she will no longer speak. This moment is quite disappointing, for we see the character of Širin whose greatest strength lies in her eloquence, seemingly agreeing to remain silent from here on. It appears as though she is yielding to Ḵosrow and foregoing her truth.

When considered from a different perspective, however, this episode does not represent a moment of humiliation and loss of agency for Širin, but rather works in her favor. Returning to Meisami's argument of the text representing a sort of "Mirror for Princes" and understanding how Širin has thus far acted as both a guide for Ḵosrow and also as a seeker on her own quest for illumination, we come to see that Širin is actually not accepting defeat and foregoing her agency. She is, rather, coming to terms and making peace with a Ḵosrow who has also grown and evolved throughout the epic and—predominantly thanks to Širin—has reached a newfound maturity as a lover. In other words, and to borrow from Širin's own metaphor, Ḵosrow and Širin now meet one another with mirrors in the battlefield of love instead of one carrying a mirror and the other a sword. Ḵosrow has finally reached a point where, like Širin, he is becoming self-reflective and self-aware and can now meet Širin on more equal grounds. And Širin, albeit her apologies and "promise" to not speak, does not keep silent. Once Ḵosrow has learned the ways of a true lover, she encourages him to acquire knowledge and to pursue justice as a means to become a true king. Although Ḵosrow abides and continues in his progress, it is ultimately the cruel hands of fate and

[374] Dastgerdi 1954, 370–71.

the karmic force set in motion by Ḵosrow's murder of the pure-hearted Farhād that lead the king to his untimely demise at the hands of his own son.

Yet even in her darkest hour, Širin, who has endured so much over the course of two epic masterpieces, does not admit defeat or accept humiliation. In what proves to be an ultimate paradox, which in many ways seems to define the preceding heroines as well, Širin at once silences herself forever yet ensures that her reputation and voice resound through eternity. In the vigilant protection of her honor and chastity Širin was ultimately able to fulfill her wish to become Ḵosrow's lawful wife. Now, in her final moments and in an act of ultimate defiance towards Širuye and his marriage proposal, Širin assumes complete agency of herself and takes her future into her own hands. She follows her beloved into the abyss, and, by deceiving the man who is attempting to coerce her into marriage and by ending her mortal life at the time of her choice, she both defies the patriarchy that attempts to control her and she ensures that posterity remembers her as she yearns to be remembered: a strong, independent, and honorable woman. As Neẓāmi writes, after fatally stabbing herself in the same spot on her body where Ḵosrow was stabbed on his, Širin takes her beloved into her arms, kisses him and screams from the depths of her being:

به نیروی بلند آواز برداشت چنان کان قوم از آوازش خبر داشت
که جان با جان و تن با تن بهپیوست تن از دوری و جان از داوری رست

"With great force she screamed,
Such that everyone realized what had happened.
Now soul with soul and body with body were united in one,
The body was freed from separation, and the soul from judgement!"[375]

[375] Dastgerdi 1954, 423–24.

Thus Širin, whose utterance and power of speech were likened unto magic and for which she has lived up to her namesake, utters her last call—a final scream, awakening the heedless to the truth of her essence—before dying triumphantly.

Chapter Three

Vis in Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin*

Between 1050 and 1055 CE, roughly forty years after the completion of Ferdowsi's epic of kings, another literary masterpiece was born. The romantic epic *Vis o Rāmin* was composed by Faḵr al-Din Asᶜad Gorgāni (1014?–?) in the city of Isfahan not long after the defeat of the Ghaznavids at the hands of the Seljuks. In his introduction to the work, Gorgāni explains how ᶜAmid Abo'l Fatḥ Moẓaffar, who became governor of Isfahan in the absence of the Seljuk sultan Abu Ṭāleb Ṭoḡrel Beg, enquires of him regarding the tale of *Vis o Rāmin*. When Moẓaffar tells Gorgāni that he has heard *Vis o Rāmin* "…is a truly fine [tale]/ [And] beloved by all in this land!"[376] Gorgāni responds that it is indeed a beautiful tale compiled by "six wise men;" yet is written in the "Pahlavi" language, which not everyone can read or understand.[377] He likewise adds that the text is often used as a means to learn Pahlavi.[378] Unlike the poets of "today," Gorgāni continues, the men of the past did not compose literature in such beautiful verses. As a result, the story lacks in descriptive beauty.[379] Intrigued, the governor asks Gorgāni to rewrite the tale in Persian verse.[380]

Unlike the epic of the *Šāhnāme*, whose plot predominantly concerns Iran's military conquests and the heroic battles of its kings and paladins, Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* pivots around a love story. As Meisami tells us, "the genre of romance is [also] distinguished [from the genre of

[376] Minovi 1935, 26, v. 30.
[377] Minovi 1935, 26, vv. 31–33. Although "Pahlavi" generally refers to Middle Persian, discussions regarding Gorgāni's use of the term here and its definitive meaning abound, questioning whether the term "Pahlavi" here actually refers to Middle Persian, a variation of it, or a dialect of Isfahan. By referring to Pahlavi the author also simply conveys the antiquity of the text, as well as adding to it an air of mystery. For a thorough analysis of the topic, see Cross 2018, 28–32. While there have been many studies in relation to whether or not Gorgāni's sources were purely oral or written, the most recent findings suggest that it was a mix of the two. By dint of saying that the version of *Vis o Rāmin* popular at his own time was in "Pahlavi," Gorgāni also insinuates that there must have been a written version. See Cross 2018, 35–36. For more on the Iranian minstrel tradition and the Parthian *gosān*s, see Boyce 1957. For a general survey, see Lazard 1975, 595–632. Also, Perry 2009, Shayegan 2016, and Lazard 1971, 361–91.
[378] Minovi 1935, 26, v. 39.
[379] Minovi 1935, 26–27, vv. 36–55.
[380] Minovi 1935, 27, v. 56.

epic] by the importance it gives to the inner life of its protagonists."[381] While glimmers of the romantic epic's origins do appear in the tales of the *Šāhnāme*, such as the story of Zāl and Rudābe, the romance style develops a more independent identity with later works like ᶜOnṣori's (961–1039) *Vāmeq o ᶜAḍrā* and ᶜAyyuqi's (11th century) *Varqe o Golšāh*.[382]

Yet the "psychological depth," lacking in the protagonists of these earlier romances does not materialize until decades later, when Gorgāni composes his *Vis o Rāmin*. With this romance, Gorgāni "at last succeeds in creating another dimension, which coexists with that of the narrated action: a dimension encompassing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters, as they (and we) ponder the meaning of their experience."[383] As Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*—composed over a century later—makes clear, interiority becomes a central characteristic of the epic romance.

Although historically Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* has not enjoyed the same level of renown as the *Šāhnāme*, nonetheless, it has, from a literary perspective, played two principal roles. First, as a work composed early on in the formation of New Persian as a language, it has helped preserve elements of the language through its use of more non-Arabized Persian vocabulary; arguably even more so than Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme*. Second, it acted as the foundational inspiration for Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*.[384] The central story of the romance is argued by Minorsky to date back to the

[381] Meisami 1987, 131.
[382] On ᶜOnṣori, see *EIr* 2008. On *Vāmeq o ᶜAḍrā*, one of the earliest romantic epics in New Persian with Greek origins, see Hägg 2003. On ᶜAyyuqi, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1987. On *Varqe o Golšāh*, another example of the earliest romantic epics in Persian, this time stemming from Arabic sources, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1987 and Ṣafā 1983. For the influence of both on *Vis o Rāmin*, see Cross 2018, 106–19 and 119–35.
[383] Meisami 1987, 86.
[384] In the introduction to his translation of *Vis o Rāmin* into English, Davis writes, "Persian poetry of the eleventh century shows a strong nostalgia for the stories and civilizations of pre-Islamic Iran…The most spectacular example of this literary nostalgia is Ferdowsi's great epic, the *Shahnameh* (completed in 1010 CE). Gorgani's *Vis and Ramin* is another instance of it. In some ways *Vis and Ramin* is an even more interesting example than the *Shahnameh*… although Ferdowsi's diction is relatively conservative, Gorgani's is at times even more so, and his poem is a major source for lexical survivals from pre-Islamic Persian into the Persian of the post-conquest period" (x–xi). For more on this see, Davis 2005; Davis 2008, viii–xlv; Lazard 1975; and Lazard 1983. For more on Gorgāni's influence on Neẓāmi's epic romances, see Cross, 42–43. For more on Old Iranian motifs in the romance of *Vis o Rāmin*, see Shayegan 2016.

Parthian (Arsacid) period (250 BCE–226 CE) and is believed to have been transmitted both orally and via texts (now lost to us), until Gorgāni renders it into New Persian as poetry in the *hazaj* meter.[385] As Davis argues, *Vis o Rāmin* shows "affinities with Greek motifs and narrative techniques;" an influence also found in its aforementioned literary predecessors, *Vāmeq o ᶜAḏrā* and *Varqe o Golšāh*.[386] In addition to the Hellenic romances, *Vis o Rāmin* also shares multiple commonalities with the European love story *Tristan and Iseult*. The two stories feature comparable motifs—the manner in which the lovers meet and fall in love, the hero's renown as both a hunter and as a minstrel, and the essential role of the heroine's confidant as an intermediary.[387] Gorgāni's rendition of *Vis o Rāmin*, takes into consideration the story's original Arsacid past and its Hellenistic connections, and also combines it with the wider pre-Islamic Iranian and Central Asian ideals, as well as the text's more contemporary Samanid and Ghaznavid courtly rituals and aesthetics.

Among the three main female characters of *Vis o Rāmin*—Vis, the heroine; Šahru, her mother; and the Nanny, the woman who raises Vis and becomes her caretaker and confidant— Vis takes center-stage. Vis' story begins before she is even born. In the capital city of Marv, at a gathering held for the grandees and nobles of the land by the Iranian king of kings—Mowbad Manikān—the king encounters Šahru, queen of the vassal kingdom of Māh (Hamadan).[388] Awe-

[385] Minorsky 1943–6, 1947–8, 1954, 1962.
[386] On the exchange between ancient Greek and Persian literature, see Davis 2001, 1–9; Davis 2002; and van Ruymbeke 2007.
[387] Davis 2005. For more on the comparisons between *Vis o Rāmin* and the *Tristan* tales, see Cross 60–64.
[388] The detailed description of the gathering by Gorgāni is particularly interesting in that he emphasizes the presence of both strong, lion-like men, and beautiful, gazelle-like women at this party, all partaking of wine and engaged in merrymaking. The poet continues on to give a detailed description of all the beautiful women from throughout the kingdom present at Mowbad's gathering. See Minovi 1935, 29, vv. 16–18 and 31–33. This opening scene serves as a great example of the conflation of pre-Islamic Iranian ideals mixed with the courtly rituals and aesthetics of the Samanids and Ghaznavids. On the *gōsān*s (minstrels) of pre-Islamic Iran and the role of song, music, and poetry in celebratory gatherings, see Boyce 1957. It is interesting to note that Vis o Rāmin is one of only two texts in Persian literature where reference to the term *gōsān* may be found, and where the minstrel of Mowbad's court is referred to as "Kusān-e navāgar" and "Kusān-e rāmešgar." See Minovi 1935, 292–94 and Boyce 1957, 10. On courtly gatherings

struck by her beauty, he asks her to be his, whether as a wife or as a lover. Šahru is delighted by the king's offer, but declines it nonetheless. She tells him that to accept his proposal would be socially unacceptable for a woman of her age. Mowbad reluctantly concedes under one condition: should Šahru one day bear a daughter, she will wed her to Mowbad. Šahru agrees and they swear an oath upon their pact.[389]

Many years pass and the promise fades from both Mowbad and Šahru's memories.[390] As fortune would have it, however, Šahru becomes pregnant in her old age and gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, whom she names Vis. As soon as Vis is born she is given to her Nanny, who takes Vis to her hometown of Ḵuzān and raises her there in a state of comfort and luxury fit for a princess.[391] Along with Vis, Rāmin (Mowbad's younger full brother) is also sent to Ḵuzān to be raised by the same Nanny, and thus Vis and Rāmin grow up together. Ten years later Rāmin is sent back to Khorasan. Recounting this event, Gorgāni interjects:

که دانست و کرا آمد گمانی که حکم هر دو چونست آسمانی
چه خواهد کرد با ایشان زمانه دران کردار چون سازد بهانه
هنوز ایشان ز مادرشان نزاده نه تخم هر دو در بوم اوفتاده
قضا پردخته بود از کار ایشان نبشته یک بیک کردار ایشان
قضای آسمان دیگر نگشتی بزور و چاره زیشان برنگشتی
چو برخواند کسی این داستان را بداند عیبهای این جهان را
نباید سرزنش کردن بدیشان که راه حکم یزدان بست نتوان

"Who knew and who could have conjectured
How divinely ordained the destiny of both of them would be;
[Or] what Destiny would do with them
And what excuses it would conjure for its [own] behavior!

and wine drinking, see Brookshaw 2003 and Yarshater 1960. On the role of power and pleasure in the poem and its links to pre-Islamic Iran, see Davis 2008, xiii–xv.

[389] Minovi 1935, 28–36.

[390] Minovi 1935, 36, v. 9.

[391] Minovi 1935, 37. vv. 17–23.

Neither of them had yet been born,
Nor their seeds yet sown into the earth,
When Fortune had sealed their fate and dispensed of it,
Having written one by one their [very] deeds!
Heaven's decree did not change,
Nor could it be altered through their force or ruses!
Whoever reads this tale
Will understand the shortcomings of this world:
One must not chide them (Vis and Rāmin)
For no one can frustrate God's will!"[392]

Gorgāni's inclusion of these lines at such an early point in the epic is significant, given that the issue of moral ambiguity features prominently in *Vis o Rāmin*. It seems at times throughout the text that Gorgāni also judges a particular act by one of the protagonists as "wrong." Yet the auspicious manner in which the tale concludes for both Vis and Rāmin suggests that none of their actions deserves punishment. As this passage shows, Gorgāni provides us, from the very beginning, with a lens through which the reader might interpret the tale. Vis and Rāmin are not to be blamed for what occurs, nor for what they do. After all, they have had no hand in becoming enmeshed in the situations in which they find themselves mired. What Šahru and Mowbad have concocted and, on a much grander scale (as Gorgāni wants us to believe) perhaps what God has decreed, cannot be changed by Vis and Rāmin. As such, they must do the best that they can within an unfavorable situation. This key concept sets our protagonists (especially Vis) free from the very beginning of any negative moral judgement. This point becomes crucial, given Vis' later infamy throughout the history of her reception by readers.

Once Vis comes of age, Šahru, her mother, sends an entourage to fetch her from K̲uzān and to return her to the country of Māh. Describing Vis, Gorgāni writes:

[392] Minovi 1935, 39, vv. 6–12.

چو قامت برکشید آن سرو آزاد که بودش تن ز سیم و دل ز پولاد
خرد در روی او خیره بماندی ندانستی که آن بت را چه خواندی
گهی گفتی که این باغ بهارست که در وی لاله های آبدارست
بنفشه زلف و نرگس چشمکانست چو نسرین عارض و لاله رخانست
گهی گفتی که این باغ خزانست که در وی میوه‌های مهرگانست
سیه زلفینش انگور ببارست زنخ سیب و دو پستانش دو نارست
گهی گفتی که این گنج شهانست که در وی آرزوهای جهانست
رخش دیبا و اندامش حریرست دو زلفش غالیه گیسو عبیرست
تنش سیمست و لب یاقوت نابست همان دندان او درّ خوشابست
گهی گفتی که این باغ بهشتست که یزدانش ز نور خود سرشتست
تنش آبست و شیر و می رخانش همیدون انگبینست آن لبانش
روا بود ار خرد زو خیره گشتی کجا چشم فلک زو تیره گشتی
دو رخسارش بهار دلبری بود دو دیدارش هلاک صابری بود
بچهره آفتاب نیکوان بود بمغزه اوستاد جادوان بود
چو شاه روم بود آن روی نیکوش دو زلفش پیش او چون دو سیه پوش
چو شاه زنگ بودش جعد پیچان دو رخ پیشش چو دو شمع فروزان
چو ابر تیره زلف تابدارش بابر اندر چو زُهره گوشوارش
ده انگشتش چو ده ماسوره‌ی عاج بسر بر هر یکی را فندقی تاج
نشانده عقد او را در بَرِ زر بسان آب بفسرده بر آذر
چو ماه نو برو گسترده پروین چو طوق افگنده اندر سروِ سیمین
جمال حور بودش طبع جادو سرین گور بودش چشم آهو
لب و زلفینش را دو گونه باران شکربار این بدی و مشکبار آن
تو گفتی فتنه را کردند صورت بدان تا دل کند از خلق غارت
و یا چرخ فلک هر زیب کش بود برآن بالا و آن رخسار بنمود

“When that free cypress grew in stature—
[With] a body of silver and a heart of stone!—
Wisdom was awestruck by her countenance
[And] knew not what to call that idol.
At times it would say, ‘She is a spring garden,
Which is filled with fresh poppies!
Violets are her hair and narcissi her eyes;
Her face like the wild rose, and poppies her cheeks!’
At times it would say ‘She is an autumn garden,

For she produces the fruits of Mehregān![393]
Her jet-black locks are ripened grapes,
Her chin an apple, and her two breasts two pomegranates!'
Other times it'd say, 'She is the treasure of kings,
In which lie [all] the desires of the world!
Her face silk and her body [of] brocades,
Her curls are civet musk and her hair is ambergris!
Her body is silver and her lips are pure rubies;
Her very teeth are lustered pearls!'
At times it would say, 'She is a heavenly garden,
Which God wrought from His own light!
Her body is water and milk, her face wine;
And those lips of hers are honey!'
It was fitting for Wisdom to be awe-struck by her,
For [even] Heaven's eye turned dark [in envy] of her!
Her two cheeks were a heart-stealing spring,
[And] her two eyes were the slayers of restraint.
In countenance she was the sun of all the beautiful ones,
[And] in essence she was the master of all sorcerers!
Her face was like the emperor of Byzantium,
Her two curls [dangling] before her face, like two guards.
Her twisting locks were like the king of Zanzibar,
Her two cheeks beside them like two burning candles!
Her wavy hair like the darksome clouds,
Her earrings [dangling] like Venus under the clouds!
Her ten fingers like ten ivory spindles,
[Seated] upon each of them a small crown.[394]
Her necklace was set upon her golden chest,
Like water frozen over fire!
Like a new moon with Pleiades strewn upon her;
Like a silvern cypress adorned with a ring.
She had the beauty of a *ḥur*, the essence of a sorceress,

[393] Mehregān is the festival of the autumnal equinox. For more on Mehregān, see Cristoforetti 2000.
[394] The small crowns are referring to her delicate fingernails.

