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ORALITY, MOUVANCE, AND EDITORIAL THEORY IN SHĀHNĀMA STUDIES*

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The ongoing discussion of “oral” versus “textual” transmission of the Iranian national epic¹ has important implications for the study of classical Persian epic literature in general. It touches upon several important issues in Shāhnāma studies, such as the question of the epic’s oral or literary nature, the questions of the form and history of intellectual and literary activity during the most vibrant period of Muslim civilization in Iran, as well as theory and technique of textual criticism of the Shāhnāma. Diverse as these issues appear to be, they have coalesced in the scholarship on the history and criticism of the Iranian national epic. In what follows, I have tried to formulate the problems as I see them by disentangling the various strands of the present discussion. The assumption of the oral nature of the Shāhnāma, or the related argument that this epic is “orally derived,” is at the center of this debate. However, the “orality” argument, even for Homer’s poems, did not appear out of thin air. It grew out of a long intellectual tradition that concerned a number of characteristics of the Homeric epics. These characteristics made the supposition of the oral origin of Homer’s poems reasonable in the first place. There was, in other words, no ready-made “Oral Formulaic Theory” into which one could force the corpus of the Homeric epics. Rather it was certain features inherent in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that led critics—as early as Josephus and Cicero—to question the assumption that Homer composed by the help of writing.² Indeed the very identity of Homer, his gender, and even existence came under scrutiny by a

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¹ Mahmoud Omidsalar, “Unburdening Ferdowsi,” *JAOS* 116 (1996): 235–42 and Olga M. Davidson, “The Text of Ferdowsi’s Shāhnāma and the Burden of the Past,” *JAOS* 118 (1998): 63–68.

² For a brief history of the Oral Formulaic Theory see A. Parry’s introduction to *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971). This source will be cited as MHV, see also the introduction to F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), and J. M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

host of scholars over the years. The totality of these doubts and concerns about Homer and his poetry is generally known as “The Homeric Question.” Milman Parry (1902–1935) and Albert B. Lord (1912–91) later formulated elegant solutions to many of the problems of Homeric scholarship. They suggested that Homer composed orally, and that many of the problems of the poems that are customarily ascribed to him are characteristic of oral verse making in general. Through comparative research and fieldwork among the oral poets of the former Yugoslavia, Parry made a strong case for what later came to be known as the Oral Formulaic Theory. After Parry’s untimely death by an accidental gunshot wound, his assistant Albert B. Lord formulated the results of their researches in *The Singer of Tales* that has become a classic statement of this school.

According to Parry and Lord, illiterate bards who do not have access to writing and sing their tales to the accompaniment of a musical instrument rely on a stock of formulas and rhetorical devices that help them re-compose in performance quickly and “without the aid of writing.”³ As Lord puts it, poets who composed in the oral traditional style kept to formulaic diction because they had to rely on the spoken word alone:

[Writing] alone allows the poet to leave his unfinished idea in the safekeeping of the paper which lies before him, while with whole unhurried mind he seeks along the range of his thought for the new group of words which his idea calls for.⁴

The founders of the Oral Formulaic Theory believed that literacy kills the art of the oral poet, or as Parry put it, the form of oral poets’ songs “hangs upon their having to learn and practice their art without reading and writing.”⁵ Both Parry and Lord pointed out that the oral poem does not, in the course of time, transform itself into written literature. These are mutually exclusive manners of verse making. Lord puts the point with typical clarity and grace:

Beginning with the Romans, the peoples of Europe have borrowed a literary tradition and made it their own. It supplanted their native oral traditions; it did not develop out of them. There is no direct line of literary development from the *Chansons de geste* to the Henriade, or from Beowulf to Paradise Lost. Our western literary tradition of epic stems from Homer through Apollonius and Virgil. Virgil did not write in Saturnians, nor in any direct descendant of them; nor did Milton write in alliterative Germanic verse, nor in

³ John M. Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. 11.

⁴ MHV, pp. 467–68; and see pp. 466–67.

⁵ MHV, p. 469.

any direct descendant of it because there were no real direct descendants of these native oral traditional meters. Oral tradition did not become transferred or transmuted into a literary tradition of epic, but was only moved further and further into the background, literally into the backcountry until it disappeared.⁶

Furthermore, Parry and Lord believed that an oral poet does not merely perform a song that he has memorized. Rather, drawing on traditional patterns, he re-composes his song during every performance. In the course of discussing Wolf's understanding of how Homer composed, Milman Parry's son, Adam Parry, points out this crucial distinction:⁷

Wolf lacked any clear concept of what an oral tradition is like. He does not distinguish between the rhapsode like Plato's Ion, who memorizes and the bard or minstrel, like Phemius and Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, who as Parry was to show, improvises from a poetic store of formulae, themes, and tales.⁸

This is an important difference that anticipates the excesses of those who confuse memorization, as it was common among the *rāwīs*⁹ employed by the Persian and Arab poets of the classical era, with the composition in performance that is the hallmark of genuine oral poets.

In contrast to the primarily oral environment in which the songs of Homer and the bards of the Balkans thrived, the social and intellectual conditions under which the Iranian national epic was composed were purely literary. Ferdowsi had easy access to pen and paper, he was literate, and there is no evidence that he or any other early Persian poet "performed" epic songs. No doubt extemporaneous composition of a verse or two of non-narrative poetry by court poets was known. However, this is a very different thing from the extemporaneous re-composition of a whole tale of many verses during performance.¹⁰

⁶ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge/Mass: Harvard UP, 1981), p. 138.

⁷ Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824), whose *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, published in 1795, is a milestone in Homeric scholarship.

⁸ MHV, xvi.

⁹ Every important Classical Persian poet had a person who publicly recited his verse. These individuals who were quite well versed in literature, and some were even poets in their own rights, were called *rāwī*. A *rāwī* neither composed the poems that he recited nor sang them. He merely recited the poems of his masters. We know absolutely nothing else about the manner of the *rāwīs*' performance in Iran. We can say with certainty however, that none of them "recomposed" the poems that they had memorized from a written version.

¹⁰ Several Iranian poets, including Nader Naderpour who is among those contemporary artists who exercise their art in both classical and modern styles, assure me that it is quite impossible to produce such extemporaneous verse in Persian.

Oral Formulaic Theory as it is applied to the Iranian national epic, assumes that Ferdowsi's manner of composition was either similar to the manner in which Homer and the troubadours of medieval Europe produced poetry, or that he relied on the verse of oral poets. One way or another, this idea assumes that Ferdowsi's poem was somehow influenced by the so-called "oral style."

Many of these assumptions are rooted in two misconceptions. The first is confusing the "oral" with the "literary" in the Persian tradition. The second is the confusion between what is "medieval" in European terms with what is "medieval" in Persian terms. In other words, what constitutes "medieval" in European history is applied to the Muslim world with total disregard of the historical and cultural factors that set the two regions apart. It is then assumed that since Ferdowsi lived at a time that chronologically corresponds to the period called the "Middle Ages" in European historiography, his social and intellectual conditions must have resembled those of medieval Europe. To wit, because Ferdowsi lived during the Middle Ages, he is "medieval" in the same sense that his European contemporaries are "medieval," and his poem is a "medieval" poem in the same sense that European epics are "medieval." Naturally, those who work by such premises see nothing wrong in drawing a series of analogies between Ferdowsi and various European authors of the Middle Ages nor do they shrink from using European evidence to analyze Ferdowsi's work or world.

But why are these assumptions wrong? Why should we not consider a poet who died in 1020 AD a medieval poet? What in Ferdowsi's intellectual and cultural environment prevented him from composing in the oral mode, or at any rate, in a manner similar to the way the European troubadours composed? Before we can answer these questions, we must ascertain what medievalists mean by the word "medieval." We must also assess the available cultural evidence to determine whether the European and the Muslim societies of the Middle Ages were similar either in being "medieval" or in being "oral."

In his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, W. F. H. Nicolaisen writes:

The notion of a chronological Middle Age, with its concomitant epithet medieval, is, in its hint at a tripartite temporal division, essentially European in origin and application. Any exercise insisting on a double vision in matters concerning oral tradition in a medieval setting ..., is consequently almost by definition, predestined to concentrate on and perhaps even to deal exclusively with, the European scene.¹¹

¹¹ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Introduction," in *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, ed. (Binghamton NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies,

Albert Lord extends Nicolaisen's view by observing that:

The definitions of the formula and of the theme need to be interpreted in terms of each individual culture because, even within the Indo-European umbrella, the several cultures, such as Slavic or those of Western Europe, differ from one another in significant details.¹²

Following these scholars, the present author believes that all generalizations about life and literature in Iran of Ferdowsi's time made on the basis of cultural evidence culled from medieval European life to be either wrong or seriously flawed. The social conditions of Ferdowsi's intellectual milieu were drastically different from those that prevailed in medieval Europe. It is a demonstrable fact that the medieval European society was predominantly illiterate and depended on "oral tradition" while the Muslim world of the same period enjoyed a far higher rate of literacy, and relied extensively on written, archival, and documentary sources. The implications of this fundamental difference is that Ferdowsi's society was by no stretch of the imagination an "oral" culture in the same sense as medieval Europe was oral. Evidence of the presence and treatment of "books" in these two cultures is quite telling in this respect.

Prior to the 15th century, "or at any rate, the late 14th century, there was no general public for books" in Europe, and according to one 14th century author, the laity "were utterly unworthy of any communion with books."¹³ Moreover, books were expensive in Europe at a time when European societies did not produce the kind of surplus wealth that could make expensive objects affordable to a large group of people. A fairly common price for a bound volume was approximately 20 s, for which in the mid-fifteenth century, one could buy "two cows, a dozen sheep, or a tolerable horse, or if he were convivially inclined, about 20 gallons of wine or 10 barrels of beer."¹⁴ Alternatively, one could for this price, employ an agricultural laborer for about 10 weeks.¹⁵

Medieval European society's attitude toward the written word was fundamentally different from the attitude that prevailed in the Middle East during the same period. If the number and size of public libraries in these two areas may be taken as an index of the relative literacy of their populations, then we must conclude that the Muslim Middle East

1995), pp. 1-6.

¹² Albert Lord, "Oral Composition and 'Oral Residue' in the Middle Ages," in *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, p. 9.

¹³ Thomas Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain Before 1850* (London: The Library Association, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*, p. 14.

differed fundamentally from medieval Europe with respect to its reliance on written sources.¹⁶

For a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, the typical European library was a “collection of a few hundred codices kept in a book-chest or two in a corner of a monastery chapel.”¹⁷ During the early Middle Ages (ca. 500–1100 AD)—the latter part of which corresponds with Ferdowsi’s time—“the common word for library ... was *armarium*. This was the name for the book-chest where the books were kept.”¹⁸ By contrast, during this period no less than nine terms for library existed in the Middle East. The first part of all of these terms was a word that meant either “house” (*dār*), “hall or room,” (*bayt*.) or “treasury” (*khizāna*.) This terminological evidence suggests that much larger spaces than mere chests were devoted to the storage of books in the Middle East,¹⁹ which in turn implies the presence of much larger book collections, and hence, a greater demand for books by a larger reading public.

As well as being small, medieval European libraries were basically devotional,²⁰ and monasteries held the largest stores of books. The monastic collection in St. Gall had only 400 volumes in 841 AD, Cluny had 570, and Bobbic had only 650 in the 12th century, while St. Pons de Tomières held only 300 volumes as late as the 13th century.²¹ Cathedral libraries, which were geared more towards educational than inspirational reading, appeared around the 12th century AD. These were not much different from their monastic predecessors. The Cathedral library at Durham had only 600 volumes in 1200 AD, while Canterbury, one of the largest libraries, had about 5000 volumes in the year 1300.

University libraries were even smaller. The Cambridge library had 122 volumes as late as 1424, and only 330 by 1473 AD. That is, it grew by a mere 108 volumes in nearly fifty years. In 1375 AD, Oriel College, Oxford, had just under 100 volumes, and Peterhouse College, Cambridge, had a wealth of 380 books in 1418; and in 1453, the library of King’s College in Cambridge had a mere 174 volumes.²² It should be pointed out however, that since it was common practice to bind several

¹⁶ The quantitative difference in this case is so great as to imply a qualitative change.

¹⁷ James Thompson, *A History of the Principles of Librarianship* (London: C. Bingley, 1977), p. 22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For a discussion of these terms see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1981), pp. 24–27. I have translated the term *khizāna* as “treasury” although Makdisi translates it as “closet” (p.24), because the primary meaning of the word, as is clear from its use for royal libraries that housed books as well as precious objects, was treasury rather than “closet.”