The buttocks of an onager, the eyes of a gazelle!
Her lips and her hair rained different things:
The first, sugar, and the second, musk.
One could say that [through her] sedition was depicted,
So that it could steal the peoples' heart;
Or that all the beauty that the revolving sphere had
It had painted upon [her] stature and [her] face!"[395]

The imagery used to describe Vis' beauty is worth examining in detail. The description at once invokes the classical beauty tropes of the *Šāhnāme* and *Ḵosrow o Širin*, and the starkly unique imagery particular to Samanid and Ghaznavid panegyrics and quatrains.[396] References such as a tall, slender cypress with a body of silver, hair like musk, and eyes like narcissi are all, as previously mentioned, common tropes used to describe the beloved. A number of other comparisons made by Gorgāni, however, are in fact unique to his own literary period. For instance, he refers to Vis as a garden in varying seasons, while comparing the different flowers and fruits of each season to her features. This distinctive combination of metaphors sets Gorgāni apart from Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi. In the same vein, Gorgāni anthropomorphizes Wisdom as an entity who is awe-struck by, and incapable of accurately describing, Vis.[397] Like Neẓāmi's later description of Širin's sweet utterance as one capable of undoing even the wisest of men, Gorgāni's choice of Wisdom here as the entity who is awe-struck by Vis' beauty illustrates how she can throw even the very quintessence of sagacity into disarray through her physical appearance. The juxtaposition

[395] Minovi 1935, 37–38, vv. 24–47. The imagery of the revolving sphere painting its beauty onto Vis' body and face and therefore creating more beauty through her symbolizes neoplatonic cosmological elements and the notion of the original light creating other lights.
[396] The poetry of Azraqi, Manučehri, and ʿOnṣori offer strong examples of such imagery. For their *divāns* (collections of poetry), see Nafisi 1957, Dabir-Siyāqi 1959, and Dabir-Siyāqi 1963, respectively.
[397] Wisdom here may be compared to the Avicennian concept of *ʿaql-e koll* or *ʿaql-e faʿʿāl*. We may also understand Wisdom as a reference to a deity of sorts, rather than an abstract notion. Given the close connections of both the tale and the period from which the tale originates, both Roman and Greek cultures may very well have left influences as such (think Athena/ Minerva, the goddess of wisdom) on *Vis o Rāmin* and its contemporary romances. Likewise, in Zoroastrianism, Ahurā-Mazdā (God/the principle good force) literary translates to "Lord Wisdom."

of Vis with the emperor of Byzantium and the king of Zanzibar is also intriguing, both in its comparison of Vis' beauty to royal male figures and in its playful descriptions. Gorgāni describes Vis' face as fair, like the Byzantine emperor's. Her locks dangle before her face like the black-clad guards of the emperor standing before him in service. Her hair is dark, like the black king of Zanzibar, and her fair cheeks behind the black locks resemble glowing candles. The image of her fingers as ivory spools and her nails as small crowns adorning them is also unique, as is the comparison of her breasts to fire and of her (presumably diamond) necklace to congealed water over the fire.

Upon Vis' return to Māh, Šahru delights in her daughter's beauty and decides that Vis is fit for none other than her own son, Vis' older brother, the great paladin Viru.[398] Vis is happy with this decision and the siblings are wedded. However, as Vis is menstruating, the couple cannot consummate their marriage. News of Vis' return quickly reaches Mowbad, who dispatches his half-brother and *dastur* (priest), Zard, to bring Vis to Marv.[399]

Once he has arrived at the banquet, Zard gives Šahru a letter from Mowbad in which he reminds her of their pact and insists that God granted her a daughter for his sake.[400] Šahru feels at once embarrassed and terrified upon reading Mowbad's letter. She fears both the king's and God's wrath. These heavy sentiments soften her heart to Mowbad's cause and ultimately persuade her to help Mowbad capture and kidnap Vis. Once Vis realizes what had come to pass between Mowbad and her mother many years ago, she berates Šahru in front of the guests at the wedding banquet and then turns to Zard, demanding that he introduce himself.[401] Zard boasts that he is not only the

[398] On next-of-king marriage (*x̱wēdoda*), see Skjærvo 2013 and Vevaina 2018.
[399] For an in-depth discussion on the possible histories of the characters of Mowbad and his brother Zard, see Shayegan 2016, 34–47.
[400] Minovi 1935, 47, vv. 48–49.
[401] Minovi 1935, 49, vv. 87–89.

brother of the king, but also his royal guard, his confidant, and his adviser; he whose steed is pitch-black, whose face is rosy-red, and whose name is Zard (lit: yellow).[402] To Zard's elaborate response Vis replies first with sarcasm and then with rage:

چو بشنود آن نگارین پاسخ زرد بنرمی و بخنده پاسخش کرد
که زردازرد باد آنکت فرستاد بدین فرزانگی و دانش و داد
بمرو اندر شما را باش آیین که یک زن را دو کس آرد بکابین
که زن خواهد از آنجا کش بود شو زپاکی شو و زن هر دو بی آهو
نبینی این همه آشوب مهمان رسیده بانگ خنیاگر بکیوان
سرا آراسته چون نوبهاران ببُت رویان شهر و نامداران
بزیورها و گوهرهای شهوار طرایفها و دیباهای زرکار
مهان نامی از هر شهر و کشور یلان جنگی از هر مرز و گوهر
بُتان ماهروی از هر شبستان گُلان مشک‌موی از هر گلستان
ز رنگ روی و جام دلفروزان ز بوی مشک و عود خام سوزان
بفریاد آمده دل زیر هر بر ستوهی یافته هر مغز در سر
نشاط هر کسی با همنشینی زبان هر کسی با آفرینی
که جاوید این سرا آراسته باد پُر از شادی و ناز و خواسته باد
درُ و خرّم و یوکان و خسوران عروسان دختران داماد پوران
کنون کین بزم دامادی بدیدی سرود و آفرین یک یک شنیدی
عنان باره‌ی شبرنگ برتاب شتابان رو برَه چون تیر پرتاب
بدین امّید مسپر دیگر این راه که باشد دست امّیدِ تو کوتاه
بنامه بیش ازین ما را مترسان که دارم این سخن با باد یکسان
مکن ایدر درنگ و راه بر گیر که ویرو هم کنون آید ز نخچیر
ز من آزرده گردد و ز تو کین دار برو تا خود نه کین باشد نه آزار
ولیکن بَر پیام من بموبد بگو چون تو نباشد هیچ بخرد
بسی گاهست خیلی روزگارست که نادانیت بر ما آشکارست
ز پیری مغزت آهومند گشتست زگیتی روزگارت درگذشتست
ترا گر هیچ دانش یار بودی زبانت را نه این گفتار بودی

[402] Minovi 1935, 50, vv. 1–7. In the choice of Zard's name Gorgāni uses a double entendre, which he specifically highlights in this scene, where the king's brother-adviser introduces himself to Vis as one whose steed is black, whose face is red (perhaps referring to his good health), and whose name is Zard. Zard, while meaning yellow in New Persian, is defined as "old; infirm" in Parthian. See Shayegan 2016, 34–35, n. 20. Furthering Shayegan's argument that Zard and Mowbad may be manifestations of the Old Iranian motif of the two evil brothers, I would hypothesize that in this passage of *Vis o Rāmin* Gorgāni's play with words further proves this notion; that while Zard is red (and thereby healthy) on the exterior, his true nature (as represented by his name) is yellow, and thereby infirmed, sickly, and far from goodness (i.e. evil).

نجستی زین جهان جفت جوان را ولیکن توشه جستی آن جهان را
مرا جفت و برادر هر دو ویروست همیدون مادرم شایسته شهروست
دلم زین خرّم و زان شاد باشد ز مرو (و) موبدم کی یاد باشد
مرا تا هست ویرو در شبستان نباشد سوی مروم هیچ دستان
چو دارم سرو گوهربار در بر چرا جویم چنار خشک و بی‌بر
کسی را در غریبی دل شکیباست که اندر خانه کار او نه زیباست
مرا چون دیده شایستست مادر چو جان پاک بایسته برادر
بسازم با برادر چون می و شیر نخواهم در غریبی موبد پیر
جوانی را بپیری چون کنم باز ملا گویم ندارم در دل این راز

"When she heard Zard's embellished response
With softness and chuckles, she replied,
'May arrant yellowness be upon him
Who sent you [here] in such nobility, wisdom, and justice![403]
Is it your custom in Marv
That two men should marry one woman?
That [your men] seek a woman who has a husband;
One whose husband and herself are stainless in their purity?
Do you not see this horde of guests?
The musicians' clamor reaching Saturn [itself]?
The palace adorned, like the new spring,
With the kingdom's idol-faced beauties and grandees;
In royal adornments and gems;
In rarities and gilded brocades?
Eminent moons from every city and country,
Warring paladins from all borders and races?
Moon-faced idols from every harem,
Musk-locked roses from every garden,
From color [of the wine] both [their] faces and cups gladdened,
Relishing in the burning scent of unadulterated musk and oud?

[403] As mentioned, the term *zard* in Parthian translates to "old; infirm." In Persianate cultures the color yellow and yellowness are also traditionally associated with sickliness and sallowness, or ill-will and enmity. This is most likely what Vis refers to when she wishes "arrant yellowness" (*zardāzard*) on Mowbad, while clearly playing with Zard's name. This is likely, given that she then refers to Mowbad's old age and decrepitude on multiple occasions, therefore linking ailment and old age to one another.

Every [lover's] heart screaming [from the weight of a beloved's] embrace,
[And] the brain in each head drained [from the overflow of joy]?
Each guest's pleasure accompanied by a companion,
And each one's tongue [accompanied] with praise,
Crying, 'Long live this palace! May it always be adorned!
May it always be filled with joy, glory, and riches!
May it forever flourish, filled with children and in-laws,
May their girls be brides and their sons grooms!'

Now that you have seen this wedding festivity
[And] have heard every single one of its praises,
Turn the bridle of your black steed again
And swiftly, like an arrow, set on the road!
And return naught [again] with hope upon this path,
For [if you do] all hope will be lost to you!
Don't [try to] scare us anymore with your letters
For to me their words are as useless as the wind!
Tarry not and be on your way
For Viru will shortly return from his hunt,
[And] will be upset with me and angry at you;
Go! Before there be any [further] animosity or injury.

But! Take my message to Mowbad;
Say, 'Truly nobody is your equal in wisdom![404]
It has been some time and a long while
That your idiocy has been made manifest to us!
Your brain has become deficient from old age,
Your time in this world has come and gone!
If you had even an inkling of intelligence
You would not be saying such things!
You would not be seeking a young partner in this world,
But rather making provisions for the next world!

[404] The term *be-x̲rad* means "as regards intelligence/wisdom." Here Vis is again being sarcastic in calling Mowbad "wise," when really, she means "fool/unwise."

Viru is both my pair and my brother,
And fair Šahru is my mother.
My heart is gladdened by this one and joyful from the other;
Why would I even think of Marv or Mowbad [for a second]?
Until Viru is in my bedchamber
I have no business with Marv!
When I have a valiant cypress in my arms,
Why would I seek a barren, dry plane tree!?
[Only] the one who sees no goodness at home
Is willing to languish and suffer in exile.
My mother is as beloved to me as my very sight
And my brother as dear to me as a pure soul.
I will thrive with my brother, like milk and wine;
I do not want [an] old Mowbad in exile!
Why would I exchange youth for old age?
I say this openly; I will not hide this secret in my heart!’’’’[405]

This introduction to Vis through her own words astounds the reader with her power of utterance, boldness, strength, and independence. As will be later discussed in more depth, these qualities immediately associate her with her literary sisters in the *Šāhnāme* (e.g. Rudābe, Tahmine, Širin) and her literary successor in Neẓāmi’s poem. We see a young woman who is unwilling to submit to the injustice of decisions made on her behalf without her own input; a heroine who, while exceptionally aware of her “morality” and the rights and wrongs of society, remains unwilling to face injustice for the sake of social codes and will instead forge her own path based on her personal moral rectitude. Cross, too, arrives at this conclusion in his work, a conclusion that remarkably goes against the grain of Vis’ reputation throughout centuries in Persian literature: as a woman of

[405] Minovi 1935, 50–52, vv. 8–40.

loose moral standards.[406] Yet this is manifest from the outset; Vis is not willing to be forced into a marriage of which she disapproves and she will fight to defend herself.

In her response to Zard, Vis begins with her own wordplay, using the knight's name to poke fun at Mowbad who has sent Zard on what she believes to be a foolish errand. In doing so she illustrates from the start her refusal to yield to any man's will, even to the king. She then informs Zard of her marital status through a series of sarcastic questions about the residents of Marv. Is it customary for their men to marry married women? Do their women take multiple husbands? She then draws his attention to his surroundings and asks him if he does not see the grand banquet playing out before him. Can he not see that his journey has been in vain for she is already married? Vis spends an exceptionally long time relating the details of the wedding celebration, an act that both fortifies her own platform of power as the ceremony's central figure and further humiliates Zard by suggesting that he is a fool for not realizing the event he has interrupted. Her speech then seems to culminate in a command: "Go!" She orders the king's envoy to leave, before her husband returns and violence ensues. Up until this point Vis has shown that she can stand her own ground; without the help of any man she has stood up to the great commander of the royal army. She has also, undoubtedly, shocked both Zard and the reader by not acting in an expected manner. She neither responds with silent submission (as seemed to be the case when Šahru suggested she marry Viru) or with an onslaught of tears, delivering instead a bold and impassioned reproach of Zard. The general appears speechless in response.

[406] Cross 2015, 383: "While Rāmin's lyrical persona eventually drives him to enacting its latent violence, Vis shows herself unwavering in her commitment to the bedrock principles by which she has defined herself since the beginning of the story; in the latter half of the story, with her world crashing down around her, these are the principles that allow her to continue to fight for her own worth as a self-willed subject who acts and speaks, the two qualities that are conventionally denied her in the horizon of Rāmin's lyrics."

After she has commanded Zard to leave, Vis seems to suddenly realize that she is not actually finished. In the final part of her speech, which begins with the interjection "But!" Vis launches her verbal assault on the king, the great sovereign to whom her own family and all subjects must bear allegiance. She questions his intellect (*čon to nabāšad hič be-x̱rad "*Truly nobody is your equal in wisdom"), labeling him an old fool, and describing his idiocy as public knowledge. She highlights the age difference between them, further questioning his cognitive abilities for believing that a beautiful young maiden like herself would take interest in an old man like him. Finally, she questions his manhood, referring to him as a "barren, dry plane tree," while juxtaposing the virile Viru against him as a "valiant cypress."[407] She declares that not only she, but no one in their sound mind would exchange youth for old age. As long as she enjoys this good fortune in her own home, she continues, for what purpose would she seek exile in a strange land?

Shocked, Zard immediately leaves Māh for Mowbad's court and informs the king of what has come to pass. His account enrages Mowbad, who then gathers his allied vassal kingdoms and wages war against the House of Qāren.[408] In defense, Viru also amasses his own army of neighboring companions. The two forces meet and engage in a bloody battle, which culminates in Qāren's death at the hands of Mowbad's forces. Ultimately, however, the conflict ends in Viru's victory over Mowbad and the recession of the king's armies to Isfahan. From there Mowbad heads to Gurāb, where Vis has taken refuge in a citadel.

In Gurāb, Mowbad writes to Vis, encouraging her to surrender and promises that if she marries him he would seek her pleasure, decree orders upon her commands, bestow upon her the

[407] As Shayegan has noted, Mowbad's name/title—Mowbad Manikān—is quite intriguing, as *mowbad* is the term used to denote a magus or priest. In this regard, Mowbad aligns even more with the Old Iranian motif of the two evil brothers who usurp the crown, as they were magi. See Shayegan 2016, 29. An affiliation between one of the two evil usurper brothers and being a eunuch also exists, which may be linked to the fact that Mowbad is referred to as "barren" by Vis. See Shayegan 2012, 11–12 and 12, n. 11.

[408] Qāren is Vis' father in the epic. The House of Qāren was one of the most eminent noble families during the Arsacid dynasty. For more on The House of Qāren (Kāren), see Pourshariati 2017 and Shayegan 2012 ("The Arsacids"), 12.

key to his treasury, and entrust her with both his heart and soul.[409] As Cross argues, the ultimate reason that Mowbad cannot be successful in this plot is because he is not Vis' *true* love, and this can be gleaned in the transactional nature of his declarations to her. He promises Vis both material goods and emotional bonds in return for her physical and emotional investment: her body and her devotion.[410] And while, at least in the realm of the romance, this does not define love and happiness, one cannot help but feel a sense of sympathy for Mowbad who in his own calculating way attempts to offer something worthy to Vis in return for her love. This ambiguous depiction of Mowbad (arguably the "antagonist"), which evokes both repulsion and compassion, is a common strategy in Gorgāni's tale. Through such nuances, he creates—in his characters—a more *real* nature endowed with depth, as opposed to a more commonly-found one-dimensional nature.[411]

Vis, of course, does not respond favorably to Mowbad's letter. Now that he has killed her father, she tells him, a new, deeper enmity has risen between them. When her own beloved and brother has not enjoyed her company in bed, she continues, who is Mowbad—a perfect stranger—to assume that he will have her?[412] The thought of Vis' virginity further excites Mowbad, however, and he thus takes counsel with Zard and Rāmin on how to capture her.[413] When Rāmin, who has secretly loved Vis since childhood, hears Mowbad's dilemma and finds Vis within his reach, he encourages his older brother to give up on his mission, citing the significant age difference between

[409] Minovi 1935, 68, vv. 8–16.
[410] Cross 2015, 171.
[411] Gorgāni is not the first to implement such qualities for his lesser-liked characters. This may be found in some of Ferdowsi's "antagonists" as well, two of the best examples being the king of Turān, Afrāsiyāb, and Sudābe. At times these "antagonists" become arguably even more likable than the poet's "protagonists," for example Keykāvus or even Rostam himself, as they are either more prone to action (versus the disconnectedness or lethargic inactivity of some of the protagonists, such as Keykāvus) or more honest in their villainous qualities as opposed to hiding behind a veil of innocence. For more on Afrāsiyāb, see Yarshater 1984. For Keykāvus, see Skjærvø 2000. Arguably, one may also see in these characters the glimmerings of what, as we discussed, is one of the key qualities of the epic romance; namely the psychological depth manifested in the characters.
[412] Minovi 1935, 68–71, vv. 1–54.
[413] Minovi 1935, 72, vv. 3–5.