²⁰ Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*, p. 16.

²¹ James Thompson, *A History of the Principles of Librarianship* p. 22.

²² Thompson, *History*, pp. 23–24.

independent works together in the same volume, often without regard to their subject matter, a more accurate number of titles held by these institutions may be reached, if we multiply the number of their volumes by three or four. For instance, "at Christ Church, Canterbury, the 14th century catalogue lists 1,831 volumes, but these contain 4,157 separate titles."²³

Private libraries were quite rare during this period. Richard of Bury's "uncharacteristic" private collection is described in his *Philobiblon* to have had 1500 volumes.²⁴ The largest medieval libraries, namely those of Bury St. Edmunds, Canterbury, and Syon did not even have a discernable pattern of bibliographical arrangement, and:

If the horrified stories of Renaissance humanist book collectors are to be believed, conditions toward the end of the Middle Ages were even worse. Boccaccio and Petrarch claim to have found the books in the monasteries they visited strewn about in haphazard fashion, piled in corners or buried under refuse, with leaves missing (stolen as love-tokens by the monks), contents incorrectly described, and generally with little evidence of any bibliography as an ordering discipline.²⁵

In her extensive survey of the libraries of the Anglo-Saxon Britain, Bressie writes that most of the older book stocks in the islands were destroyed as a result of Danish invasions. According to her research, the period from Alfred The Great (849-899) to William The Conqueror (1066-1087) was primarily one of replacement by copying of the few English books which survived the devastation or those which were imported from the continent.²⁶

Things were quite different in the Middle East. Books in Arabic and other languages, as well as translations from a number of foreign literary and scientific canons were available to Muslims. Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) provides a partial list of the Middle Persian texts that he had seen either in the original Middle Persian, or in Arabic translation, at the time when he was composing his *al-Fihrist* (circa 377/987). Of the Persian texts that he mentions, only sixty-five are individual titles while others appear to be collections.²⁷ Thus, when Ferdowsi claims the authority of an older literary source for his poem, he does so because he

²³ Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*, p. 16.

²⁴ D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship* (New York: Garland, 1994), pp. 15-16.

²⁵ *Idem*, p.16.

²⁶ Ramona Bressie, "Libraries of the British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon Period," in *The Medieval Library*, J. W. Thompson, ed. (New York: Hafner Pub. Co., 1957), p. 125, and cf. p. 119, where she says that the plunder of the British libraries was complete by the year 875 AD.

²⁷ A list of these books is provided by Taqīzāda; H. Taqīzāda, *Ferdowsi va Shāhnāma-yi ī*, H. Yaghmā'i, ed. (Tehran: IAAM, 1349), pp. 77-86.

had actual access to a written corpus of ancient texts in translation. His claims therefore, may not be dismissed out of hand only on the grounds that similar claims by such European medieval authors as Geoffrey of Monmouth may be untrue. The social circumstances of Ferdowsi and those of Geoffrey of Monmouth were drastically different.²⁸ Consider the following evidence concerning the size and prominence of the Middle Eastern book collections.

At the conclusion of his essay on Muslim libraries W. Heffening writes: "It can safely be asserted that Muslim libraries were in every respect centuries in advance of those of the west; there was a general need for public libraries felt in Muslim lands much earlier than in the west."²⁹ According to Le Strange, public libraries of Baghdad during the 'Abbasid Caliphate furnished their patrons with pen and paper and the opportunity to make copies from their collections.³⁰ We know of some 100 bookshops and stationers that formed the booksellers' market in the city.³¹ Ibn Jubayr reports that at his arrival in Baghdad in the year 581/1185, there were over thirty colleges in the city,³² each of which, no doubt, had its own library. Yāqūt (d. 626/1228) who spent three years in the city of Marv where he worked on his famous geographical dictionary, mentions twelve public libraries in that city alone. He praises the liberality of their librarians, who allowed him to borrow up to two hundred volumes of their books to use at home without having to put up any security.³³ Not many European libraries of that time had 200 volumes, let alone the capacity to lend such a number of volumes to their patrons, with or without collateral.

Speaking of one of these libraries, Yāqūt provides important information about the kind of people who funded or patronized libraries. One of the libraries in Marv was bequeathed to the city by a man called 'Azīz al-Dīn Abū Bakr 'Atīq al-Zanjānī. This man served as a brewer for the Saljūq ruler Sanjar (490–552/1097–1157), and early in his career was a seller of fruits and vegetables. Nevertheless, according to Yāqūt's eyewitness account, the library that a man of such humble origins bequeathed

²⁸ For an argument that tries to apply the European model to the Persian scene by drawing an analogy between Ferdowsi's artistic activity and that of Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100–1154), see Dick Davis, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources," *JAOS* 116 (1996): 48–57. For the assessment and refutation of Davis' paper, see Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Could al-Thā'ālibī have used the *Shāhnāma* as a source?" *Der Islam* 76 (1998): 163–171.

²⁹ See *EI*², s. v. "maktaba."

³⁰ G. Le Strange, *Baghdad During the Abbasid Caliphate from Contemporary Arabic and Persian Sources* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1900), p. 267.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 92.

³² *Idem*, p. 92.

³³ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1376/1957), vol. 5, p. 114. In other editions, s.v. Marv.

to the city of Marv contained nearly twelve thousand volumes.³⁴

The evidence for the size and importance of “medieval” Muslim public libraries are summarized in a number of important studies.³⁵ Additionally, some bibliographies of the works of a number of important scholars, as well as the catalogues or lists of the books in their libraries have survived. These provide evidence of the kinds of books that interested the scholastic community of that period. For instance, al-Bīrūnī prepared a bibliography of Muḥammad b. Zakariya al-Rāzī³⁶ in which he listed 184 titles divided into eleven subjects. He appended a list of his own compositions to this treatise.³⁷

Muslim libraries employed librarians, translators, copyists, binders, janitors, and attendants.³⁸ These institutions were large and well funded. The library of the Umayyad Caliph of Andalusia, Ḥakam II (350–366/961–976) had 400,000 volumes, of which the author and title catalogue was prepared in forty-four volumes of fifty folios each.³⁹ The Buyī ruler ‘Adud al-Dawla (338–372/949–982) employed several librarians and other personnel in his library which was located in a long hall divided into different rooms where the walls were covered with book shelves. Each of these was three yards wide and nearly a man’s height. These shelves were made of fine wood and had wooden covers that could be pulled down to protect the tomes. The Buyī library had an extensive title catalogue. Different rooms housed books devoted to different subjects, and volumes were shelved according to subject in the same manner that Ibn Sīnā found to be the arrangement of the Sāmānī library of Bukhārā.⁴⁰

³⁴ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, vol. 5, 114.

³⁵ Some of these which have good bibliographies are: S.K. Padover, “Muslim Libraries,” in *The Medieval Library*, James W. Thompson, ed. (reprinted with a supplement by Blance B. Boyer, New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 347–37; Ehsan Naraghi, “The Islamic Antecedents of the Western Renaissance,” *Diogenes* (1996) 173: 73–107; A. Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Beirut: Dār al-Kashshāf, 1954), chapters 2, and 5, and Shalaby’s Arabic translation of this text which is a revised and updated translation of the English original (p.40): *Ta’rīkh al-tarbiya’ al-islāmiyya*, 2nd edition (al-Qāhira, 1966). Above all, I have relied on the work of the dean of Persian codicology and bibliography, Muḥammad Taqī Dānishpazhūh in his series of papers called “*Ganjūr va barnāma-yi ū*,” published in fourteen parts *Hunar va Mardum* between 1351–1352 (1972–74), nos. 119–135.

³⁶ Bīrūnī, *Risāla lil-Bīrūnī fī fihrīt kutub Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā al-Rāzī*, P. Kraus, ed. (Paris: al-Qalam, 1936).

³⁷ Many other similar lists exist, for instance A. J. Arberry, *A Twelfth-Century Reading List: A Chapter in Arab Bibliography* (London: Emery Walker, 1951); E. Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and his Library* (Leiden, 1992).

³⁸ Dānishpazhūh, “*Ganjūr I*,” p. 25; cf. also Shalaby (English text), pp. 85–93.

³⁹ Dānishpazhūh, “*Ganjūr II*,” p. 58.

⁴⁰ Dānishpazhūh, “*Ganjūr II*,” p. 60. For the details concerning the Sāmānī library of Bukhārā see, Humāyūnfarrukh, *Ta’rīkh-hā-yi kitābkhāna-hā-yi Irān va kitābkhāna-hā-yi ‘umūmī* (Tehran: Ittiḥād, n. d.), pp. 32–33.

Men of letters routinely used libraries in their research. For instance, the great Arab poet Abū Tammām (d. 222/836) composed his *Dīwān al-Hamāsa* in the Iranian city of Hamadān, where he took advantage of the library of Abū al-Wafā b. Salma. Since Abū Tammām's *Dīwān* contains the poetry of some three hundred famous Arab poets, we may deduce that Abū al-Wafā's library must have been quite rich in literary titles.

Some of the other famous Iranian libraries of the tenth and eleventh centuries were the libraries of the Daylamite princes, 'Imād al-Dawla (r. 322–338/934–934) 'Adud al-Dawla (338–372/949–983), Bahā' al-Dawla (388–403/998–1012), and the public library of Abū Naṣr Shāpūr b. Ardashīr (d. 416/1025) that was destroyed by fire in 447/1055. Lists of many other such institutions have already been published.⁴¹

Aside from being large, Muslim libraries collected books on many subjects. The list provided by Ibn al-Nadīm in his *al-Fihrist*⁴² is the proof of the wide and varied subjects that interested the literate classes of his time. Unlike their European counterparts who were immersed in devotional literature, the Muslim intellectuals routinely consulted secular texts. For instance, in the year 352/963, when Ferdowsi was probably twenty-two years of age, the Sāmānī wazīr Bal'āmī (d. 363/973) writes in reference to the texts of Greek philosophers:

Philosophy spread in the world from [the Greeks], ... and their books on the disciplines of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, logic, and architecture⁴³ are quite well known. None of those philosophers survives today, however, their books are widely available to all (*lākin kitāb-hā-yi iṣhān māndast ba*

⁴¹ Humāyūnfarrukh, pp. 26–48. Moreover, there is an interesting list of some notable Muslim libraries and the number of their holdings in Muḥammad Qazvīnī's published notes. According to Qazvīnī's quotation from al-Sam'ānī's *Kitāb al-ansāb*, the library of the scholar al-Wāqidī (747–823 AD) required 120 draft animals for its transportation. The library of the wazīr 'Alī b. Alīmad al-Jarjarā'ī (d. 1045 AD) contained 6500 titles only on the subjects of astronomy and geometry. Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī's (d. 1273 AD) personal library in the city of Marāgha had 400,000 volumes, while that of the wazīr Sāhib b. 'Abbād (d. 995 AD) was estimated to contain 1,140,000 volumes. The library of al-Qādī al-Fāḍil had 140,000 codices; that of the Mustansiriyya College in Baghdad boasted 80,000 as did the private collection of Sayyid Murtadā. One of the Rasūlī rulers of Yemen had a collection of 100,000; and the city of Bardsīr in Kirmān had a small collection of 5,000 volumes, which by European standards of the time was a huge collection. See M. Qazvīnī, *Yād-dāst-hā-yi Qazvīnī*, 10 volumes in 5, ed. I. Afshar (3rd printing, Tehran: 'Ilmī, 1363/1984) vol.6, 193f.

⁴² I have counted over 6000 titles in Tajaddud's edition of the text.

⁴³ I believe that architecture, as the usage of the word in the text of the *Tā'rikh-i Bayhaqī* demonstrates, is a more appropriate translation of *hindisa* in this instance than is the more common meaning of the word, i.e., "geometry"; *Tā'rikh-i Bayhaqī*, Modarris-i Shādiqī, ed. (Teheran, 1998), p. 410.

*dast-i khālg andar).*⁴⁴

These examples, that may easily be multiplied several hundred-folds, prove how different the approaches of the Muslim and European cultures were to letters and literature. Therefore, no meaningful conclusions about the Muslim civilization's attitude towards or dependence on written sources may be drawn based on the evidence culled from medieval Europe's experiences with texts or textuality. It may be argued that the historical evidence of the prevalence or use of libraries in the Middle East reflects the lifestyle of the educated classes, not that of the general public and that one may not use this evidence to generalize about society as a whole. This objection is not acceptable. Ferdowsi was not a member of the general public.⁴⁵ He belonged to the intellectual elite of his society, and evidence that demonstrates the nature of the resources that were available to the literary elite is unquestionably relevant to assessing his manner of intellectual activity. Be that as it may, the Muslim society's greater dependence on writing in the medieval period is born out by another form of evidence that may not be considered as belonging to the elite. This is the evidence of the graffiti.