Mowbad and Vis.[414] Blinded by desire, Mowbad ignores Rāmin and instead follows Zard's advice, which is to win Šahru over to his cause through the fear of God and bribery. Mowbad follows suit, and the ruse works. On a frightful night, when nature once again mimics the doom of impending evil, Šahru unlocks the fortress gates to Mowbad and his men. They chase a helpless Vis throughout the fortress, ultimately capturing her and taking her to Marv.

Describing Vis' canopied litter, by which Rāmin accompanies the men who are taking her from Māh to Marv, Gorgāni writes:

چو روشن گشت شه را چشم امّید زپستا زی خراسان برد خورشید
عماری از رخ ویس پری‌زاد نگارین خانه‌ی مانی استاد
چو بادی بر عماری برگذشتی جهان از بوی او خوش‌بوی گشتی
چو درجی بد ز رخشان دانه‌ی در چو برجی بود از تابان مَهِ پر
تو گفتی آن عماری گنبدی بود زموی ویس یکسر عنبر آلود
نگاریده بدو در آفتابی فروهشته برو زرّین نقابی
گهی تابنده از وی زهره و ماه گهی بارنده مشک سوده بر راه
عماری بود چون فردوس یزدان عماری‌دار او فرخنده رضوان
چو تنگ آمد قضای آسمانی که بر رامین سر آید شادمانی
ز عشق اندر دلش آتش فروزد بر آتش عقل و صبرش را بسوزد
بر آمد تند باد نو بهاری یکایک پرده بربود از عماری
تو گفتی کز نیام آهخته شد تیغ و یا خورشید بیرون آمد از میغ
رخ ویسه پدید آمد ز پرده دل رامین شد از دیدنش برده
تو گفتی جادوی چهره نمودش بیک دیدار جان از تن ربودش
اگر پیکان زهرآلود بودی نه زخم او بدین سان زود بودی

"When the king's sight was brightened with hope

[414] Gorgāni writes:

دل رامین ز گاه کودکی باز هوای ویس را می‌داشتی راز
همی پرورد عشق ویس در جان زمردم کرده حال خویش پنهان

Since childhood, Rāmin's heart
Had in secret held Vis' love.
He cultivated Vis' love in his soul,
And hid his state from everyone else!
(Minovi 1935, 73, vv. 4-5)

He carried the sun from the west to Khorasan.[415]
By the (grace of the) fairy-born Vis' visage the canopied litter
Had become like the adorned abode of Māni, the master(-painter)![416]
Whenever a breeze would pass by the litter
The entire world would be perfumed by its scent.
It was like a treasure-box by dint of that sparkling pearl;
A constellation by dint of that shining full moon.
You could say that the litter was a dome
Amber-scented from end to end by Vis' hair;
[The litter] beautified by holding a sun,
[The sun] covered by the golden mask [of the canopy].
Sometimes Venus and the Moon shining through it,
And sometimes powdered musk strewn from it.
The litter was like God's paradise
Its keeper the blessed *Reżvān*.[417]
When Heavenly Fortune in distress decreed
That Rāmin's happiness should come to an end,
That in his heart it would cast the fire of love
And by that fire burn away his wisdom and patience,
The spring breeze rose rapidly
And tousled the litter's canopy!
You might say that the sword was unsheathed
Or that the sun emerged from the fog:
Vis' countenance appeared through the veils
[And] in seeing it Rāmin's heart became a slave!
You would say that her face cast on him a spell,
With one glance robbing his soul from his body!
Even if it had been a poisoned spear
Its effect would not've been so quick!"[418]

[415] The sun here represents Vis and Gorgāni is playing with the fact that sun rises from the east and sets in the west, yet in this case it is arising from the west (Hamadan) and descending in the east (Khorasan).
[416] Māni was the founder of the Manichaean religion and famed as an exceptionally skilled artist, who lived during the 3rd century C.E. For a detailed article on Māni, see Bausani 2000, 80; Boyce 2001, 111; and Sundermann 2009.
[417] In the Islamic tradition, Reżvān is said to be the angel who guards the gates of heaven. For more on Reżvān (Ar.: Riḍwān), see Raven 2012.
[418] Minovi 1935, 86–87, vv. 1–17.

In his beautiful description of the canopied litter, Gorgāni sets the stage for the fateful scene in which Rāmin at last catches a glance of the unveiled Vis' face and falls instantly into the snare of her love.[419]

Soon after Vis' arrival in Marv, the Nanny receives news of the tribulations that have befallen her beloved surrogate daughter, and she rushes to join her. Once reunited with Vis, the Nanny rejoices in her company and, while sympathizing with her pain, expends all of her energy trying to help Vis see the benefits of her situation. The Nanny advises Vis to allow Mowbad's love to grow in her heart and to learn to enjoy her life there as a queen. No matter what the Nanny says, however, Vis' tears do not cease. She begs the Nanny to create a talisman through which Mowbad will be rendered sexually impotent when they are together. At first opposed to the idea, the Nanny eventually agrees under the condition that the spell be broken once Vis has overcome her grief. She then fashions a talisman out of copper and brass, bounded together with iron, and buries it for safekeeping. Not long after, a flood hits Marv and sweeps the talisman away, thus rendering Mowbad forever impotent with Vis. Here, Gorgāni writes:

همان دو شوی کرده ویس بت روی بمهر دختری مانده چو بی‌شوی
نه موبد کام ازو دیده نه ویرو جهان بنگر چه بازی کرد با او
بپروردش بناز و شادکامی برآوردش بجاه و نیکنامی
چو قدّش آفت سرو سهی شد دو هفته ماه رویش را رهی شد
شکفته شد برخ بر لاله‌زارش ببار آمد ز بر سیمین دو نارش
جهان با او ز راه مهر برگشت سراسر حالهای او دگر گشت
بگویم با تو یک یک حال آن ماه چه با دایه چه با رامین چه با شاه

"The idol-face Vis had [now] married two men

[419] The gaze often acts as the inciter of love between the lover and the beloved in Persian poetry. As ʿOnṣori writes, regarding the first encounter of Vāmeq and ʿAḏrā: ز دیدار خیزد همه رست خیز/ برایـد بمغز آتش مهر تیز (Hägg 2003, 92). Meisami eloquently translates this as, "It is from sight that confusion always stems, and the hot/ flame of love mounts to the brain" (Meisami 1987, 81).

But, like the unmarried girl, she remained with the virgin's seal.
Neither Mowbad had been fulfilled, nor Viru;
Behold what a game the World played with her!
It reared her in sweetness and joy
[And] bestowed upon her fame and virtue.
When her stature became the envy of the tall cypress,
[And] the moon became like a slave unto her face;
[When] the poppy garden blossomed on her cheeks,
And two silvern pomegranates grew on her chest,
The World turned against her in the path of love
And her whole world turned upside down!
I'll recount to you one by one the anecdotes of that moon,
Whether with the Nanny, Rāmin, or with the King!"[420]

The above passage relays three important facts: first, that although Vis has now been married twice, she is still remained a virgin. Rāmin is therefore the first and only man in the story with whom she will engage in sexual intercourse. Second, this passage highlights the role of Vis as the main protagonist of the poem, as Gorgāni tells us that he will be tending to Vis' "condition" (*ḥāl*), which I've translated as "anecdotes" for a clearer rendition in English. He also mentions other characters (i.e. Rāmin, the Nanny, and the King) but says that they will all be discussed in accordance to Vis ("that moon"), thus making her the focal point of the text. Third, the passage again highlights the notion that Vis should bear no blame for what has befallen her and for the measures she is forced to take.[421]

Soon after Mowbad has been rendered impotent, the romance between Vis and Rāmin begins to blossom. Finding himself helplessly in love, Rāmin turns to the Nanny, who had raised

[420] Minovi 1935, 105, vv. 61–67.
[421] This is quite symbolic of the text in general; a kind of back-and-forth between good and evil, black and white, Vis being a woman with complete agency and one who is completely at the whims of fortune. As Cross states, "*Vis & Rāmin* is rife with "mixed signals" and "false starts," and with every new surprise comes an additional layer of doubt and anxiety regarding the role and intention of the characters…" (Cross 2015, 215).

him along with Vis for a period of their childhood. At first she is reluctant to help, yet she eventually concedes to assist Rāmin in his endeavors to win Vis over.[422] She returns to Vis in a state of mind that Gorgāni describes as "like a witch, disloyal and ill-essenced," with the goal of inciting in her the desire to meet Rāmin.[423] Vis is initially extremely resistant to the Nanny's temptations, and quotes speeches by great kings, such as Ḵosrow and Hušang, on the importance of shame and how women are naturally prone to caving in to wayward desires.[424] After three arduous attempts, however, the Nanny finally wins Vis over to her cause with the argument that Vis is neither an angel, nor a demon, nor a *ḥur*. She assures Vis that while she sits in her palace alone wasting away her youth, all the other noblewomen are enjoying both the company of their lawful husbands and their illicit lovers.[425] This resonates with Vis and, in what Gorgāni describes as the Devil's army coming to the Nanny's aid and a thousand snares being laid before Vis, she begins to entertain the validity of the Nanny's claim, while outwardly denying it.[426]

The next day, the Nanny manages to smuggle Vis to the roof of the pleasure-palace in which Rāmin, Mowbad, and the grandees are seated, engaged in drinking and merrymaking. From an enclave in the railing Vis peers into the hall below. In the instant that her gaze falls upon Rāmin, she falls madly in love with him:

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[422] The circumstances surrounding the Nanny's acceptance of Rāmin's pleas are very odd. Having been denied multiple times, Rāmin begs the Nanny once more, then takes her in a tight embrace and kisses her on the head. He then proceeds to kiss her on the lips and on the face and then, as Gorgāni tells us, "the demon then arrived/ arose and went into her body." He then continues to say that when Rāmin had quickly had "his pleasure" with the Nanny, it was as though he "planted the seed of love in her heart" (Minovi 1935, 122, v. 245). These vague descriptions seem to suggest that Rāmin engages in sexual intercourse with the Nanny, as a means to win her over to his own cause. The language that follows the Nanny's dialogue with Rāmin also seems to insinuate that indeed they did have sex, as we are told that the "veil of shame was then torn/ and her cold words turned warm" (Minovi 1935, 122, v. 248). Gorgāni takes this opportunity to speak ill of women, saying, "When you've had your way with a woman once/ Regard it as though you've bridled her [for life]!" (Minovi 1935, 122, v. 246).

[423] Minovi 1935, 124, v. 1.

[424] Minovi 1935, 129–130, vv. 92–113.

[425] *Ḥur*s or *ḥuri*s are beautiful maidens with fair skin and dark eyes who inhabit heaven and are believed to be given to pious male believers in the afterlife. For more on *ḥur*s, see Wensinck and Pellat 2012.

[426] Minovi 1935, 142, vv. 142–49.

همه تا ویس رامین را همی دید تو گفتی جان شیرین را همی دید
چو نیک اندر رخ رامین نگه کرد وفا و مهر ویرو را تبه کرد
پس اندیشه کنان با دل همی گفت چه بودی گر شدی رامین مرا جفت
کنون کز مادر و فرّخ برادر جدا ماندم چرا سوزم بر آذر
چرا چندین بتنهایی نشینم بلا تا کی کشم نه آهنینم
ازین بهتر دلارایی نیابم سر از پیمان و فرمانش نتابم
نکرد این دوستی بر دایه پیدا اگرچه گشته بود از عشق شیدا
مرو را گفت رامین همچنانست که تو گفتی و بس روشن روانست
هنرهای بزرگ و نیک داند بفرّخ بخت ویرو نیک ماند
ولیکن آنچه میخواهد نیابد رخم گر مه بود بر وی نتابد
چو ویس آمد بزیر از بام گلشن بچشمش تیره شد خورشید روشن
ستنبه دیو مهر آمد بچنگش بزد بر دلش زهرآلوده چنگش
ربود و برد و بستردش بدان چنگ زتن زور و ز دل صبر و ز رخ رنگ

"At once when Vis beheld Rāmin
It was as though she'd seen his sweet soul![427]
When she gazed well upon Rāmin's countenance
She killed [both] her loyalty and love for Viru.
Then, pondering, she said in her heart,
'If only Rāmin could become my pair!
Now that from both [my] mother and blessed brother
I've been separated, why should I burn in [this] fire?
Why should I dwell [even longer] in loneliness?
'Til when shall I suffer? I'm not made of iron!
A better lover than he I will not find;
I will never turn from his union and his command.'
She revealed not this affection to the Nanny,
Though now she was maddened by love!
She said to her, 'Rāmin is as
You had said: he's indeed enlightened,
He possesses great and goodly virtues,
And he much resembles Viru in good fortune.

[427] As there is no gender in Persian and the term that Gorgāni uses here is simply, "the sweet soul," one could also translate this line as "It was as though she'd seen her [own] sweet soul!" Such a reading perhaps intertwines the lovers even more, highlighting a kind of primordial spiritual connection.

But he will not receive that which he desires;
Though my face is a moon, it won't shine on him!'
When Vis descended the roof of that pleasure-palace,
The shining sun [itself] turned dark in her sight.
The monstrous demon of love caught her in its grasp,
And scratched her heart with its poisoned claws!
With those talons it robbed, seized, and stole
Strength from her body, patience from her heart, and color from her face!"[428]

Just as Rāmin lost all his senses when he caught a glance of Vis in the canopied litter and fell in love, so too does Vis lose control of her body when she catches sight of the prince. According to Gorgāni, when Vis sees Rāmin it is as though she sees his "sweet soul." Cross argues that the lovers' responses to one another denotes that their love is indeed true; that unlike the "love" of Mowbad for Šahru or Vis, or even that of Vis and Viru for one another, *this* is real love. No contracts are invoked, there is no real seduction, and the love does not stem solely from a perception of mutual benefit or suiting each other as a result of customary standards.[429] This love is raw, spontaneous, and real. Cross also links this notion to the renowned "Myth of Aristophanes" in Plato's *Symposium*, which claims human beings to have once been fully round beings, with four hands and four legs; yet these creatures were so powerful that Zeus commanded them to be split in half in order to limit their strength. Since then, each human being has sought its other half. When the halves find one another, they are struck by love.[430] This passage carries traces of this myth, for when Vis so much as sees Rāmin, she feels as though she has seen his inner essence, his soul. This once again allows for the legitimization of Vis and Rāmin's love.

[428] Minovi 1935, 149–150, vv. 21–37.
[429] Cross 2015, 163–64 and 171.
[430] Cross 2015, 164–65.

Vis finally agrees to meet with Rāmin, and the lovers rendezvous in secret while Mowbad is away on a hunting expedition. They express their affection for one another, swear an oath of union before God and the holy fire, and consummate their love.[431] Soon, however, Mowbad learns of Vis and Rāmin's affair from the Nanny, through a slip of the tongue, and he unleashes his rage. Instead of attempting to hide the situation from Mowbad, Vis stands up to him with incredible strength and courage, in a manner reminiscent of her literary predecessors, especially Rudābe during her confrontation with Mehrāb regarding her relationship with Zāl. Gorgāni writes:

نگه کن تا سمنبَر ویسِ گل رخ بتندی شاه را چون داد پاسخ
اگر چه شرم بی‌اندازه بودش قضا شرم از دو دیده بر ربودش
ز تخت شاه چون شمشاد برجست بکش کرده بلورین بازو و دست
مرو را گفت شاها کامگارا چه ترسانی به پادفراه ما را
سخنها هر چه گفتی راست گفتی نکو کردی (که) آهو نانهفتی
کنون خواهی بکُش خواهی برانم وگر خواهی برآور دیدگانم
وگر خواهی ببند جودان دار وگر خواهی برهنه کن ببازار
که رامینم گزین دو جهانست تنم را جان و جانم را روانست
چراغ چشم و آرام دلم اوست خداوندست و یار و دلبر و دوست
چه باشد گر بمهرش جان سپارم که من خود جان برای مهر دارم
من از رامین وفا و مهربانی نبرّم تا نبرّد زندگانی
مرا آن رخ بران بالای چون سرو بدل بر خوشترست از ماه وز مرو
مرا رامین گرامی‌تر ز شهروست مرا رامین گرامی‌تر ز ویروست
بگفتم راز پیشت آشکارا تو خواهی خشم کن خواهی مدارا
تو با ویرو بمن بر پادشایید بشاهی هردوان فرمان روایید
گرم ویرو بسوزد یا ببندد پسندم هر چه او بر من پسندد
وگر تیغ تو از من جان ستاند مرا این نام در گیتی بماند
که جان بسپرد ویس از بهر رامین بصد جان میخرم من نام چونین
ولیکن تا بود بر جای زنده شکاری شیر جانگیر و دمنده
که دل دارد کنامش را شکفتن که یارد بچگانش را گرفتن
هزاران سال اگر رامین بماند که دل دارد که جان من ستاند
چو در دستم بود دریای سرکش چرا پرهیزم از سوزنده آتش

[431] Minovi 1935, 159–60, vv. 70–106.

مرا آنگه توانی زو بریدن که تو مردم توانی آفریدن
مرا نز مرگ بیمست و نه از درد ببین تا چه چاره بایدت کرد

“Behold how the rosy-cheeked, silver-bosomed Vis
Replied sharply to the king.
Although she felt immeasurable shame,
Divine decree robbed shame from her sight.
Like a box tree she sprung up from the king’s bed,
With her crystal arms stretched out
She said unto him, ‘O King! O Monarch!
Why do you attempt to scare us with reprimand?
All that you have said is the truth;
You did well not to hide any [of my] faults!
Now if you want, kill me or shun me!
And if you want you can blind me!
And if you want, hang me [by the] eternal noose
And if you want, parade me naked in the bazar!
For Rāmin is the one I choose in both worlds
He is my body’s soul and my soul’s essence
He is the light of my eyes, the balm of my heart
He is my lord, companion, sweetheart and beloved!
So what if I cast my life in the path of his love?
For the [sole] purpose of my life *is* love!
Loyalty and love I will never deny unto Rāmin
Until the day that I am dead!
That face upon that cypress-like stature
Is sweeter to my heart than both Māh and Marv!
Rāmin is dearer to me than Šahru,
Rāmin is dearer to me than Viru!
I’ve laid bare before you my secret
[Now] rage in anger or deal with it, as you like!
Kill me if you want or hang me;
I haven’t and won’t stay away from Rāmin!
You and Viru are both my kings,
And in your kingship, you both wield command.