Reports of extensive graffiti all over Iran and the rest of the Middle East is scattered throughout classical Persian and Arabic literature. These reports show that writing was a far more common skill among the Muslim public than it was in Europe. Such graffiti is even reported in pre-Islamic Iran. Ibn Qutayba (d. 891 AD) quotes from the translation of a pre-Islamic text that a Persian courtier advised his son against writing upon walls or gates.⁴⁶ It may further be demonstrated that at the time when most Europeans, including much of the nobility of Europe, were illiterate, most of the professional classes, aristocrats, and not a small number of the military personnel in the Middle East could read. Consider the following evidence:

Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī (284–363/897–967 AD), best known for his encyclopedic *Kitāb al-aghānī*, compiled a short treatise in which he collected a mass of interesting graffiti. He called this book *Kitāb adab*

⁴⁴ Bal'āmī, *Tā'rīkh-i Bal'āmī*, 2 volumes, ed. M. T. Bahar (2nd edition, Tehran: Zavvār, 1975), vol. 2, p. 693.

⁴⁵ I have already presented data on the shared poetic language of the literati of Khurāsān, and have demonstrated how their diction differs from the artless verse of popular epics. See M. Omidsalar, "Bayān-i adabī va bayān-i 'āmiyāna dar ḥamāsa-hā-yi fārsī," *Golestān*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1998, pp. 85–112.

⁴⁶ Ibn Qutayba, 'Uyūn al-akhbār (reprint of Dār al-Kutub edition, 1963), vol. 3; p.221. Implicit in many of the studies of the *Shāhnāma* is the view that with the exception of the religious canon, what was inherited from pre-Islamic Iranian literature was transmitted orally. I find this quite unlikely. An empire of the size and complexity of the Sasanid Empire could not survive by "oral tradition" alone, any more than could its only rival, the Roman Empire. Scattered throughout the early Arabic texts is a great deal of evidence that implies a high level of literacy in the pre-Islamic Persian society. This vast data, however, remains largely unexplored.

al-ghurabā', in which he listed copious samples of graffiti found on the walls of gardens, mosques, inns, and fortifications as well as upon tombstones, rocks, and gates.⁴⁷ One of his informants, a man by the name of 'Alī b. 'Abdullāh al-Wāsiṭī al-Šūfi, was utterly amazed at the dizzying abundance of graffiti that he found covering the inner walls of the minaret of the main mosque in Sāmīra, Iraq.⁴⁸ Certainly writing graffiti upon the walls of public buildings, as we have seen from Ibn Qutayba's prohibition, may not be considered an "elite" pastime.

Textual orientation is evident even among members of some professions in "medieval" Iran, the practitioners of which tend to be largely illiterate in the twentieth century. For instance fortune-tellers appear to have relied on books for the conduct of their business in Ferdowsi's era. The poet Manūchihrī writes:

*ba sān-i fālgūyānand murghān bar dirakhtān bar
nihāda pīsh-i khwīsh andar pur az tašwīr daftārhā*

The birds upon the trees resemble fortunetellers

Who have placed their books filled with pictures in front of
them.⁴⁹

Such a state of affairs presupposes a widely accessible educational system. Education was not limited to the children of the rich in the Middle East. An anecdote related by al-Zamakhsharī (467–538/1074–1143) tells us that the offspring of the wealthy and the children of the poor were taught by the same teacher in the same school.⁵⁰ Yāqūt quotes Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 414/1023) to have reported that when Ibn Kaysān (d. 299/912) was discussing one of the texts of the grammarian Thā'lab (200–291/816–904) over 100 nobles and literati and a great many other people attended his lectures. He adds that Ibn Kaysān paid just as much attention to the poor as he did to the notables that were present in his class.⁵¹

Ferdowsi lived in a literary culture which possessed a sophisticated critical community. His peers, namely the literati of Khurāsān, were so learned and discriminating with regard to written sources that he could not possibly fabricate a source without fear of being held up to

⁴⁷ Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb adab al-ghurabā'*, Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid, ed. (Beirut, 1972), pp. 32–35, 55, 60, 62–63, 74, 84–85, 88, 94, 98–99.

⁴⁸ al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb adab al-ghurabā'*, p. 72.

⁴⁹ Manūchihrī, *Dīvān-i Manūchihrī-yi Dāmghānī*, M. Dabīrsiyāqī, ed. (Tehran: Zavvār, 1370), p. 3.

⁵⁰ al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabi' al-abrār wa nuṣūṣ al-akhbār*, 4 volumes (Baghdad: Maṭba'a al-'ānī, 1980), vol. 1; p. 522.

⁵¹ Wadād al-Qādī's notes on Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī, *al-Basā'ir wa al-dhakhā'ir*, 10 volumes, W. al-Qādī, ed. (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1988), vol. 9; pp. 316–317.

prey to intellectual snobbery of the kind that was expressed against folk storytellers by his contemporary, the learned historian Bayhaqī.

The Muslim intellectual classes of this period were not in the habit of uncritically accepting every written and oral account that they could get their hands on. They made careful distinctions between texts and verbal reports that were authoritative and those that were not. In the 2nd/8th century hijrī, al-Jāhīz speaks of the difficulty of making critical editions: *mašaqqatu taṣḥīḥ al-kutub*,⁵⁶ and the necessity of making critical editions: *wujūb al-‘ināya bi-tanqīh al-mu’allafāt*.⁵⁷ Naturally if all written documents were the same to him, he would not have bothered to address the problems of their “correction.” The same idea is expressed by Kaykāvūs b. Iskandar (d. 492/1098) who in the year 475/1082 advised his son, “Do not trust written sources except when they are in the handwriting of trustworthy authors [i.e., are holograph copies]; and do not consider every book or pamphlet reliable.”⁵⁸

Much later, in or around the year 613/1216, Muḥammad b. Ḥasan b. Isfandiyār, the author of *The History of Tabaristān*, provides another example of the critical attitude that the intellectuals of his period exercised towards written and oral sources of historical and legendary narratives:

... one day I discovered a few pamphlets among the books of the library of the college of the crusading king (i. e., *ghāzi*), Rustam b. ‘Alī b. Šahriyār (r. 534–558/1140–1163), which contained information on Gāvbāra. I remembered that the late king Ḥusām al-Dawla Ardašīr (r. 567–602/1172–1206)... had often asked me saying: “It is said that Gāvbāra used to be the title of a ruler of Tabaristān some time in the past. Have you ever seen such a thing in Persian or Arabic books, [and do you know] to which clan or tribe he belonged?” I [had responded in the negative, saying] ...that [I know of] no other book than the *Bāvandnāma* that was collected in the days of Malik Ḥusām al-Dawla Šahriyār Qārīn (r. 466–503/1074–1110) [from] the lies of the country folks (*az takādhīb-i ahl-i qurā*), and the mouths of the common people (*wa afwāh-i ‘awāmm-i nās*).⁵⁹

It is noteworthy that when the king inquires about a legendary character that interests him, he specifically wants to know if information exists about the fellow “in Persian or Arabic books.” In his response, the

⁵⁶ al-Jāhīz, *al-Ḥayawān*, 8 volumes, M. ‘A. Hārūn, ed. (Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1965), vol. 1, p. 79.

⁵⁷ al-Jāhīz, *al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 1, p. 88.

⁵⁸ ‘Unṣur al-Ma‘alī, *Qābūsnāma*, Gh. Yoosefi, ed. (Tehran: Scientific & Cultural Publishing Company, 5th printing, 1989), p. 159.

⁵⁹ Ibn Isfandiyār, *Tārīkh-i Tabaristān*, A. Iqbāl, ed. (Tehran: no publisher, 1320), p. 4.

ridicule by them.⁵² In other words, he could not get away with what one critic claims that Geoffrey of Monmouth did.⁵³ This is evident from a statement that one of Ferdowsi's contemporaries makes in his *History of Qumm* (composed in 378/988). Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Qummī writes the following with regard to his use of sources:

Let it be known that whoever sets out to compose a book or compile a treatise, places his person in danger by exposing himself to the criticism of the literati. . . I have collected most of what is in this book from geographical texts, those that concern the founding of cities, histories of the Caliphs, and the works of those who were learned in some knowledge, [and have on occasion] copied my material from texts and tomes in their possession. I say this [beforehand] so that when the distrustful learn and notice that I have compiled this book and chronicle from these [aforementioned] texts, they can not denigrate [my work] by saying that I have only collected the work of others and have plagiarized from them. I can lay no claim to the contents of this book beyond its arrangement. Only the information that specifically concerns Qumm and its inhabitants [is original], and has been collected by myself with great toil. Everything else is taken from other chronicles and histories.⁵⁴

Clearly an intellectual atmosphere in which authors had to take such great care not to be accused of plagiarism or of lack of originality was not similar to that in which Geoffrey of Monmouth worked.⁵⁵ Moreover, given the intellectual rigors of Ferdowsi's literary environment and that environment's tastes and expectations, his epic, if based on oral tradition, would have become the object of scorn and would have fallen

⁵² It was this critical attitude of the intelligentsia of 10th century Khurāsān that would have made it impossible for Ferdowsi to fabricate his source. An example of the attention to detail that Khurāsān intellectuals exercised is found in the work of Ferdowsi's contemporary, the Ghaznavid historian Bayhaqī (d. 470/1077). After he quotes a statement from the Ma'mūnid Khwarezmshāh, he adds that it is possible that Khwarezmshāh has adopted his statement from the accounts of the Caliph Mu'tadid (279/892) "and that he may have read Mu'tadid's, because I have seen this [narrative] in that book" *Ta'rikh-i Bayhaqī*, 'A. Fayyāz, ed. (2nd edition, Mashhad: Ferdowsi University Press, 2536/1977), p. 909.

⁵³ Davis "Sources," *JAOS* 116 (1996): 48–57.

⁵⁴ Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Qummī, *Kitāb-i tā'rikh-i Qumm tarjuma-yi Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Ḥasan b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Qummī ba fārsī dar sāl-i 806 qamārī*, J. Tīhrānī, ed. (Tehran: Tūs, 1361).

⁵⁵ For reasons the full discussion of which will take us far afield, even Geoffrey can not be unceremoniously accused of fabricating his sources. The critic who makes that claim depends primarily on outdated scholarship of Tatlock's *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular* (Berkeley, 1951).

author makes the distinction between books that he views as dependable and those that are mere collections of folk “nonsense.” Elsewhere in the text, Ibn Isfandiyār expresses once again his negative assessment of various compendia of legendary material that existed in book form:

Many are the tales of Māhiya-sar and his kingship that Yazdādī has mentioned in his book, which is all nonsense (*khurāfāt*) and old women’s tales (*afsāna-yi ‘ajāyiz*); and because they are not believable (*nā-ma‘qūl*), I did not translate them [here].⁶⁰

The importance of authoritative manuscripts was recognized by the critics of Ferdowsi’s period. Aside from listing the titles of the literary sources that he used in preparing his monumental *al-Baṣā’ir wa al-dhakhā’ir*,⁶¹ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī repeatedly refers to the authority of documents in the handwriting of great savants. For instance, he quotes from an autograph copy of a collection in the handwriting of the poet and Caliph, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (247–296/861–909).⁶² This, of course, is not to say that Muslim classical authors did not depend on oral reports in preparation of their works.⁶³ However, the oral tradition on which they relied was chiefly a learned and scholastic oral tradition. It was far different from the one imagined by the neo-romantics of our discipline or the bucolic crudity on which many European authors of the medieval period relied.

⁶⁰ Ibn Isfandiyār, *Tārikh-i Ṭabaristān*, p. 85, and cf. p. 83 By Yazdādī he means Imām Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, also known as Ibn Yazdād (d. 459/1066) see also p. 142 of Ibn Isfandiyār.

⁶¹ *al-Baṣā’ir wa al-dhakhā’ir*, vol. 1, pp. 2–5, and vol. 9, pp. 268–270.

⁶² *al-Baṣā’ir wa al-dhakhā’ir*, vol. 9, pp. 64–98; and see the appendix to this volume by W. al-Qādī, vol. 9, pp. 271–72.