If Viru burns me or throws me in prison
I will accept whatever he decrees for me!
And if your dagger takes my life,
This memory will [forever] remain of me in the world:
'Vis who gave her life for the sake of Rāmin;'
A title like this I would buy with a hundred lives!
But so long as [Rāmin] remains,
That vicious and angry hunting lion,
Who dares to destroy his den?
Who can steal away his cubs?
[Even] if Rāmin lives for a thousand years,
Who would dare to take my life!?
When I have the raging seas in [the palm of] my hand,
Why should I fear the burning fire!?
You can only cut me off from him
When you can create a race of men![432]
I am neither afraid of death, nor of pain;
[So] think of a solution for [your own] problem!'"[433]

By defending herself, Vis demonstrates the sincerity of her love and claims the position of the lover who is willing to endure all kinds of hardship on the path towards her beloved. The scene once again reiterates the legitimacy of Vis and Rāmin's love. Gorgāni claims that although Vis feels great shame because of Mowbad's discovery of her affair, "divine decree" blinds her from this shame and gives her the strength to stand against the most tyrannical figure of the tale. She recognizes Mowbad and Viru as her sovereigns, but Rāmin as her true lover from whom nothing can withhold her. In this way, Vis informs Mowbad that his (and Viru's) sole power over her is

[432] Vis' statement that Mowbad can only stop her from seeing Rāmin when he himself can create a race of men acts as a double-entendre. On the one hand it means that Mowbad will only be able to stop Vis from seeing Rāmin when he becomes God, the Creator of the race of man. He is not and never will be God, so he cannot stop her. On the other hand, it can also be read as a jab against his manhood/sexual impotence, implying that he can only stop her when he can procreate [with her]. Given that he never can do so because of the lost talisman, he will never be able to get in the way of her meeting with Rāmin.
[433] Minovi 1935, 165–66, vv. 42–67.

that of either governance or force; the only power capable of truly dictating her agency is the love she holds in her heart for her true beloved. The conclusion of Vis' speech is particularly striking in that she essentially tells Mowbad that he must come to terms with her and Rāmin's relationship and that nothing he can do will ever keep them apart.

Not long after this scene, Vis and Rāmin flee Mowbad's wrath and hide out in the town of Reyy. Eventually the situation subsides and Mowbad, at the behest of his mother, invites the two to return. One night, after their return, as Vis lies in bed with a slumbering Mowbad, she hears Rāmin singing of his longing for her. Yearning for his company, she convinces the Nanny to take her place in the bed with Mowbad, while she sneaks up to the roof to spend the night in Rāmin's embrace.[434] In the morning Mowbad nearly discovers Vis' ruse. Before he fully realizes what is happening, however, Vis hurries back into the bed and chides him for being so suspicious of her.

Soon after, Mowbad leaves for war against the emperor of Byzantium, but locks up Vis and the Nanny in the desolate Aškaft Fortress and takes Rāmin along with himself. Rāmin eventually finds his way back to Marv and into the Aškaft Fortress, and upon his return from a victorious campaign Mowbad discovers this and beats both Vis and the Nanny unconscious, leaving them to die in the fortress. Once Šahru realizes what Mowbad has done she threatens to bring down his dominion by inciting the nobility against him. Mowbad, terrified by Šahru's rage and anguished by his separation from Vis, commands that Vis and the Nanny be brought back to Marv and nursed back to health.

In the spring Mowbad must once again leave Marv. This time he orders that the entire palace be barred with iron fences, the windows closed off, and the doors locked and sealed in order

[434] This occasion of the older woman replacing the young heroine in bed with her husband is later mimicked by Neẓāmi in *Ḵosrow o Širin* as well when, on their wedding night, Širin sends in her old nursemaid into the bedchamber. On the use of this common ruse in a variety of literatures, see Doniger 2005.

to keep Vis from escaping. He then entrusts the keys to the Nanny, whom he threatens with death should she allow Rāmin to enter the palace or Vis to escape. Once again, he also takes Rāmin along with himself on his expedition, only for him to again escape and return to Marv in search of Vis. Realizing that Rāmin has returned, Vis begs the Nanny to let her out, but this time the Nanny refuses and leaves Vis to her own devices. In a magnificent scene, which we will shortly discuss, Vis uses all that she has at her disposal— her body, her clothing, and the furniture— to climb out of the high ceiling windows onto the roof, eventually jumping into the garden and finding her beloved Rāmin, with whom she spends the night. When Mowbad returns at the break of dawn he is awestruck to find the locks sealed and the Nanny with the keys, but Vis missing. Bewildered, he finally discovers Vis in the garden. He intends to kill her, but Zard intervenes, warning that he will regret his rash decision. Mowbad concedes, asking Vis how she managed to escape the palace, and she replies with a fabricated story that Mowbad believes.

Some months later, through the counsels of a certain Behguy (lit. one of good speech), Rāmin concludes that he and Vis will never freely be together as long as Mowbad is alive. He therefore decides to leave her and Marv behind. With the blessing of Mowbad, Rāmin stations himself in Gurāb where he soon meets the beautiful Gol (lit. rose) and marries her.[435] News of Rāmin's marriage devastates Vis, although she feigns disinterest in the matter before Mowbad. Distraught, she writes a series of ten letters to Rāmin, recounting their love and complaining of his faithlessness.

[435] As Gorgāni describes her, Gol is a strong, beautiful woman of noble lineage, with her father, the paladin Rafidā, hailing from Gurāb and her mother hailing from Hamadan; an interesting point given that Vis is also from Hamadan (Māh) and her father was also a renowned paladin. Gol introduces herself as the Lady of Gurāb, which creates another parallel between her and Vis, who may be seen as the Lady of Māh and is often referred to in the text as the "lady of Irān and Turān." The character of Gol is a trope that Neẓāmi again emulates in *Ḵosrow o Širin*, when Ḵosrow falls in love with and marries Šekar of Isfahan, whose name even stands as a comparative element to Širin.

Although initially unperturbed by Vis' grief, Rāmin is overcome with sorrow and regret once he has read her letters and leaves Gol to win back Vis. In a scene that is later emulated by Neẓāmi in his *Ḵosrow o Širin*, Rāmin approaches Mowbad's palace and begs the forgiveness of an irate and unmoving Vis who, from behind her window, refuses to accept Rāmin's apologies and to allow him into the palace, while he sits on his horse in the midst of a snowstorm. Their heated dialogue continues for a while, until Rāmin finally gives up hope and leaves to return to Gurāb in the midst of the storm. Pining for him and regretting her own obstinance, Vis instructs the Nanny to go after him, as she herself also prepares to leave. The lovers then continue their argument in the midst of the snowstorm and at dawn, finally exhausted, they retreat together to a corner of the palace. Ultimately reconciling, they spend two weeks in the warmth of each other's embrace, making love and enjoying one another's company.

The Nanny comes up with a ruse through which she, Vis, and Rāmin manage to steal Mowbad's wealth from the treasury and escape to Deylamān. Mowbad pursues them soon after this theft, but while he is camping, en route to Deylamān, a wild boar attacks and kills him. Rāmin then returns to Marv as the rightful king and makes Vis his beloved queen. The two reign with justice and nobility:

چو بر رامین مقرّر گشت شاهی ز دادش گشت پر مه تا بماهی
جهان در دست ویس سیمتن کرد مرورا پادشاه خویشتن کرد
دو فرزند آمدش زان ماه پیکر چو مامک خوب و چون بابک دلاور
دو خسرو نامشان خورشید و جمشید جهان در فرّ هر دو بسته اومید
زمین خاوران دادش بخورشید زمین باختر دادش بجمشید
جهان در دست ویس داستان بود ولیکن خاصش آذربایگان بود
همیدون کشور ارّان و ارمن سراسر بد بدست آن سمنتن
بشاهی سالیان با هم بماندند بنیکی کام دل یکسر براندند
مهار عمر خود چندان کشیدند که فرزندان فرزندان بدیدند

"When kingship was firmly established for Rāmin

[And] from the sky to the sea all was filled with his justice,
He placed the world in the palm of the silver-bodied Vis
[And] made her his own king!
Two children were born to him of her—
In beauty like their mother and [in] valor like their father—
Two kings, their names Ḵoršid and Jamšid,
In whose glory the world set its hope!
The lands of the east he gave to Ḵoršid;
The lands of the west he gave to Jamšid.
The world was in the hands of the renowned Vis,
But her favorite [place] was Āzarbāygān!
Likewise, the lands of Arrān and Arman[436]
Were fully in the hands of that jasmine-bodied [beauty]!
In kingship they [reigned] together for [many] years;
In goodness they had their hearts' desires!
They lived their lives in such a manner
That they [even] saw the children of their children!"[437]

After eighty-one years of marriage to Rāmin, Vis dies. Rāmin laments her death with a beautiful elegy, referring to her as the most loyal person he had ever known:

ندیدم در جهان چون تو وفادار چرا گشتی ز من یکباره بیزار

"'I never saw one as loyal as you in this world;
Why did you so suddenly tire of me [and leave?]'"[438]

Rāmin has a mausoleum built for Vis, by the fire temple. Soon after he entrusts the monarchy to his son Ḵoršid and he himself takes refuge in the fire temple where he remains until his death:

شبی از دادگر پوزش همی‌جست همه شب رخ بخون دل همی شست

[436] It is interesting to note that a link exists here too between Gorgāni's Vis and Neẓāmi's Širin, as the latter makes his heroine the queen of Arrān and Arman in juxtaposition to his predecessor Ferdowsi, who represents Širin as culturally ambiguous/most likely Iranian.
[437] Minovi 1935, 506, vv. 88–97.
[438] Minovi 1935, 507, v. 13.

چو اندر تن توانایی نماندش گه شبگیر یزدان پیش خواندش
بیزدان داد جان پاک شسته ز دست دشمن بسیار رسته
بیامد پور او خورشید شاهان ابا او مهتران و نیکخواهان
تنش را هم بپیش ویس بردند دو خاک نامور را جفت کردند
روان هردوان در هم رسیدند بمینو جان یکدیگر بدیدند

"One night he prayed to the Just One for clemency
Washing his face all night with the blood of his heart.
When he had no more strength left in his body,
At dawn-tide, [the pure] God called him forth!
Unto God he gave his pure, cleansed soul,
Having escaped from many an enemy.
His son King Ḵoršid came forth
Along with the grandees and well-wishers;
They took his body unto Vis' and
Paired the graves of these two renowned ones.
The soul of both arrived within the other's
And in heaven each beheld the other's soul!"[439]

Analysis

The Moral Crux

Throughout the poem Vis often refers to the fact that she has become a symbol of infamy throughout the world as a result of the reproach she has received with regard to her relationship with Rāmin. In a scene where Mowbad advises Vis against her behavior, prior to Rāmin's departure for Gurāb, Vis declares:

ز بس کامد بگوش من ملامت شدم یکباره در گیتی علامت

"'From all the reproach that I have received
I have wholly turned into a sign [of infamy] in the world!'"[440]

[439] Minovi 1935, 510–11, vv. 30–35.
[440] Minovi 1935, 306, v. 36.

and on another occasion, she complains:

نصیحت می‌کنندم دوستانم ملامت می‌کنندم دشمنانم
ز بس کردن نصیحت یا ملامت مرا کردند در گیتی علامت

"'My friends advise me,
My enemies reproach me!
From all of this advice and reproach
They've made me a sign [of infamy] throughout the world!'"[441]

Vis' statement appears to be prophetic, seeing as she and her tale do achieve notoriety in the centuries following the epic's composition. As we have noted, the influence of *Vis o Rāmin* is clearly visible in *Ḵosrow o Širin*'s rhetoric, settings and character. In that tale, Mahin Bānu (Širin's aunt and the queen of Armenia) cautions Širin that if she allows Ḵosrow to have his way with her before they are wed, she—like Vis—will "become infamous the world over for [her] obscenity."[442] A little over a century later, the poet ᶜObeyd Zākāni (1300–1371 CE) warned men not to expect chastity (*masturi*) from a woman who reads the story of Vis and Rāmin, undoubtedly due to the example set by Vis.[443] However, while Vis is often emblematized as a paragon of sin, Gorgāni very clearly establishes her innocence by declaring from early on in the epic and on multiple occasions the innate goodness of Vis and Rāmin's relationship. Introducing the long-awaited scene of Vis and Rāmin's first face to face encounter, Gorgāni writes:

[441] Minovi 1935, 484, vv. 32–33.
[442] Dastgerdi 1954, 120, v. 11.
[443] See Maḥjub 1999, 321, vv. 7–8. Zākāni's exact words are as follows:
از خاتونی که قصّه‌ی ویس و رامین خواند و امردی که بنگ و شراب خورد مستوری و کون درستی توقّع مدارید.
(From a woman who reads the story of Vis and Rāmin and a prepubescent boy who drinks wine and cannabis-drink do not expect chastity and an intact anus.) Slight variations do exist in the sentence, as cited by Maḥjub in an endnote: in another version, instead of "a woman who reads the story of Vis and Rāmin" we have "a woman who knows the story." In a yet more intriguing variation, we have "[From] a woman who reads the story of Vis and Rāmi [sic] or Ḵosrow and Širin or Leyli and Majnun or Gol and Nowruz…do not expect chastity or an intact anus." It is interesting that in the last version three other stories (most notable for our purposes, the story of *Ḵosrow o Širin*) are also mentioned, especially given that in Neẓāmi's epics neither Širin nor Leyli engage in pre-marital sex. It seems as though Zākāni's narrator is against any story in which women play a pivotal role.

چو خواهد بُد درختی راست بالا چو بر روید بود زآغاز پیدا
همیدون چون بود سالی دلفروز پدید آیدش خوشّی هم ز نوروز
چنان چون بود کار ویس و رامین که هست آغازش آینده بآیین
اگرچه درد دل بسیار بردند بدرد اندر خوشی بسیار کردند

"How a healthy tree is destined to grow upright
How it shall develop, it'll be manifest from the beginning!
Likewise, when a year is to be delightful
Joyfulness will be manifested from its Nowruz![444]
Thus was the affair of Vis and Rāmin,
The beginning of which manifests its very end.
Though they endured much anguish,
They [also] enjoyed much pleasure in that pain!"[445]

Through this passage and the many other comparable passages in the text the author exercises his narrative power to iterate and reiterate the legitimacy and almost divinely ordained nature of the lovers' relationship. He ultimately seals this with the final scene of their spiritual reunion in paradise.

A "Sign" of Loyalty

From the very beginning of the poem, Vis is dealt an unjust set of cards. With the help of the Nanny and by drawing on her own emotional and physical strength, however, she manages to change an unfavorable situation into a favorable one. In other words, perhaps more than any of the prior female characters, Vis fights hard to exercise agency over her own future. She defies the standards of her society and even agrees to incite mutiny against her husband and sovereign so that she can be with the man she loves. In doing so, she rejects the loveless marriage that has been forced upon her through the initial betrayal of her mother and her abduction by Mowbad. When

[444] Nowruz, coinciding with the spring equinox, has for many centuries marked the beginning of the new year in various parts of the Persianate world. Nowruz literally means new (*now*) day (*ruz*).
[445] Minovi 1935, 155, vv. 1–4.

the Nanny suggests that all the other noblewomen remain with their lawful husbands and keep a clandestine lover on the side, Vis genuinely considers an affair with Rāmin for the very first time. But in the end, Vis still chooses to treat her relationship with Rāmin as a sacred union, as opposed to a simply exciting tryst.[446] In her initial encounter with Rāmin, after he has praised her physical beauty by describing her as a queen amongst all women and a master enchantress amongst all enchantresses, Vis replies:

بدو گفت ای جوانمرد جوانبخت بسی تیمار دیدم در جهان سخت
ندیدم هیچ تیماری بدین‌سان که شد بر چشم من رسوایی آسان
تن پاکیزه را آلوده کردم وفا و شرم را نابود کردم
ز دو کس یافتم این زشت مایه یکی از بخت خود دیگر ز دایه
بگو تا تو چه خواهی کرد با من ز کام دوستان وز کام دشمن
بمهر اندر چو گل یکروزه باشی نه چون یاقوت و چون فیروزه باشی
اگر پیمان چنین خواهدت بودن چه باید این همه زاری نمودن
به یکروزه مرادی کش برانی چه باید برد ننگ جاودانی
نیرزد کام صد ساله یکی ننگ کزو بر جان بماند جاودان زنگ

"She said to him, 'O good-fortuned youth!
I have [already] suffered greatly in this world.
[But] I'd never experienced suffering like this
That made disgrace so acceptable in my own sight!
I have sullied my pure body
[And] destroyed loyalty and honor.
I received this obscene essence from two beings:
First from my own fortune, second from the Nanny!
Tell me: [Now] what will *you* do with me?
Will you treat me like a friend or like a foe?
Will you be like unto a flower in your love, lasting just one day?[447]

[446] Minovi 1935, 140–42, vv. 111–48.
[447] The use of the term "flower" or "rose" (*gol*) here as a possible symbol of Rāmin's love is tongue-in-cheek given the fact that the lover he later takes when he deserts Vis is named Gol. As mentioned earlier, this method of using names as double-entendres is also implemented by Neẓāmi in *Ḵosrow o Širin* with Ḵosrow's lover being name Šekar (sugar) as a juxtaposition to Širin (sweetness).

Not like a ruby or like the turquoise, [eternal]?
If this is how your promise will be
Why should we shed so many tears?
For a pleasure that we'll enjoy solely for a day
Why should we suffer eternal shame?
[Even] a hundred-day pleasure is not worth one [stain of] disgrace,
For its tarnish will last forevermore!'"[448]

While Rāmin uses his introductory lines to compliment Vis' physical beauty, Vis does not waste time reciprocating Rāmin's handsome compliments. Instead, she directly addresses the central predicament of their relationship: the moral quagmire of their clandestine meeting and its potential consequences. Here, she uses her own ruses to cover up any self-inspired interest in Rāmin, by telling him that only Fortune and the Nanny have put her up to this. Nevertheless, she still discusses frankly the matter at hand: whether it is worth risking eternal damnation and infamy for this affair, if it will solely turn into a tryst. Unlike the other noblewomen with their husbands and secret lovers, Vis has no interest in the excitement of this affair. Rather, she wishes to find a haven of love and faithfulness in a world that has repeatedly left her vulnerable and alone.