⁶³ Dependence on oral tradition, especially in studies on the history of transmission of *ḥadīth*, is almost completely misunderstood by the non-specialists. In the introduction to his edition of *Taqyīd al-‘ilm* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (392–463/1001–1070), Yūsif ‘Ishsh brilliantly challenges the prevalent misconception among many students of *ḥadīth* in the west, and those whom he calls “the common people not given to research or profound inquiry,” that assumes oral tradition to be the sole means of transmission of *ḥadīth*. He devotes a concise and tightly argued section of his introductory essay to debunking this view. See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taqyīd al-‘ilm*, Y. ‘Ishsh, ed. 2nd edition (n.p: Dār iḥyā’ al-sunna al-nabawiyya, 1975), 5ff. For a summary of the arguments against the excessive weight given to the oral transmission of learning among the Muslims see Franz Rosenthal, “Of Making Many Books There is no End: The Classical Muslim View,” in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, George N. Atiyeh, ed. (New York: State University Of New York Press, 1995), 33–57. Rosenthal refers to the “never abandoned fiction … of the primacy of the spoken word,” and the prevalence of the erroneous belief that “books were … innovations that came about only after the year 120/738 when … the men around Muḥammad and most men of the second generation, were dead, and so on. In fact, of course, written books were indispensable almost from the outset.” (pp. 35–36).

Even when faced with information collected from oral tradition, Muslim scholars were concerned about the nature and quality of the field-work that produced that information. They contemplated the accuracy of the collectors' notes and occasionally expressed their unease about uncritically accepting everything that was presented as derived from oral tradition. For instance, al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī⁶⁴ reports the criticism against the famous Ibn Kaysān, that faults that scholar for distorting knowledge three times: first, for recording what he hears in the field inaccurately, second, for transferring his field notes into his journals inaccurately, and third, for reading the information inaccurately from the text of his journals.⁶⁵

The Middle Eastern intelligentsia differed from their European counterparts in one other important respect, namely, the manner in which they read their texts. The evidence shows that Muslim literati read silently and in private while European readers often read aloud. This crucial difference is also not taken into account by the "oralists." The presentation of some background regarding this matter is in order.

In a paper called "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry," Larry Benson challenged some of the assumptions of the Parry-Lord theory of Oral Formulaic poetry.⁶⁶ Benson questioned the efficacy of relying on the presence or frequent use of the formula as the sole means of establishing the orality of medieval texts. In order to prove his point he analyzed a number of Anglo-Saxon poems that were known to be of literary origin. Benson demonstrated that these literary poems used formulas "as frequently and sometimes more frequently than supposedly oral compositions" did.⁶⁷ Regarding Arabic poetry, the implications of Benson's study were challenged by Michael Zwettler who wrote: The very concept of an "audience of readers" goes against almost everything we know of the publication and circulation of poetical works during the era before printing and large-scale book production, particularly in the early (Western) Middle Ages.⁶⁸

The key word in Zwettler's observation is the word "Western." Although Zwettler lists a number of references to show that reading aloud

⁶⁴ For reasons that need not detain us here, Rāghib's date of death must have been sometime between the years 396/1005 and 401/1010, rather than 502/1108 which is reported by *EI*².

⁶⁵ al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā' wa muḥāwarāt al-shu'arā' wa al-bulaghā'*, 2 volumes (Beirut: n.d.), vol. 1, p. 106. The same story is related by al-Zamakhsharī without specifying the name of Ibn Kaysān, but with noting that he distorts the records four times; *Rabi' al-abrār*, vol. 1, p. 619.

⁶⁶ Larry D. Benson, "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry," *PMLA* 81 (1966): 334-41.

⁶⁷ Benson, pp. 335, 336-37, 339-40.

⁶⁸ Michale Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1978), p. 16.

was a habit of medieval European readers (p.17ff), it does not follow from this fact alone that these habits were also shared by the Muslim readers in the 10th and 11th centuries. In Europe, reading aloud was almost forced upon readers by the nature of early European orthography. We know for instance, that in much of the medieval European writing no spaces separated the letters that formed words and sentences.⁶⁹ This was possible because the orthography of Greek and Latin alphabets allows such a practice. This kind of writing, which is called *scriptio continua*, is impossible in Arabic script in which Persian texts are written. Among the Europeans, often the meaning of a sentence would be ambiguous precisely because word divisions were not observed. Metzger gives the example of the sentence, “GODISNOWHERE” that may be read in two contradictory ways, as “God is nowhere,” and “God is now here.” Often only by reading aloud could the European reader understand what was on the page. That is, faced with the vagaries of *scriptio continua*, it was by pronouncing aloud what was written, syllable by syllable, that the European reader could eventually extract words from the uninterrupted chain of letters on the page. Thus, western readers were practically condemned to read aloud because of the nature of the script in which they exercised their knowledge of reading.⁷⁰ This type of writing did not exist in the Middle East, and inferences drawn from its European attestation may not be used in constructing arguments that purport to describe reading habits of Muslim readers. In order to be convincing, evidence for the reading habits of the Middle Eastern population must come from the Middle East.

Once we turn to the evidence of the classical Persian and Arabic literature, we find a picture drastically different from that of the medieval European reader strenuously sounding out every syllable. We are also forced to acknowledge that unlike the cultures of Western Europe that were still at the “oral” level of enjoying poetry, those of the Muslim Middle East had already reached “that stage at which the individual read to himself for his own enjoyment.”⁷¹ However, before I present the evidence of private reading among the Muslim intelligentsia, I would like to make a small digression on the oral performance of poetry.

In one sense, every poet who composes rhymed poetry performs his

⁶⁹ See, for instance, plates 1, 5, 6, 15, and 21 in Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Daibhi O Croinin and David Ganz (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) and Elias A. Lowe, *English Uncial* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960); S. Harrison Thomson, *Latin Bookhands of the Later Middle Ages: 1100–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), D. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, pp. 280–84.

⁷⁰ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 13. See also the extensive references to the practice of reading aloud in Europe on this page.

⁷¹ H. J. Chaytor, cited in Zwettler, p. 17.

poem in the course of its composition. Even literate poets, who work with pen and paper, keeping one hand upon a rhyming dictionary, probably recite their verse under their breath or read it to themselves in order to see how it sounds. Therefore, in one sense, every poem at the moment of recitation by its creator is externalized and performed by its poet for its poet and probably also for an imaginary audience in the poet's mind. That it is performed for an actual audience of one, or that the performer is at the same time the creator as well as the audience does not matter. But this is a far cry from both "oral performance" and "oral formulaic composition."