As a result, we see Vis engaged in two important acts in this scene. First, she addresses the nature and ultimate goal of this affair—as an equal party in the relationship—with Rāmin, and second, she negotiates her own moral framework. This negotiation continues for Vis throughout the entire epic, as she suffers periods of doubt and regret for having carried out an illicit affair. This scene, however, showcases a crucial moment for Vis. Through her actions, she forsakes the morals forced onto her by society in her role as a "good wife," or even the code of conduct practiced by libertine noblewomen. In this way, Vis exercises full agency and takes her destiny into her own hands for the first time. She forges her own path, an act that is revolutionary in both

[448] Minovi 1935, 157–58, vv. 44–56.

the milieu of the epic and the period of its composition. This allows her to establish her own moral grounds. While stuck in a sexless relationship with Mowbad, who kidnapped her and forcefully made her his wife, she uses her independence to take Rāmin on as her beloved. Vis also shows herself to be even more faithful than Rāmin, who later retreats to Gurāb when overcome by obstacles in his relationship with Vis and marries Gol instead. As a result, Vis—who believes herself to have become "a sign" of infamy "in the world"—actually proves herself to be a sign of loyalty and the most moral of all of the characters in the epic.[449] While Šahru betrays her, Mowbad forces himself upon her, the Nanny deceives her and at times turns her back on her, and Rāmin leaves her, Vis remains undyingly loyal to the one standard that she has been able to create for herself: her love for Rāmin and their relationship.[450] The underlying thematic current of the story further proves this theory, as Gorgāni consistently reminds us of the goodness of Vis and Rāmin's love,[451] the fact that like all things good its happy ending can be predicted in its beautiful beginning.[452] Lastly, the relationship between Vis and Rāmin— as Cross has demonstrated— is based on love, incited simply by a glance. This love throws into stark relief the futility of transactional relationships like that of Vis and Mowbad or Rāmin and Gol.[453]

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[449] Minovi 1935, 306, v. 36 and 484, vv. 32–33.
[450] See also, Cross 2015, 202; 223; 225–26; and 227–36.
[451] Minovi 1935, 39, vv. 6–12.
[452] Minovi 1935, 155, vv. 1–5.
[453] Cross 2015, 163–64 and 171. It is interesting to note in line with what Cross discusses regarding Mowbad's love for Vis (and Šahru) being transactional versus Rāmin's love being true, that the love between Rāmin and Gol also seems to mimic the pattern of a "deal" rather than that of love. Unlike Vis and Rāmin, who fall madly in love with one another upon first glance, Rāmin is clearly infatuated with Gol's beauty and Gol is impressed by Rāmin's status and that which he can offer her. Rāmin's offer to Gol says it all:

اگر من یابم از تو کامگاری بیابی تو ز من کامی که داری
ترا نگزیرد از بخشنده شاهی مرا نگزیرد از رخشنده ماهی
تو باش اکنون بکام دل مرا ماه که من باشم بکام دل ترا شاه
ترا بخشم ز گیتی هر چه دارم وگر جانم بخواهی پیشت آرم
سرایم را نباشد جز تو بانو روانم را نباشد جز تو دارو

"'If I receive that which I desire from you
You too shall receive that which you desire from me!
You have no recourse save a generous king,

Sex as a Political Act of Agency

If Vis is a symbol of loyalty rather than one of promiscuity, what might explain her long-standing literary infamy? Another issue that is clearly at play in *Vis o Rāmin* is the topic of sexual agency and its moral implications, an issue befitting to discuss as we open our comparison of Vis with her literary sisters in the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's Širin. As we have discussed, Tahmine, but also Rudābe, Maniže, and Sudābe and, to an extent, even Ferdowsi's Širin, are allowed a greater amount of sexual agency compared to either Vis or Neẓāmi's Širin. Tahmine receives no punishment at all for exercising her sexual agency. Rudābe and Maniže's tales are more vague regarding whether or not their heroines engage in pre-marital sex, yet they also strongly insinuate that they are in fact sexually involved with men. Sudābe is punished, of course, but not so much for wielding her sexual agency as for her deviant attempt to seduce her pure and almost prophet-like stepson.[454] Ferdowsi's

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[And] I have no recourse save a shining moon.
Now, be the moon of my heart's desire,
That I may be the king of your heart's desire.
I will bestow upon you all that I have in this world,
Even if you ask for my life, I'll bestow it unto you!
None shall be the lady of my palace save you,
No balm shall there be for my soul save you!'"
(Minovi 1935, 322, vv. 117–21.)

This passage demonstrates how the relationship between Rāmin and Gol is not based on love, but instead mimics the transactional nature of Mowbad and Šahru's earlier pact, which results in Vis' loveless marriage to Mowbad. Thus, like the relationship of Vis and Mowbad, the marriage of Rāmin and Gol is, from its onset, bound to fail. This transactional relationship can never compete with the intrinsic, natural love that sparks between Vis and Rāmin and which will burn through all that lies in its path. In her response to Rāmin, Gol says that if he promises to be faithful to her and to cast away the love of Vis, she will be his. In the same passage she reiterates the same points that we have seen made against Vis and Rāmin's love earlier in the text: namely, that Vis is Mowbad's wife and therefore does not belong to Rāmin. Their relationship is wrong in the sight of God. Yet the fact that Rāmin and Gol's relationship, which can in many ways be perceived as an ideal and lawful union, ultimately fails, while Vis and Rāmin's love endures even after death provides further evidence of the underlying current of the tale: that in fact Vis and Rāmin's love is right, divine, and always triumphant.

[454] The murder of Siyāvoš at the hands of Afrāsiyāb and his forces is one of the greatest tragedies of the *Šāhnāme*, only second to the murder of Sohrāb by his own father, Rostam. The murder of Siyāvoš, the disarray into which it throws the Iranian monarchy, the ultimate rise of his noble son Keyḵosrow from the heart of Turān, his eminent return to Iran, and his seating upon the Iranian throne all contribute to the messianic symbolic allure of the tale. In parts of Iran (predominantly the region of Fars) and the Caucuses the death of Siyāvoš is still mourned in a tradition sometimes referred to as "Siyāvošān;"a tradition in which the character of the innocent Siyāvoš from whose seed arises the great Keyḵosrow, is linked to a vegetation deity, from whose blood a plant springs. In time the story of Siyāvoš's murder by an arrogant and unjust monarch has become entangled with the account of the murder of the Prophet Muhammad's

Širin, one could argue, obtains her status *because* she engaged in an amorous relationship with Ḵosrow outside of wedlock, as she later uses the relationship as leverage to marry Ḵosrow. For Neẓāmi's Širin and Gorgāni's Vis, however, sexual agency serves as one of their foremost anxieties. Perhaps as a reaction to the character of Vis, Neẓāmi paints his Širin in a very favorable light from the patriarchal perspective; Širin, who is beautiful, wise, eloquent, and coy, refuses sexual encounters with Ḵosrow, until she is married with him. And while her abstinence may be regarded as a form agency, it is, nevertheless, an appeasing form of agency for a woman in a patriarchal system.

Vis, however, behaves differently. In a plot that positions her as a mere object at the hands of an old man's desires and whims, Vis must wrest power away from her husband and recover complete control of her body and her sexuality. Vis' affair with Rāmin and, more importantly, the immense pleasure that she derives from it does not just serve as evidence of her love for him; it's also a political act. By engaging in sexual intercourse bounded by love, Vis rebels against the boundaries that have been forced upon her through Mowbad and Šahru's foolish deal. She also resists the common practice of her time (according to the Nanny) in which a woman divides her devotion and desire between a husband and a lover, respectively. Instead, Vis reconciles the two in one person. In fact, the degree to which Vis exercises agency via her sexuality surpasses even that of Tahmine or her other literary sisters, for whom the use of sexuality was authorized. Vis' practice of sexual agency, on the other hand, is transgressive in nature. As such, she becomes the target of reproach and punishment, both within the text and in its literary legacy.

grandson, Ḥoseyn, and the tragedy of Karbala. The underlying theme of the novel *Savošun* by the renowned modern writer Simin Daneshvar is largely based on the folkloric tradition and myth that sprung from the tale of Siyāvoš. See Daneshvar 1969, Jaᶜfari Jazi 2011, Meskub 1972, and Yarshater 1979.

The Burden of Belonging

In addition to her transgressions of standards set by the patriarchy, which demands her to behave otherwise, Vis' ethnicity also distinguishes her from her literary sisters. Unlike Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, Maniže and Neẓāmi's Širin, all of whom hail from either the peripheries of Iran or its neighboring lands, and unlike Ferdowsi's Širin (who is either a Christian or a woman of low-birth) Vis is an Iranian, Zoroastrian noblewoman. Returning to Turner's theory of liminality, the women of the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's Širin all inhabit a liminal space, from whence even their "transgressions" (if they commit them) against the male-dominated world may be forgiven, as they are women from the borderlands and peripheries of the empire acting in favor of Iran. Yet when the transgression is committed by a woman from within the heartland—one who does not inhabit a liminal space based on her religion or ethnicity—her actions may not be tolerated. Ultimately, she must either be killed or eternally damned. Thus, the political nature of exercising agency, of authoring her own life and sexuality within an oppressive system that consistently attempts to subdue is in fact what renders Vis— as Mahin Bānu declares— "infamous the world over for [her] obscenity." For in truth, as Gorgāni demonstrates to us both through his own words and through Vis' behavior, Vis is not only not immoral, but she is the only sign of loyalty in the tale and commits no evil save that of attempting to take her future into her own hands. It is, as Davis states, the double-standard of "'our' daughters have to behave, even if foreign daughters may, and may be encouraged to kick over the traces in order to join 'us.'"[455]

Vis and the Women of the Šāhnāme

Vis, perhaps even more so than Neẓāmi's Širin, resembles—in character—the women of the *Šāhnāme*. Determination and boldness, the two key qualities that characterize Rudābe, are also

[455] Davis 2007, 74.

visibly manifest in the character of Vis. Her determination allows for her relationship with Rāmin to continue and makes it possible for her to bear the brunt of Mowbad's rage and anger, which at one point nearly proves fatal. Yet no matter the consequences, Vis continues her relationship with Rāmin. Tied to her relentless sense of determination is Vis' boldness, for she risks everything simply for the chance to be with her beloved. It bears noting, however, that Vis' boldness manifests differently throughout the text. Initially it shows in the rashness of her speech; she speaks frankly without regard for the risk that her candidness poses to her own safety. When Zard unexpectedly arrives at Vis and Viru's wedding celebration, Vis stands up to Zard, berating him and ridiculing the sovereign who sent him.[456] When Mowbad discovers her and Rāmin's affair, Vis confirms the veracity of what the king has heard and tells him that no matter what he does, he will never manage to stop her.[457] In another scene shortly after this one, Mowbad praises the beauty of Marv and asks her if she agrees with his observations, Vis bluntly admits that she has only remained in Marv because of her love for Rāmin.[458] Yet as the story goes on Vis seems to learn that while she can still be bold in her demeanor, it may serve her better to spin tales to protect herself from Mowbad's uncontrollable rage. This is not always the case, however. When Mowbad arrives in Aškaft Tower, for instance, and finds Vis on the floor next to evidence of Rāmin's escape, Vis says nothing at all. She simply wails at her beloved's departure.[459]

The tale of Vis and Rāmin and that of Zāl and Rudābe also share thematic and narrative similarities in some of their key scenes. For instance, Zāl climbs up the palace walls to reach Rudābe, and Rāmin climbs up the palace walls to reach Vis; Rudābe stands up to Mehrāb when he reprimands her for having met with Zāl; Vis stands up to Mowbad when he chastises her for her

[456] Minovi 1935, 50–52, vv. 1–40.
[457] Minovi 1935, 165–66, vv. 42–67.
[458] Minovi 1935, 171–80, vv. 1–104.
[459] Minovi 1935, 260, vv. 122–29.

illicit affair with Rāmin. In both stories the presence of a strong motherly figure—Sindokt in the story of Rudābe and the Nanny in Vis' tale—becomes integral to the narrative's forward movement. Additionally, the strong mother figure also helps the heroine achieve her goal of uniting with her beloved.

Like Tahmine, Vis locates her source of agency in her sexuality. The two characters also share in their wisdom. As a character, Vis certainly appears to be conventionally wise, especially in the beginning: she initially disregards the Nanny's suggestions that she begin an affair with Rāmin for this very reason. Just like Tahmine, however, she later also "kills" conventional wisdom for the sake of love. When Tahmine approaches Rostam in the middle of the night, she confides in him that after hearing all the tales of his heroic adventures she has yearned for his strong neck, shoulders and arms and as a result she has "killed wisdom for the sake of passion!"[460] Likewise, when Vis' gaze first falls upon Rāmin and she falls in love with him, and later, when the two have made their vows to always love one another, Vis eschews conventional wisdom and opts instead to behave in the manner that her lovelorn heart believes to be wise.

With Sudābe and Maniže, Vis has in common the ability to use deception and guile as a means to get her own way. A key example of this occurs when she asks the Nanny to take her place in the bed with Mowbad, while she goes to spend the night on the rooftop with her beloved.[461] Vis also uses her guile and deception when Mowbad finds her in the garden. Incredulous, he wonders how she could have possibly escaped from the imprisonment he imposed on her. Seizing the chance, Vis responds that God is on her side; no matter how Mowbad tries to subdue her, He will come to her rescue in the end. She declares that as she was complaining to God of what she has suffered at the hands of Mowbad, she fell asleep and an angel (*soruši*) appeared before her,

[460] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 2: 123, v. 75.
[461] Minovi 1935, 220–29, vv. 122–277.

lifting her up out of the palace and placing her amidst the flowers in the garden. Gorgāni tells us that the gullible king believes Vis' "lie" (*dorūg*) and apologizes for his behavior.[462] Vis even implements the use of guile against Rāmin when she continues to resist his apologies for having betrayed her, while in truth her heart still yearns for him.[463]

Like Maniže, Vis also sacrifices everything for her beloved and their relationship. Throughout the tale she foregoes her own comfort and ease for the sake of Rāmin, just as Maniže does for Bižan in the *Šāhnāme*. While we rarely ever witness Rāmin being berated or physically attacked for his relationship with Vis (though he too complains that he has become an emblem of ill-repute), Vis is consistently verbally and emotionally abused and once almost beaten to death by Mowbad because of her love for Rāmin. Nevertheless, nothing holds her back from tending to him.

Vis and Širin

In many ways Gorgāni's Vis acts as a bridge between the women of the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's rendition of Širin. *Vis o Rāmin* certainly served as inspiration for Neẓāmi's *Ḵosrow o Širin*, especially regarding the epic's rhetoric. Both works also share the same meter (*hazaj*) and even some key scenes, such as when the lovers argue in the snow, with the male character seated on his horse outside of the palace and the female character either watching him from the palace balcony or from behind a window. Gorgāni's detailed descriptions of the night sky also have very visible influences on Neẓāmi's romance, which displays a great concern for astrology.[464] Likewise, both stories show the male lovers to be weaker characters, both wavering in their loyalty to their female counterpart. The women protagonists, meanwhile, are much more faithful and arguably possess the more stable personalities. Similarly, during their arguments with their male counterparts, both

[462] Minovi 1935, 291, vv. 147–70.
[463] Minovi 1935, 413–49.
[464] Davis 2005.

Vis and Širin often vacillate between a great sense of self-worth and strength and a neediness and dependence on their beloved. Compared to Shirin, however, Vis does treat herself more justly. She makes apologies to Rāmin, while also holding him accountable for his mistakes, whereas Širin apologizes for standing up for herself.[465] Throughout her arguments with Rāmin regarding his union with Gol, Vis engages in a frequent word play, using Gol's name as means to make puns about her or to compare her to herself. As we have seen in the previous chapter Širin also uses puns to express her rivalry with Šekar. She playfully suggests, for instance, that (Šekar) may be sweet but its sweetness is only rendered onto it by sweetness (Širin) itself.[466]

The Magic of Pen and Parchment

Aside from sharing a central anxiety around questions of sexual agency, Vis and Širin are also connected by virtue of their well-honed verbal skills, what previous texts have often referred to as women's "magic." While Vis is also at times called a sorceress by Rāmin or accused of knowing magic by Mowbad, these are very visibly tropes and not accusations, as Vis is never actually, legitimately charged with black magic in any part of the text.[467] Perhaps more importantly, the character of Vis (at least as much as we can conjecture due to an absence of pre-Gorgāni versions of the tale) does not descend from a magical predecessor. Širin, on the other hand, may be linked

[465] Although, as I have argued in chapter two, this is done more as a means to end the argument and move on— not meeting in the battlefield, one with a sword and the other with a mirror, as Širin says— rather than as a symbol of her capitulating to Ḵosrow. As for Vis, the following example shows her coupling her apologies with the just argument that Rāmin is equally blameworthy, if not more so, than she is:

تو آزرده شدی از من بگفتار من آزرده شدم از تو بکردار
اگر بود از تو آن کردار نیکو چرا بود از من این گفتار آهو

"You were hurt by me through my words,
I was hurt by you through your deeds.
If your deeds were commendable,
Then why were these words of mine bad?"
(Minovi 1935, 451, vv. 33–34)

[466] Dastgerdi 1954, 286, vv. 8.

[467] Interestingly, as Shayegan notes, Mowbad is accused of magic aplenty in the text. See Shayegan 2016, 36–38.

to Semiramis. The aforementioned women of the *Šāhnāme*, too, can each be linked to their own various magical origins. Returning to the subject of liminality, this lack of associations with magic further restricts Vis from inhabiting a liminal space that would provide room for transgressions. As a result, she becomes a target of more intense and frequent slander. Yet if Širin's "magic," as argued, does indeed lie in her well-honed oratory skills, Vis possesses a similar "magic" or power: the power of composition.

As previously observed, Širin's power of utterance saves her from the slander of the nobility, the magi, and Širuye in the *Šāhnāme*, thus keeping her reputation intact. As Neẓāmi suggests in *Ḵosrow o Širin*, Širin's eloquence and power of utterance is also the reason for which she is ultimately called Širin (sweetness) and it is an essential factor in her being able to achieve her goals in that epic. Just as Širin locates her power in utterance, Vis finds hers in composition. The "ten letters" in *Vis o Rāmin* is one of the most iconic sections of Gorgāni's entire poem. In these stanzas, the pen, the parchment, and the letters are either compared to Vis' physical body or somehow linked to it. Beginning his section on the ten letters, Gorgāni writes:

حریر نامه بود ابریشم چین چو (مشک) از تبت و عنبر ز نسرین
(قلم از مصر بود آب گل از جور دویت از عنبرین عود سمندور)
قلم چون قامت ویس از نزاری زبس کز رام دید آزار و خواری
دبیر از شهر بابل جادوی تر سخن آمیخته شکر بگوهر
حریرش چون برِ ویسِ پری‌روی مدادش همچو زلف ویس خوشبوی

"The parchment of the letter was Chinese silken (sheet)
As the musk was from Tibet and the amber from [the isle of] Nasrin.
The pen was from Egypt, the rosewater from Jur,
The ink from the amber-like oud of Samandur!
The pen [was] like Vis' body in frailty
Having experienced much cruelty and humiliation at Rām(in)'s hands.
The scribe [was] more magical than the land of Babylon,

His words [like] mixing sugar with gems!
The silk [parchment] was like the bosom of fairy-faced Vis,
The pen perfumed like Vis' hair!"[468]

In this passage the pen is compared directly to Vis' stature, made frail by the anguish that Rāmin has caused her. The silk parchment on which she composes the letter is compared to her breasts. The link between the scribe, who serves as Vis' mouthpiece here, and Babylon (the land of magic) connects the text thematically to *Ḵosrow o Širin*. On multiple occasions in the poem, Širin either refers to herself or is referred to as Babylon or the magic of Babylon, alluding to her roots as a descendent of queen Semiramis. The words of Vis' letter, therefore, like the words uttered by Širin, become almost magical.

A few lines later in the introduction to the ten letters, the links between Vis and the written word continue. Writing to Rāmin about the letters, Vis declares:

یکی بر تو دهم در نامه سوگند بحق دوستی و مهر و پیوند
که این نامه ز سر تا بن بخوانی یکایک حال من جمله بدانی

"I will make an oath to you in this letter,
By the righteousness of friendship, love, and union,
That when you read this letter from beginning to end,
You will know every single detail of my [forlorn] state!"[469]

Here, Gorgāni links the letters directly to Vis' state of being. The letters thus become an extension of Vis, an emotional litmus test. She tells Rāmin that reading the letters will help him understand exactly how she is feeling. A few lines later, she adds:

کنون ده در بخواهم گفت نامه بگفتاری که خون بارد ز خامه

[468] Minovi 1935, 346, vv. 1–5.
[469] Minovi 1935, 348, vv. 30–33.

"Now in ten letters I shall recite
Speech that'll make blood pour from the pen!"[470]

In this line the pen becomes a stand-in for her own self; as she writes this letter and recounts her grief, even the pen's heart bleeds at the mention of the difficulties she has endured out of love for a beloved as unfaithful as Rāmin. Again, in the opening lines of the first letter she writes:

اگر چرخ فلک باشد حریرم ستاره سر بسر باشد دبیرم
هوا باشد دوات و شب سیاهی حروف نامه برگ و ریگ و ماهی
نویسند این دبیران تا بمحشر امید و آرزوی من بدلبر
بجان من که ننویسند نیمی مرا در هجر ننمایند بیمی

"If the wheel of fortune were to be my silk [parchment]
[And] every single star to serve as my scribe;
[If] the air were to be my ink and the night its black [hue],
[And] the words of the letter the leaves, the pebbles, and the fish,
[And if] these scribes 'til Judgment Day were to compose
My wishes and my desires to the beloved,
[Then,] by my life they [still] wouldn't write half of [my pain]
And they wouldn't scare me with [the pangs of] exile!"[471]

This passage marks the first iteration of what will become a recurring construction: nature mirrors Vis' emotions, and Vis summons the elements to aid her in times of hardship. In this passage, Vis calls on different aspects of nature—such as, the stars, the night sky, the leaves—to stand in for the different elements of her letter. By inviting the above-mentioned aspects of nature to become a physical part of her letter, she links the natural world to the parts of herself that she conveys in her message to Rāmin.

In the opening lines of the ninth of the ten letters to Rāmin, Vis declares:

[470] Minovi 1935, 351, v. 95.
[471] Minovi 1935, 352, vv. 96–99.

نگارا سرو قدّا ماهرویا بهشتی پیکرا زنجیر مویا
زبی رحمی مرا تا کی نمایی دریغ دوری و درد جدایی
بجان تو که این نامه بخوانی یکایک حالهای من بدانی
مداد و خون دل در هم سرشتم پس آنگه این جفانامه نوشتم
جفانامه نهادم نام نامه که بر وی خون همی بارید خامه
چو یاد آمد مرا آن بی‌وفایی که از تو دیده‌ام روز جدایی
ز هفت اندام من آتش برافروخت قلمها را در انگشتم همی سوخت
چو بی‌تدبیر و بی‌چاره بماندم ز دیده بر قلم باران فشاندم
بدین چاره رهانیدم قلم را نبشتم قصه‌ی جان دژم را
ببین این حرفهای پژمریده همه نقطه بریشان خون دیده
خط نامه چو بخت من سیاهست همان نونش چو پشت من دو تاهست
جهان حلقه شده بر من چو میمش امید من شکسته همچو جیمش
مرا چون لام نامه قدّ دو تاست ترا همچون الفبا قامت راست
نگارا خود ترا این سرزنش بس که باشد در جهان نام تو ناکس
چگوید هر که این نامه بخواند وزین نامه نهان ما بداند
مرا گوید عفاالله ای وفادار که چندین جست مهر بی‌وفا یار
ترا گوید جزالله ای جفا جوی که خود در تو نبود از مردمی بوی

"O Sweetheart! O Cypress-Statured [One]! O Moon-Faced [One]!
O Heavenly-Bodied [One]! O Curly-Locked [One]!
'Til when will you, out of [your] cruelty, inflict on me
The grief of distance and the pain of separation?
By your life, when you read this letter
You will know every detail of my [forlorn] state!
I have mixed with the pen the blood of my heart
And then composed this Book of Cruelty!
I call this letter a Book of Cruelty
For [even in writing it] the pen shed [tears of] blood.
When I remembered that faithlessness
That I was made to bear by you on the day of separation
The seven members of my body burst into flames,
And [even] burned the bones in my very fingers![472]

[472] The *haft andām* or "seven bodies" may refer to three different sets of body parts. On the outside it refers to the head, the chest, the back, the two hands, and the two feet (totaling in seven body parts). Internally it refers to the brain,

When I found myself without any recourse or help
I rained [tears] from my eyes upon the pen.
As a recourse I released the pen
And wrote the tale of my desolate soul!
Look upon these wilting words,
Every single dot of which is the blood of my eyes!
The script of the letter is black, like my fortune
And its *nun* is bent in half, like my back!
The world ensnares me, like [the letter's] *mim*s,
And my hope has broken, like its *jim*s!
Like the letter's *lām*s my stature is curved
[But] you, like *alef-bā*, stand tall!
O Sweetheart, this reproach should suffice you:
That you should be remembered as a rogue throughout the world!
What will he who reads this letter and
Learns of our private affairs say?
To me he'll say: God bless you, O Loyal One!
That you thus sought the love of such a disloyal lover!
To you he'll say: May God punish you, O Cruel One!
For no trace of humanity can be found in you!"[473]

Even more clearly than the aforementioned verses, this passage shows Vis linking her physical and emotional self to the letter that she is composing and the very elements it comprises. She begins by telling Rāmin that her pen, the same tool that was earlier compared to her stature, had mixed with the "blood of [her] heart" in order to compose this letter, which she refers to as a "Book of Cruelty." The intermingling of pen and blood furthers the metaphor of the pen as an actual physical representative of herself; one which now has her very blood running through it. She then admits that even in composing these letters the pen (her body) shed tears of blood. The anguish

the heart, the liver, the spleen, the lungs, the gallbladder, and the stomach (though some substitute the kidney for the stomach). It may also refer to the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the stomach, the genitals, the hands, and the feet.
[473] Minovi 1935, 376, vv. 492–530.

caused by her recollection of these painful memories prompts her body (and therefore the pen) to burst into flames, leaving nothing behind to continue the composition. Yet, with her body (and the pen) gone, it is her very soul (*jān*; also possibly translated as "breath (of life)") that replaces or perhaps penetrates the pen and continues to write of her sorrows and grief at the hands of the faithless Rāmin. Thus the pen and, more importantly, the act of writing itself serve as a proxy for Vis (both body and soul) and the experience of her anguish.

Vis goes on to claim that the dots of every "wilting word" of the letter is from the blood of her tears. She compares the characters she writes in the letter to the different manifestations of her pain: the letter *nun* (ن) is bent like her back from the weight of her sorrows; the upper loop of the letter *mim* (م) represents the world, trapping her in its snare; the crooked shape of the letter *jim* (ج) stands for her shattered hopes; and the curvature of the letter *lām* (ل) symbolizes her once cypress-like stature, now bent and curved from the pain of separation. By contrast, Rāmin has retained his tall, healthy stature resembling the *alefbā* (الفبا) throughout his faithlessness to Vis and his pleasure-seeking and merrymaking with Gol in Gurāb.

Concluding the ten letters, prior to sending the epistles off to Rāmin, Vis takes the parchment and rubs her musken hair against it, thereby perfuming the letters with her scent. Through this act, Vis takes the connection between the compositions and herself even further by incorporating her body and scent into the letters.[474] By associating the pen and the act of composition with herself and by invoking the similarities of her own desolate state to the various bent and broken shapes of the Persian alphabet, Vis solidifies and seals her affiliation with the *written word*; this stands in contrast to her literary successor Širin's affiliation with the *spoken word*.

[474]Minovi 1935, 383, vv. 3–4.

Vis' connection to composition versus Širin's affiliation with speech is fascinating in how it influences the future legacy of these characters. As previously mentioned, Vis ultimately becomes a symbol of the unchaste woman, with authors such as Zākāni later stating that chastity cannot be expected of women who read *Vis o Rāmin*. Meanwhile, the character of Širin as molded by Neẓāmi ultimately becomes the epitome of a good, chaste woman. This mainly stems from the fact that Vis, as an Iranian woman, transgresses patriarchal boundaries in order to secure her own happiness. I posit, however, that this stark dichotomy also has to do with a difference in each woman's medium of expression. Vis, as an independent character, has access to open communication through writing and the preservation of her ideas through text, whereas Širin must rely heavily on the power of speech.

Both women implement the power of language as a means to preserve their legacies: in the *Šāhnāme*, Širin uses her power of utterance to defend herself from the slanderous accusations made against her by the magi, the nobility and, most importantly, by Širuye. Meanwhile Vis' letters show us—the readers of posterity—the pain she has suffered as a result of her loyalty to her beloved. This in turn clears Vis from accusations of immorality and looseness thrown at her by men in the epic itself (like Mowbad) and by men of the future (like the poet Zākāni). Yet Širin's words, because they are not written down in the form of epistles, remain susceptible to change. While in her future incarnation in Neẓāmi's epic, she continues on as a symbol of chastity, she is robbed of some level of agency when her previous words are cut out and she is recast as a more benign—or perhaps palatable—female character by Neẓāmi. Because Vis' words, meanwhile, have appeared in writing and because the ten letters play such an important literary role in Gorgāni's epic, her character becomes harder to recast in a more "agreeable" form. She must therefore face slander and disregard by detractors in the hopes that she will eventually die off as a

character. In some ways this attempt was successful, as Vis never again manifests fully in Persian literary history; instead, she is replaced by more benign figures such as Širin and Leyli. From another angle, however, Vis is ultimately victorious because her words of self-defense were preserved in the ten letters. Whenever the poem is discovered and re-discovered, Vis once again tells her story through *her own* words. In this way, she can demonstrate to generations far removed from her own that the legacy assigned to her is a fabrication; she *is* an emblem of loyalty. As she herself writes in her letters to Rāmin:

ز یاری نیک پر مهر و وفاجوی به یاری شوخ و بی‌شرم و جفاجوی
نبشتم نامه در حال چنین زار که جان از تن، دل از جان بود بیزار
منم در آتش هجران گدازان توی در مجلس شادی نوازان
منم گنج وفا را گشته گنجور توی دست جفا را گشته دستور

"From a lover who is truly loving and loyal,
To a beloved who's flagrant, shameless, and quarrelsome:
I have written [this] letter in such a sad state
That my soul is sick of my body, and my body of my soul!
I am the one who's burning in the fire of separation;
You are the one who's singing in celebration!
I am the one who's become the guardian of loyalty's treasure;
You are the one who instructs the very hand of oppression!"[475]

The Riddle of Gender

Unlike her literary sisters in the *Šāhnāme*, Vis does not exercise her agency by initiating contact with her beloved. By contrast, the women of the *Šāhnāme* all take some type of action to arrange a meeting between themselves and the men they wish to seduce. Even Neẓāmi's Širin instigates her first meeting with Ḵosrow. While Vis does not initiate her first meeting with Rāmin, she takes a far more active role in her relationship with Rāmin than either her literary predecessors or her

[475] Minovi 1935, 348, vv. 25–29.

successor. As a result, her character plays a key role in further "queering" gender as a binary concept in the text. Vis' role as *the* active party in her and Rāmin's relationship once their affair has begun is highly evident throughout the text. One such example takes place in the aforementioned scene, when she convinces the Nanny to take her place in bed with Mowbad, so that she can be with Rāmin. It is Vis who rapidly concocts a plan to get herself out of her bedchamber and onto the roof. She endangers her own safety by physically leaving her bed while Mowbad is sleeping. She also manages to return quickly as he is awakening so that he would not suspect she had been gone. In stark contrast, Rāmin—throughout this whole ordeal—simply sits on the roof and laments his separation from Vis.

Another vivid example of Vis' role as the active party in the relationship appears in the scene of Vis' escape from the locked-up palace. Leaving Marv for Zābol, Mowbad imprisons Vis in the palace, entrusts the keys to the Nanny, and takes Rāmin along with himself on the journey in order to ensure that the two lovers cannot meet. En route, however, Rāmin escapes and returns to Marv to be with Vis. Arriving in the garden outside of her chamber, he finds all the doors locked. With no way to reach Vis, Rāmin laments his state in a song and after much grieving falls asleep in the garden amongst the flowers. Meanwhile Vis, realizing that Rāmin has returned, begs the Nanny to open the doors so that she can reunite with her beloved. Yet the Nanny refuses, telling Vis that just this once she will be true to her promise to Mowbad. After rebuking Vis for wanting to continue in her waywardness she leaves her alone in her chamber. Finding herself companionless, Vis takes matters into her own hands:

چو تاب مهر جانش را همی تافت ز دانش خویشتن را چاره‌ای یافت
سراپرده که بود از پیش ایوان یکی سر بر زمین دیگر بکیوان
برو بسته طناب سخت بسیار یکایک ویس را درمان و تیمار
فگند از پای کفش آن کوه سیمین بدو بر رفت چون پرّنده شاهین
چو پرّان شد ز پرده جست بر بام ربودش باد از سر لعل واشام

برهنه سر برهنه پای مانده گسسته عقد و درّش برفشانده
شکسته گوشوارش پاک در گوش ابی زیور بمانده روی نیکوش
پس آنگه شد شتابان تا لب باغ روانش پر شتاب و دل پر از داغ
قصب چادرش را در گوشه‌ای بست درو زد دست و از باره فرو جست
گرفتش دامن اندر خشت پاره قبا شد بر تنش بر پاره پاره
اگرچه نرم و آسان بود جایش بدرد آمد ز جستن هر دو پایش
گسسته بند کُستی بر میانش چو شلوارش دریده بر دو رانش
نه جامه بر تنش مانده نه زیور دریده سر ز تا پا پای تا سر
برهنه پای گرد باغ گردان بهر مرزی دوان و دوست جویان
هم از چشمش روان خون و هم از پای همی گفتی ازین بخت نگون وای
کجا جویم نگار سعتری را کجا جویم بهار دلبری را
بحق دوستی ای باد شبگیر برای من زمانی رنج برگیر
پیام من بدان روی نکو بر که خوبی انجمن دارد بدو بر
ازو مشک آر و بر گلنارم آلای ز من عنبر بر و بر سنبلش سای
کجایی ای مه تابان کجایی چرا از باختر بر می‌نیایی
چو سیمین آینه بر زن از کوه ببین بر جان من صد گونه اندوه
دل من رفته و دلبر ز من دور دو عاشق هر دو بی دل مانده مهجور
بفرّ خویش ما را یاوری کن بنور خویش ما را رهبری کن
تو ماهی و نگارم نیز ماهست جهان بی‌رویتان بر من تباهست
خدایا بر من مسکین ببخشای مرا دیدار آن دو ماه بنمای
یکی مه را فروغ روشنایی یکی مه را شکوه و پادشایی
چو یک نیمه سپاه شب در آمد مه تابنده از خاور برآمد
چو سیمین زورقی در ژرف دریا چو دست ابرنجنی در دست حورا
هوا را دوده از چهره فروشست چنانچون ویس را از جان و رو شست
پدید آمد مرو را یار خفته میان گل بسان گل شکفته

“When the heat of love scourged her soul
Through knowledge she found her own recourse.
Unto the curtains that hung before the balcony—
One end of each on the ground, the other as high as Saturn! —
Were tightly tied many heavy ropes,
Each one a solace and a balm unto Vis!
That silvern mountain cast her slippers off her feet
And climbed [the ropes] like a soaring falcon!
Reaching the top she jumped from the curtains onto the roof,

The wind snatching from her head her ruby veil.
She was left bare-headed and bare-footed,
[With] her necklace torn, its gems scattered [all over];
Her earrings snapped [in half] while still in her ears,
Her fair countenance left bare of any adornment!
She then swiftly ran to the garden's edge,
[With] her soul full of angst and her heart full of pain.
Her muslin *čādor* she tied to a corner[476]
And grabbing onto it, she jumped down the wall!
An adobe piece [of the wall] caught onto her skirt
And tore her [long] tunic into shreds!
Although her landing was soft and smooth
Her two feet were still pained from the jump.
Her *kosti* belt came undone from her waist[477]
As her pant-legs hung shredded on her thighs.
Neither dress nor adornment remained on her body:
It was all torn from head to foot and foot to head!
Bare footed she wandered around the garden,
Running to each corner, seeking the beloved!
Blood streaming both from her eyes and from her legs,
Lamenting her hapless fortune,
'Where shall I seek my beautiful beloved?
Where shall I seek the heart-stealing spring?
By the righteousness of love, O night-wind!
For my sake unburden me of this pain for a bit!
Carry my message to that fair face
Who holds court so well; take it to him!
Bring from him musk and waft it upon my pomegranate-blossom [face],
Take from me amber and brush it on his hyacinth [countenance]!
Where are you, O shining moon, where are you?

[476] *Čādor* is a long veil used by women to cover their body and sometimes their hair. For more on the uses of *čador* in both pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, see Gheiby, Russell, and Algar 1990.
[477] The *kosti* or *košti* is a woolen thread tied thrice around the waist by Zoroastrians once they have been initiated into the religion, as a symbol of the religion's mantra, "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds," and meant to protect the wearer from the forces of evil. For more on the *kosti*, see Choksy and Kotwal 2014.

Why do you not rise from the western horizon?
Like a silvern looking glass arise from that mountain,
And behold the hundreds of sorrows [afflicting] my soul!
I am lost in love and my beloved is far from me:
Two lovers lie hopeless in desolation.
By your own glory, assist us!
By your own light, guide us!
You are the moon and my beloved is a moon too,
Without your faces the world is as nothing before me!
O Lord, forgive this poor one,
And bestow upon me the sight of those two moons!
Bestow upon one moon light and brightness,
And bestow upon the other moon glory and kingship!'[478]
When a portion of the night's [dark] cavalry passed,
The shining moon arose from the west!
Like a small silvern ship in the depths of the sea,
Like a bangle upon the wrist of a *ḫur.*
It washed away the smoke from the sky's face
Just as is it washed [sorrow from] Vis' soul and face.
Her slumbering beloved appeared before her,
Blooming like a rose amidst [other] roses!"[479]

This passage beautifully illustrates Vis' role as the active lover, while also showcasing her strength and cleverness. While Rāmin assumes a passive role by initially singing and crying and ultimately falling asleep (the utmost state of passivity), Vis pushes both her mental and physical boundaries to their limits. She first tries to figure out a way to escape a sealed and fortified palace and then climbs up the ropes attached to curtains and exits through the high palace windows. Finally, she jumps over a wall into a garden in the dark of night. In the meantime, while she illustrates her physical prowess, every single article of feminine attire is removed from her body: she casts off

[478] The first moon is in reference to the actual moon, while the second is in reference to Rāmin.
[479] Minovi 1935, 278–81, vv. 81–140.

her slippers, the wind snatches her veil, her necklace tears and sends the beads scattering everywhere, her earrings break, her *čādor* acts as a rope, and both her skirt and her tunic rip to shreds. In the end, as Gorgāni writes, "her fair countenance [is] left bare of any adornment" and she lands naked in a pitch-black garden.

From one angle this scene could be read as a sexual fantasy of the male gaze, with Vis' clothes ripping off of her as she performs heroic feats so that she can end up stark naked in the garden to make love to Rāmin. When taking into consideration Vis' broader role throughout the poem, however, and focusing the analysis on the specific articles torn away from her body, it becomes clear that this is not the case. On the contrary, the scene highlights Vis' role as the dominant, active agent in her relationship with Rāmin, thereby upsetting the gender binary that positions women as passive and men as active. Her role as the active, almost "masculine" agent is further embellished by the fact that every adornment and article of clothing that would denote her status as a "woman"—her veil, her necklace, her earrings, her skirt, and her *čādor*—is ripped off of her body, while she struggles to reach a sleeping Rāmin. The physical activities Vis carries out in the scene, from climbing ropes to jumping from the high castle walls into the garden with her bare feet bleeding also underscore her status as the active agent. Further queering the issue of gender, this scene may also be regarded as a conscious referral—albeit in the reverse—to the scene of Zāl's climbing up the palace walls to meet Rudābe.[480] Here the agent is a heroine, rather than the hero, and the action is descension instead of ascension.

At the same time, however, Vis' active role in this scene combines with a quality almost exclusively perceived as a female characteristic: a sense of oneness with nature. This connection to nature is evident in an earlier scene, when Šahru calls upon the wind, the moon, and the sun to

[480] Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988–2007, 1: 200, vv. 528–29.

help her save Vis from Mowbad, who has locked Vis up in Aškaft Tower. Like her mother, Vis—in the passage above—calls upon the wind and the moon to help her find Rāmin in the darkness of the night.[481] Like Šahru, Vis then also prays to God for help. In response to her pleas and her prayers the wind pushes the clouds away and the moon shines upon the garden, illuminating for Vis her slumbering beloved.[482]

Anxious of Rāmin's escape and certain that he has returned to Vis, Mowbad rides back to Marv. He is stunned to find all of the locks of the palace sealed. The Nanny presents him with the keys, but when he opens the doors and sees that Vis is nowhere to be found he rages in fury, beating the Nanny unconscious. He roams the palace looking for Vis until finally, he enters the garden. Upon hearing his clamor Vis urges Rāmin to flee:

ترا باید که باشد رستگاری مرا شاید که باشد زخم خواری
هر آن دردی که تو خواهی کشیدن هر آن تلخی که تو خواهی چشیدن
چه آن درد و چه آن تلخی مرا باد همه شادی و پیروزی ترا باد
کنون رو در پناه پاک یزدان مرا بگذار با این سیل و طوفان
که من گشتم ز بخت بد فسانه ز تو بوسی و زو صد تازیانه

[481] By turning into the strong motherly figure who will stop at nothing to either defend or seek revenge for her child Šahru strikes fear into the heart of Mowbad and in doing so seizes power (however momentarily) from the king of kings. Šahru becomes the active agent in this scene, who governs the situation in such ways that Mowbad is forced into action and Vis is saved. A notable element of this scene is Mowbad's genuine fear of how Šahru and Viru can destroy his kingship and strip him of his power. To some extent the fear that strikes Mowbad's heart may bear religious origins, as he may fear God's fury brought on by the prayers of a mother for her child. If this is the case it is interesting to point out that in this scene Šahru is simply turning the tables and using the same tactic that Mowbad used on her earlier in the story, to get what she wants. However, more than Mowbad's religious convictions, this fear seems to be governed by how much power Šahru and Viru and, in general, the noble families of the court hold. In a situation similar to what we see in Ferdowsi's tale of Ḵosrow and Širin in the *Šāhnāme*, with regards to both the nobility and the priesthood, the noble families of Mowbad's court very clearly hold a strong sway over him and his monarchy. If they are not appeased his rule will not last long. Mowbad knows then that if he does not heed Šahru's words, he will fall. Thus, he reassures Šahru that Vis is indeed alive and that he could never kill the one he loves so much, but that this is her own fault as she continues to deceive and defy him. For Šahru's speech, see Minovi 1935, 269–71, vv. 91–121.

[482] Thematically this scene and the scene of Šahru's lament are important, as we see in them a merging of both Zoroastrian/ pre-Islamic and Islamic characteristics. In other words, the mother and daughter praying to the elements (often represented by minor deities in Zoroastrianism) as well as to God. While the importance of Ahurā-Mazdā (the Lord Wisdom/ God) in Zoroastrian pantheon is uncontested, this passage may also be seen as an attempt on Gorgāni's behalf to both stay true to the origins of the epic (which may have had a more polytheistic flavor at times) and to the more firmly monotheistic tradition of his own period.

"'You must be free;
The wound of degradation befits me!
Whatever pain you might endure,
Whatever bitterness you might taste,
Both that pain and that bitterness be upon me!
[And] all happiness and prosperity be unto you!
Now go, under the shelter of the pure God
And leave me with this flood and storm!
For from my ill-fortune I've turned into a legend;
Receiving a kiss from you and a hundred blows from him!'"[483]

In this segment of the passage Vis once again assumes the role of active agent in the relationship, protecting Rāmin from harm's way, while throwing herself yet again at the mercy of a now bloodthirsty Mowbad. This same scenario plays out throughout the epic on multiple occasions, with slight variations.[484]

In addition to their actions, the language used to describe both Vis and Rāmin further "queers" the poem's representation of gender. While the imagery used to discuss the women of the *Šāhnāme* and Širin in Neẓāmi's poem is generally different than the ones used for the men, descriptions of Vis and Rāmin both flow between the masculine/active and feminine/passive, thereby creating a sense of genderless abstraction. In his last encounter with the Nanny as their intermediary, before Vis agrees to see Rāmin from above the pleasure-palace, Rāmin asks the Nanny to relay a message to Vis:

درودش ده درود مهربانان بگو ای کام پیران و جوانان
دل من داری و شاید که داری که بر دل داشتن چابک‌سواری
تو ریزی خون من شاید که ریزی که جان عاشقان را رستخیزی

[483] Minovi 1935, 285–86, vv. 54–58.
[484] For another example of this see the episode of Mowbad's return to Aškaft Tower, when Vis encourages Rāmin to flee, while she herself remains behind to encounter Mowbad and, as a result, is almost killed. See Minovi 1935, 257–63, vv. 76–182.

تو بر جان و دل من پادشایی بچونین پادشایی هم تو شایی
تو دانی من پرستش را بشایم نه آن باشم که مردم را ربایم
اگر با من درآمیزی بدانی که چون باشد وفا و مهربانی
وگر با خوی تو بیچار گردم زجان خویشتن بیزار گردم
فرو افتم زکوه تند بالا جهم در موج آب ژرف دریا
گرفتاری ترا باشد به جانم بدان سر جان خویش از تو ستانم
بپیش داوری کو داد خواهد همه داد جهان او داد خواهد

"'Unto her give my salutations, the salutation of lovers!
Say: O desire of both the old and the young!
You have my heart and it befits you to have it,
For you are a cavalryman in the stealing of hearts!
You shed my blood and it befits you to shed it,
For you are resurrection unto the lovers' souls!
You are the king of both my heart and my soul,
And such a kingship [truly] befits you!
You know that it befits me to worship;
I am not one to steal from others.
If you consort with me, you shall see
What loyalty and love mean.
And if I be barred from your essence,
I will become wearied of life.
I will throw myself off of a great mountain,
I will jump into the waves of the deep sea!
You will be responsible for my life
And in the next world I will seize my life from you,
Before the Judge Who exacts justice,
He Who all justice will bestow!'"[485]

Three key elements stand out in Rāmin's message to Vis. First is the imagery that he uses to describe Vis. He calls her a cavalryman fit for stealing hearts; a Resurrection Day fit to judge the souls of lovers; and the king of Rāmin's heart and soul. These illustrations, at least two of which

[485] Minovi 1935, 144–45, vv. 189–204.

evoke the image of a male figure (cavalryman and king), all denote strength. A few lines later, when the Nanny is relaying Rāmin's message to Vis she, too, refers to Vis as "the king of the beautiful ones, the moon of the *ḥur*s." Both of these comparisons also allude to Gorgāni's earlier description of Vis, where he likens her to "the emperor of Byzantium" and "the king of Zanzibar."[486] By comparing Vis to a strong male figure here, the passage recognizes her as an agent of greater power and agency. Paradoxically, Rāmin's description of himself in this passage as someone with enough agency to kill himself and make Vis pay for his deeds in the afterlife portrays him, on the same token, as someone with no agency, who cannot exist without Vis' love. Finally, his descriptions of what he will do should Vis not love him in return, allude to the imagery of Farhād and Ḵosrow. Rāmin's declaration that he will cast himself from the peak of the highest mountain, brings to mind Farhād, who throws himself off of a cliff at the false news of the death of his beloved Širin. By insisting Vis return his love and by threatening to exact revenge upon her in the afterlife for his own suicide, he recalls the image of Ḵosrow. Like Rāmin, the arrogant Ḵosrow could not bear to see his own will thwarted. He, too, is quick to exact revenge when he feels threatened.[487]

Such gendered abstractions may be found in other passages as well. Earlier in the story, when the Nanny attempts to reconcile Vis with her destiny as Mowbad's wife, she encourages her to take heart and to make herself up so that she will feel better. As a result, Vis looks even more beautiful when adorned. Gorgāni describes her here as follows:

چو بهرام ستمگر چشم جادوش چو کیوان بد آیین زلف هندوش
لبان چون مشتری فرخنده کردار همه ساله شکر بار و گهر بار

[486] Minovi 1935, 38, vv. 38–39.
[487] Here I am referencing the scene where Ḵosrow feels that Farhād may pose a threat to him in the strength and greatness of his love for Širin, and he therefore constructs a lie to kill off his rival and have Širin to himself. Much has also been written of Rāmin's use of violence. For more on this and its various interpretations, see Cross 2015, 215; 224; and 366–87, as well as Meisami 1987.

اگر فرزانه آن بت را بدیدی چو دیوانه بتن جامه دریدی
وگر رضوان بران بت برگذشتی بچشمش روی حوران زشت گشتی
جهان زوشاد و او از مهر غمگین بگوشش آفرین مانند نفرین

"Her magical eyes like the ruthless Mars
Her Hindu hair like devilish Saturn!
Her lips like the blessed Jupiter,
Forever bestowing sugar and gems!
If a wiseman were to see that idol,
Like a madman, he'd tear off his clothes!
And if *Reżvān* passed by that idol
Every *ḥur* would be ugly in his sight.
The world [was] gladdened by her, she saddened by her union,[488]
Every praise to her sounded like a curse!"[489]

By comparing Vis' eyes to the ruthless Mars, Gorgāni creates a direct link between Vis' physical beauty and Bahrām, the warrior-god who—like the Greco-Roman Ares/Mars—is represented by the planet Mars. The comparison bears significance, given that Bahrām, the warrior-god, is arguably the most masculine, virile and active member of the Zoroastrian pantheon.[490] The following two comparisons of Vis' hair to devilish Saturn (Keyvān) and the blessed Jupiter (Moštari) also follow suit. The descriptions associate her with two other male deities/planets and thereby further disrupt gender binaries. This becomes especially true when considering that the obvious comparison of Vis to the oft-mentioned female deity/planet—Venus (Nāhid)—is never made. Yet in the same passage, Vis is also said to be fairer than every *ḥur* in paradise, so much so

[488] *Mehr* in New Persian can mean "contract or love/kindness," the same semantic range may be found in Middle Persian, where Mihr means "friendship," and "contract; covenant." The term derives from the name of the Avestan divinity *miθra-*, one of whose main functions was the oversight of contracts among men. See Schmidt 2006. In Arabic, *mahr* can mean "contracting, engaging by writing to make a settlement on a wife" or "a marriage portion or a gift settled by the wife before marriage" (Steignass). As a result, the word *mehr/mahr* may either be translated as "love" or "union/ marriage" in this context. Either way it is referring to her "love" or relationship/union with Mowbad. Love/marriage (which is supposed to be a cause for happiness) is being represented here as her cause of grief.
[489] Minovi 1935, 99–101, vv. 3–33.
[490] On Bahrām, see Gnoli and Jamzadeh 1988.

that the angel Reẓvān would be awe-struck by her beauty. This suggests that Vis may be compared to and even surpasses an epitome of female beauty (the *ḥur*), whose main function is to serve and please the souls of pious men in paradise.

Another example of queering the gender binary through Vis, herself, may be found in a powerful passage from her introduction to the ten letters, where she writes:

من آن ویسم که رویم آفتابست من آن ویسم که مویم مشک نابست
من آن ویسم که چهرم نوبهارست من آن ویسم که مهرم پایدارست
من آن ویسم که شاه نیکوانم من آن ویسم که ماه جاودانم
من آن ویسم که ماهم بر رخانست من آن ویسم که نوشم در دهانست
مرا باشد به از تو در جهان شاه ترا چون من نباشد بر زمین ماه
هران گاهی که دل از من بتابی چو باز آیی مرا دشوار یابی
مکن راما که خود گردی پشیمان نیابی درد را جز ویس درمان
مکن راما که از گل سیر گردی نیابی ویس را آنگه بمردی
مکن راما که تو امروز مستی ز مستی عهد من بر هم شکستی
مکن راما که چون هشیار گردی ز گیتی بی‌زن و بی‌یار گردی
تو چون با من نسازی با که سازی هوا با من نبازی با که بازی
همی گویم هران کو مهر بازد گرش ویسه نسازد مرگ سازد
زبدبختیت بس باد این نشانی گلی دادت چو بستد گلستانی
همی نازی که داری ارغوانی ندانی کز تو گم شد بوستانی
همانا کردی آن تلخی فراموش که بودی از هوا بی‌صبر و بی‌هوش
خیالم را بخواب اندر بدیدی گمان بردی که بر شاهی رسیدی
چو بوی من بمغزت برگذشتی تنت گر مرده بودی زنده گشتی
چنین است آدمی بی‌رای و بی‌هوش کند سختی و شادی را فراموش

I am that Vis whose face is the very sun!
I am that Vis whose hair is the purest musk!
I am that Vis whose face is the new spring!
I am that Vis whose love is constant!
I am that Vis who is the king of all fair-faced beauties!
I am that Vis who is the everlasting moon!
I am that Vis whose face is the very moon!
I am that Vis whose mouth is [the essence of] sweetness!

Unto me there is a king far superior to you;[491]
[Yet] before you there shall never be another moon like me!
If you turn your heart away from me,
You shan't get me back [so] easily!
Don't do it, O Rām, for *you* will be the one who regrets it;
No cure for your pain shall you [ever] find save Vis!
Don't do it, O Rām, for you shall grow tired of Gol,
And then, not finding Vis [again], [you'll] die!
Don't do it, O Rām, for you are drunk now;
'Tis out of drunkenness that you've broken your vow!
Don't do it, O Rām, for when you turn sober,
You'll find yourself without either wife or beloved in this world!
If you do not make do with me then with whom will you?
If you do not revel in passion with me then with whom will you?
I always say: If Vis does not suit
A lover, then only death suits him!
Of your misery this itself is a sufficient sign:
That she gave you a rose, while robbing you of the rose-garden!
You flaunt the fact that you have a Judas tree,
Ignorant of the fact that you've lost [the whole] orchard!
[Now] you have forgotten the bitterness [of when]
You were restless and maddened in passion.
You beheld a vision of me in your dreams
And [foolishly] think that you have achieved kingship!
If [even] my [perfumed] scent wafts before you,
Your body will come back to life from the dead!
This is the way of idiots and fools:
That they forget both [their] pain and joy![492]

Vis' strong and dazzling performance in this passage unsettles the binary nature of gender in the text. She is most certainly the active agent in this passage, exalting her own beauty at the expense

[491] The king Vis is referring to here is Mowbad. She is utilizing her proximity to Mowbad—as her king and her lawful husband—as a means to illustrate her own superiority to Rāmin.
[492] Minovi 1935, 349–51, vv. 59–80.

of Gol and chastising Rāmin for his weakness and infidelity. Yet this very active behavior is also coupled with the more feminine act of praising her own beauty. Although the images that she conjures to paint a portraiture of her beauty are gender ambiguous, the fact that she chooses to highlight her own beauty—as opposed to physical prowess or strength, for example—veers more towards the feminine. We see this same tactic later in *Ḵosrow o Širin*, when Širin compares herself and Šekar. Širin also employs the tactic both when she berates Šāpur (and indirectly, Ḵosrow) for suggesting that she meet the king clandestinely to avoid upsetting Maryam. Thus, in choosing to mimic this pattern, Vis exhibits another facet of her active role by engaging in self-praise, yet in a feminine (but not passive) manner.

The repetition used in the first half of the first four hemistiches also creates both a hypnotic and a forceful tone, as if Vis is attempting to remind a heedless Rāmin of exactly whose love he has thanklessly thrown away. In declaring herself to be "that Vis whose love is constant" in the second hemistich of the second line, Vis jabs at Rāmin whose love is inconsistent. In using the term *mehr*, specifically, Vis engages in wordplay to create a very apt double entendre: indeed, her love is more constant than Rāmin's and by being constant she is also faithful to the oath they made when they first consummated their love. The term *mehr*, which is derived from the name of the Zoroastrian divinity Miθra, can also convey the meaning of "covenant" or "treaty."[493] Thus, by saying that she is constant in her *mehr*, Vis is at once saying that she is constant in her love for Rāmin and in the vows they made on their first night together. By referring to herself as "the king of all fair-faced beauties" Vis assigns herself a male title (king/ *šāh*), perhaps to bolster herself with a greater sense of agency in the ensuing "argument" with Rāmin.

[493] See Schmidt 2006. It is interesting to note that the deity Bahrām is closely associated with Miθra in Avestan myths, thereby creating another link between the comparison of Vis to Bahrām and her invocations to Rāmin of their *mehr*.

Vis also uses the preface to scare and threaten Rāmin, warning that he should tread carefully for if he loses her, he will not be able to get her back so easily. She openly cautions him that he will quickly tire of Gol, for she is nothing in comparison to Vis. These comparisons of Gol against herself are reminiscent of the Nanny's words earlier when she tells Vis not to worry about Rāmin's newfound love. Even the sole of Vis' foot, the Nanny assures her, is fairer than Gol's face![494] These comparisons are, likewise, undoubtedly the source of Širin's later comparisons between herself and Šekar in Neẓāmi's work. Vis also reminds Rāmin of the miserable state in which he initially approached her, begging for her attention. Here, she once again highlights Rāmin's abjectness and passivity or incapability, qualities only ever altered by Vis' active presence. She tells him that by simply having a taste of her, Rāmin now considers himself king of the world. The subtext here implies that he will come toppling down from the throne on which she placed him, now that he has forsaken her presence. Her declarations and lines of self-praise, each beginning with "I am Vis who…" are juxtaposed with her admonitions to Rāmin. These also appear in four lines with the repeating phrase "Don't do it, O Rām…!" The sets of praise and reproach juxtaposed with one another can be read as representations of Vis and Rāmin, themselves, in the preface to the ten letters. One represents the active/positive through her honesty, loyalty, and majesty, while the other manifests as the passive/negative in his dishonesty, infidelity, and lowliness.

The different representations of Rāmin throughout the text also queer gender binaries present in the poem. While urging Vis to consider Rāmin, the Nanny refers to him as "an angel on earth and a demon on the saddle," one revered by all the world's paladins and who no one dares

[494] Minovi 1935, 336, v. 127.

نکوتر زیر پای تو ز رویش چو خوشتر خاک پای تو ز بویش

"'The sole of your foot is fairer than her face,
Just as the dust on which you tread smells better than her!'"

to fight against.[495] Later, in her conclusion to the letters, Vis addresses Rāmin as "…the free box-tree/ whose chest is adorned in chain-mail."[496] Further, when Rāmin returns to Vis to render his apologies, the Nanny declares that "the royal tiger has arrived, struttingly/the kingly lion has arrived, proudly!"[497] Such images, it may be argued, evoke a more active and masculine image of Rāmin in the mind of the reader. They share similarities with images used to describe Zāl or Rostam in the *Šāhnāme* and Ḵosrow or Farhād in *Ḵosrow o Širin*.

Despite this masculine imagery, the poem does abound with images of Rāmin that show him in a more passive and often gender-ambiguous light. Some of these have already been discussed: for example, the image of Rāmin as a passive sleeper in the garden. This passivity is likewise present in the descriptive images that Vis invokes of Rāmin, particularly in the ten letters. The aforementioned opening lines of the ninth letter offer a fitting example. Vis writes to Rāmin:

نگارا سرو قدّا ماهرویا بهشتی پیکرا زنجیر مویا
زبی رحمی مرا تا کی نمایی دریغ دوری و درد جدایی

"O Sweetheart! O Cypress-Statured [One]! O Moon-Faced [One]!
O Heavenly-Bodied [One]! O Curly-Locked [One]!
'Til when will you, out of [your] cruelty, inflict on me
The grief of distance and the pain of separation?"[498]

The images invoked by Vis, of a sweetheart with the face of a moon, the stature of a cypress, a heavenly body, and curly locks resembling chainmail, may strike the modern reader as a more "effeminate" description of Rāmin. In the context of Ghaznavid poetry, however, these may be perceived as genderless tropes predominantly used to describe the ideal beloved, who is usually

[495] Minovi 1935, 128, vv. 75–77.
[496] Minovi 1935, 381, v. 571. This is a common reference in Ghaznavid traditions, as seen in the works of Ghaznavid poets such as Farroḵi Sistāni. "Chainmail" here refers to the curly locks of the beloved/soldier, which adorn his slender body, as if it were chainmail. For more on Farroḵi, see de Bruijn 1999 and Yusofi 1962–63.
[497] Minovi 1935, 414, v. 16.
[498] Minovi 1935, 376, vv. 492–93.

thought to be a prepubescent boy.[499] Yet even by pre-modern standards, as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues, a beardless face that resembles the moon did not depict an active agent, but rather the passive recipient of the active, masculine gaze and desire.[500] Thus Vis depicts Rāmin as, at the very least, a gender-ambiguous beloved—if not a passive/ feminine one. Vis, meanwhile, acts as the active agent/ masculine lover not only in this passage, but throughout the entirety of the ten epistles, thereby further queering the representation of gender binaries in the text.

What the discussed examples convey is that both Vis and Rāmin are, more or less, represented as at once active and passive, masculine and feminine, and gender neutral. Ultimately, the lovers' relationship dynamic does not operate along strongly gendered lines, both with regard to their behaviors, but also their roles and appearance. This stands in stark relief to the coupling of Vis and Mowbad, for example. This is intriguing from a literary perspective, as their gender-ambiguous roles are atypical of the genre of epic or epic romance, but commonly found in the lyrical discourse. Thus, it follows that *Vis o Rāmin*—especially the section containing Vis' ten letters—represents a fusion of the lyric with the romantic epic. In addition, the pervasive gender ambiguity of the text may be seen as yet another reason why this romance and the character of Vis would be deemed problematic by a patriarchal society. *Vis o Rāmin* not only demonstrates the powerful agency exercised by one of Iran's own daughters against the most dominant male power (the king), but it also portrays the triumph of a perhaps more gender-fluid norm over a strict, heteronormative narrative. As a result, through the characters of Vis and Rāmin, the text disrupts what Cixous labels "masculine economy," which "consists in making sexual difference hierarchical," by destroying the "oppositions" of a perceived gender binary.[501] This results in a

[499] See Yarshater 1960, 48–53.
[500] Najmabadi 2005, 15–16. Also see Yaghoobi 2016.
[501] Cixous 1986, 205.

leveling of the male and the female, and thereby the abolishment of notions such as "phallic primacy;" an abolition that threatens the very foundation of the patriarchy.

Concluding Remarks on Vis

Returning to Jauss' idea of a "horizon of expectations," we can see how Vis meets the criteria put in place by her female literary predecessors. Vis shares in many of the same qualities as her literary sisters in the *Šāhnāme*. These include unyielding determination, inspiring boldness, a keen sense of wisdom, the ability to use her sexuality as a form of agency, the implementation of guile to achieve her desire, and unrelenting sacrifice on the path to her beloved. Vis also bridges the gap between the women of the *Šāhnāme* and Neẓāmi's Širin, for she possesses the attributes of the latter even more than her literary successor. At the same time, Vis undeniably serves as the unidentified model for Neẓāmi's Širin in numerous ways, complementing her successor's "magic" of speech with her own "magic" of composition. Yet, unlike Širin (and even more than Tahmine), Vis uses sexuality and the enjoyment that she derives from her amorous encounters with Rāmin as a political act against the patriarchal system that attempts to force her into submission over and over. She refuses to submit to the system's demand that she show loyalty to a husband she never chose or that she happily live the double life of a wife and a lover. Instead, and in defiance to the broader forces of her society, her husband, and even her family, Vis implements her own standards. She blocks the consummation of her marriage through the Nanny's magic, takes Rāmin on as her beloved, and becomes a symbol of fidelity within the new structure that she herself has forged. Both Gorgāni and Vis herself demonstrate that, contrary to the opinions of popular future critics and even to the perceptions of society in the text itself, Vis is not immoral. In fact, she is the most moral character of the poem. She has simply chosen not to follow the rules that have been forced upon her by a patriarchal society and has set her own standards instead.

Had Vis been a foreign woman or one from the borderlands, perhaps the fate of her reputation would have been different. Perhaps once she played her role, she would have, like Tahmine, disappeared into the annals of history as yet another benign, foreign woman who utilized her liminal position to the benefit of Iran and, as a result, was swallowed into its bosom. Yet as an Iranian Zoroastrian woman, Vis never experiences the benefits of liminality. She is always expected to play her proper role in a state of stability.[502] Likewise, her rebellion is not only non-beneficial to Iran and the Iranian crown, it actually works against this very power. As a result, the character of Vis must be punished. Where Gorgāni refuses to penalize her, instead gifting her with a happy ending and a place in heaven beside her beloved, future social and literary forces attempt to implement her punishment. As a result, she earns the label of a woman "far from good repute" and "infamous the world over for [her] obscenity," with warnings to her literary successor, Širin, to steer clear from Vis' path if she does not wish to be remembered as a harlot. Yet through Gorgāni's iterations of Vis' unwavering fidelity and through her own words, particularly and ironically in the ten letters that have become the most renowned and emulated part of her story, Vis' true reputation shines forth. They dispel the darkness of ill-repute that threatens her good name.

That *Vis o Rāmin*, even more so than the *Šāhnāme* or *Ḵosrow o Širin*, toys with the idea of gender as binary adds to Vis' notoriety for her transgressions. While Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, Maniže, and Širin all play active roles in approaching their male counterparts, and some, such as Rudābe, Sudābe, and Maniže, stand in the face of dominant male characters who attempt to hinder them, all of these women ultimately either remain in their designated spaces and roles or return to them. Likewise, they are all described differently from their male counterparts in terms of their

[502] I have borrowed the terms "liminal state" and "stable state" from Turner's analysis based on Van Gennep's studies. See Turner 1967, 94.

appearance, which enacts a gender binary with regard to physical characteristics. Vis, however, does not fit into this mold, whether in her actions or in her physical appearance. Vis is by far the more active of the pair, exercising more physical and emotional agency than Rāmin. Vis' active physical role and the evidence of her bravery are much greater than Rāmin's. Thus, the careful reader cannot help but find it humorous when Gorgāni declares that the couple's sons take after their mother in beauty and their father in valor.[503] It would have been more befitting to announce the opposite, for Rāmin does not show much audacity, while Vis is constantly thrown into the arena of war. Similarly, as we have discussed, a breakdown of gender binaries occurs when Gorgāni describes the two lovers' physical appearance; they are both at once active and passive, masculine and feminine. This breakdown results in the further queering of gender in the story, an issue that undoubtedly creates friction between the poem and the patriarchal system in which it was produced. For this reason, perhaps, it was fated to become a text that was regarded as one left better untouched.

[503] Minovi 1935, 506, v. 90.

By Way of Conclusion

An in-depth study of the characters of Rudābe, Tahmine, Sudābe, and Maniže from Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* suggests that these heroines of the early Persian epic romance create a "horizon of expectations" for their literary posterity through the qualities of determination, boldness, wisdom, guile, sacrifice, and sexuality as agency. As these women hail from the borderlands and peripheries of Iran, their "othered" origins endow them with greater agency, which they are allowed to wield so long as it is to the benefit of the Iranian crown. However, once they have fulfilled their mission for the betterment of the heartland or married an Iranian man, they are expected to forgo their agency and to dissipate into the shadows. Those who do not obey are ultimately punished for their transgressions. A stark example of this is the infamous Sudābe. In her initial appearance in the *Šāhnāme*, Sudābe is the paragon of a woman of the borderlands who has become a loyal "Iranian" wife. She returns to the limelight in a subsequent story, however, where she lustfully and relentlessly pursues her handsome stepson, Siyāvoš. By stopping at nothing to have her way, Sudābe violates the pattern that is acceptable for an "Iranian wife." For committing this transgression, she is dragged out of the harem by her locks and decapitated in front of her husband at the threshold of the Iranian throne (a place that represents the very *essence* of Iran). Not only does her place of death carry symbolic value, but her executioner is none other than Rostam, the greatest paladin of the epic and the epitome of manhood and masculinity in the *Šāhnāme*. Thus, Sudābe becomes the quintessentially evil and lecherous wife who ultimately receives the punishment she "deserves;" she who is forced into the darkness when refusing to take her place there willingly.

Along with a greater sense of agency, these women of the *Šāhnāme* also carry an affiliation with "black magic." To a certain extent this magic may be the legacy left behind from their earlier

manifestations as supernatural beings; whether goddesses, *pairikā*-, or demonesses. As the literary daughters of the women in the *Šāhnāme*, Gorgāni's Vis and Neẓāmi's Širin carry within themselves the aforementioned attributes and a link to the magical. Yet, a deeper analysis of the texts proves the magical powers of these two women to be nothing more than their well-honed oratory and composition skills.

For Širin—perhaps inherited from the character of Sudābe—it is her power of utterance and eloquence of speech that brings on the accusations of magic. Through her words, Širin is able to penetrate the hearts of a number of men throughout two epics; yet none is she able to influence as heavily as the character of her beloved Ḵosrow in Neẓāmi's poem. In *Ḵosrow o Širin*, the heroine is not only the king's beloved, but also his spiritual guide, which enables him to become both a true lover and a true king. In conjunction with this, just as Širin is Ḵosrow's guide and beloved, she herself is also a seeker and a lover. In Neẓāmi's poem we see Širin also on her own journey of self-discovery, which begins long before Ḵosrow's, and renders her at times an almost ascetic character. This sense of asceticism in Širin is juxtaposed with a sense of passion and coquetry in her character, as manifested in her relationship with Ḵosrow, thereby creating in her an intriguing duality. As such, *Ḵosrow o Širin* may be regarded not only as a tale of earthly, romantic love, but also one with mystical undertones, perhaps paving the way for Neẓāmi's later romance, *Leyli o Majnun*.

Širin's elusive, yet certainly "exotic" and "othered" origins in the *Šāhnāme* and her re-manifestation as Armenian royalty in Neẓāmi's romance bestow greater agency upon her, like her predecessors. And while she implements this agency in a variety of ways, her greatest source of power seems to lie in the protection of her chastity and her reputation. In the *Šāhnāme*, Širin's greatest purpose is the cleansing of her name from ill-repute, heaped upon her by both the magi

and Ḵosrow's son, Širuye. In *Ḵosrow o Širin* this preoccupation continues, yet it is further implemented as a means of agency. Širin guards herself against both her own yearning for physical union with Ḵosrow and his countless attempts to be with her, as a means to garner an appropriate marriage proposal from him. Although she endures great afflictions in this process—all adding to her image as an ascetic-like seeker on a spiritual quest—she is ultimately rewarded for her efforts by marriage. Far greater, however, is the reputation she is awarded by the patriarchal system that ultimately enshrines her memory as an ideal, female beloved: an active woman of foreign origins, who protects her virginity at all costs, and whose agency ultimately benefits the heartland.

Gorgāni's Vis, however, is treated very differently. A woman of Iranian stock, she is born in Hamadan to the noble House of Kāren (Qāren), her father a hero and paladin of the Parthian dynasty. Vis inherits the qualities of her literary predecessors and manifests her "magic" through the power of her pen. Yet Vis' Iranian origins position her as the most censured and hated female character of this milieu for wielding much of the same agency as the women before her. Unlike her literary predecessors, she is not an outsider-turned-Iranian through marriage. As an insider, Vis ultimately "betrays" the social mores forced upon Iranian women. She adheres instead to her own moral code, exercising her limited agency by carrying out an affair with her husband's younger brother, whom she ultimately marries out of love and of her own volition. Interestingly enough, the man who retells her story, the poet Gorgāni, does not punish Vis for her trespasses. Instead, Vis ends up living happily-ever-after with her beloved Rāmin. She rules as the queen of Iran, bears two sons (both of whom also become kings), and upon her death reunites with Rāmin in paradise.

Unlike Gorgāni, future writers and their texts do not treat Vis as kindly. Instead, they support the predominant narrative script imbedded in the literary texts, in which Iranian women

must stick to specific roles. A little over a century later, when Neẓāmi penned his own version of *Ḵosrow o Širin*, he did not forget the role of Vis. Neẓāmi, despite using Gorgāni's tale as the foundation for his own, seized the opportunity to slander Vis' name. In Neẓāmi's tale, Mahin Bānu—the sole matriarch of the romance—uses Vis as a cautionary tale when she reminds Širin that if she fails to protect her virginity against Ḵosrow's sexual advances, she—like Vis—will gain ill-repute throughout the world.

However, Vis' implementation of her sexual agency as a political act of rebellion against the patriarchal system that repeatedly aims to crush her free spirit is not the only cause for her infamy. While the women of the *Šāhnāme* enforce their agency in initiating contact with their male counterparts, they do not represent gender as a non-binary matter. Similarly, although Neẓāmi's Širin is a very strong and capable woman, the roles of male and female are quite clearly cut in the text, both in regard to behavior and physical appearance. *Vis o Rāmin*, however, rebels against this notion. Throughout the entire tale Vis is the more active member of the pair. Whether devising a plan to desert her husband in their bed so that she can spend the night in the arms of Rāmin or climbing up walls and jumping through windows as a means to find her beloved, Vis stands in stark contrast to an often passive Rāmin. Similarly, the descriptions used for both lovers create a fluid imagery that can often allot feminine characteristics to one and masculine ones to another, and vice versa. Perhaps, then, it is as a result of such a queering of gender and the breaking of binaries, which protect the patriarchy, that *Vis o Rāmin*—like the character of Vis herself—does not share the same reception as the *Šāhnāme* and *Ḵosrow o Širin* in a patriarchal system that finds it threatening.

It is thus that the character of Širin and, to a lesser extent, the characters of Rudābe, Tahmine, Maniže and even Sudābe, live on in the world of Persian literature, while the character

of Vis slowly dissipates into the shadows. Yet these characters' visibility and invisibility do not lend themselves to neat binaries. On the one hand, Vis may have disappeared to some extent from the forefront of shared cultural consciousness (only to resurface again more recently through further studies of the text). On the other hand, it may be said that her legacy has lived on through the representation of women in the Persian literary tradition, and perhaps even directly or indirectly inspired generations of literate women who may have found in her an example of female agency.

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