By the same token, not every reference to reading aloud from some text in classical Persian or Arabic, may be taken as proof of a thriving "oral culture." Listening to someone read aloud from a book of prose or verse was quite a common pastime before the advent of radio, television, and computer games put a virtual end to it. It would be misguided to consider Victorian England, or the 19th century America as "oral cultures." It would be even less plausible to view those who recited from books in England and America as "oral poet/performers" in the sense intended by the Oral Formulaic Theory. That would be casting such a wide net as to make the very concept of the Oral Formulaic Theory meaningless. Similarly, it would be absurd to assume "oral performance" of a traditional variety to be underway every time we find textual evidence of someone reading or even singing to others in medieval Persian or Arabic sources. Keeping these points in mind, we can go on to present our evidence of the manner in which the literati of Ferdowsi's time went about reading their texts.

The historian Bayhaqī relates an anecdote according to which when Yahyā Barmakī the *wazīr* needed to find a way out of a tight political spot, he dismissed his companions,

... and then went downstairs alone. He asked that a female musician and wine be brought to him, and began to drink. There was a book entitled *Latā'if ḥiyal al-kufāt*. He asked for it, and while listening to music, and sipping wine slowly, he began reading it until well into the night.⁷²

Bayhaqī also provides an eye-witness account of the great *wazīr*, Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Ṣamad, "awake, and reading a book."⁷³ King Maṣ'ūd I (421–432/1031–1041) must have been in the habit of reading to himself because in several instances when he read a document in the presence of his secretary Bayhaqī, he did his reading quietly. When he finished reading the document, he handed it to Bayhaqī, and ordered him to read

⁷² Bayhaqī, p. 539.

⁷³ Bayhaqī, 610, cf. Rāghib, *Muḥāḍarāt*, vol. 1, pp. 117–18, al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabi'* *al-abrār*, vol. 3, p. 232.

it for himself.⁷⁴ Clearly, if the reading were done aloud, the secretary need not have been asked to read the thing for himself.

Aside from prose sources, we find implicit in the verse of some *Ghaznī* poets, evidence that even epic texts like the *Shāhnāma* were read in private. For instance, the poet *Manūchihrī* writes:

Tā safarhā-yi tu didand u hunarhā-yi tu khalq
Bar nihādand az ta‘ajjub qissa-yi sāhān ba tāq
 Having witnessed your journeys and great deeds, the people,
 Put away their copies of the stories of [ancient] kings in
 amazement.⁷⁵

Elsewhere he relates a story about *Jamshīd* that he read in a book.⁷⁶ Similarly, when *Farrukhī*'s imaginary interlocutor asks him if a greater king than his patron is ever known to have lived, the poet responds: "Don't ask me, simply look in the *Shāhnāma*."⁷⁷ In another poem, *Manūchihrī* implores his patron not to waste his valuable time in reading tales of other kings when he can read the accounts of his own exploits⁷⁸ and confesses that he has never seen a more generous king even in the tales of the monarchs of the past.⁷⁹

I know of no evidence in the classical Persian sources of Ferdowsi's time that can compel us to believe that reading in Iran was either necessarily aloud or that private consultation of written sources was not a common practice. All of this of course does not mean that scholars who have determined the nature of reading in medieval Europe to be aloud or laborious are wrong. It only means that the literati of the Middle East did not follow European habits of reading. Naturally, if this argument is correct, then no conclusions regarding the way in which Iranian of Ferdowsi's time read may be drawn on the basis of medieval European reading habits.

The present confusion about the allegedly "oral" character of the Iranian national epic is rooted in the tendency to treat all literature as an insignificant footnote to European literature, and all epic poetry as a wart on Homer's rump. Classical Persian literature is thus viewed and assessed, implicitly or otherwise, in terms of European literature, and the Persian culture of the 10th and 11th centuries is understood in terms of medieval European cultures. If medieval Europe was illiterate,

⁷⁴ Bayhaqī, pp. 13–14, 164, 193, and cf. pp. 669, 747. When Bayhaqī's contemporaries read documents aloud, they did so in order to inform an assembly of their contents, e.g., p. 387.

⁷⁵ *Manūchihrī*, *Dīvān*, p. 60.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁷ *Farrukhī*, *Dīvān*, p. 344.

⁷⁸ *Manūchihrī*, *Dīvān*, p. 297.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 338, and cf. pp. 12, 32, 65, 163.

then the entire Muslim civilization of the Middle Ages must have been illiterate in precisely the same way. If medieval European authors relied chiefly on oral tradition, then the literati of Khurāsān must have done the same, and for similar reasons. The “medieval” Iran of this fantasy world has no character in itself. Its national epic is not a literary work of art as 1000 years of native Iranian literati have assumed it to be, but a product of some elusive oral tradition, the practitioners of which have disappeared without leaving a trace of their existence in New Persian or Arabic sources. All historical and textual evidence that contradicts the *a priori* assumption of the Shāhnāma’s “orality” have been either disregarded, or summarily dismissed.

It has been argued, for example, that the language of the Shāhnāma discloses signs of an underlying formulaic expression,⁸⁰ and that its rhetoric is essentially oral. The argument has been carried to such extremes of formulaic frenzy as to doubt the very existence of a literary tradition in classical Persian. On the one hand, even the most devout Formulaicists have to admit that “formulaic epithets and the avoidance of enjambement [which is unusual in oral poetry] are typical of the bulk of medieval Persian poetry ...[most of which] cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called ‘oral.’” On the other hand, and in the face of clear textual evidence to the contrary, they conclude that even such Classical Persian verse as that of Hāfiẓ may be described as “imitation oral.”⁸¹ The proverbial “bottom-line” seems to be that Classical Persian poetry either imitates oral poetry (in the case of Hāfiẓ),⁸² or is “orally” derived (in the case of Ferdowsi). In either instance, Iran does not seem to have had a non-oral literary tradition in the past.

What is extraordinary in the arguments of those who claim an oral poetic tradition at the base of Ferdowsi’s literary epic is that they have never presented a single instance of reference to any performing bards from classical Persian sources.⁸³ Instead, the bards of Yugoslavia, ancient Greece, and pre-Islamic Arabia are regularly held up as proof of

⁸⁰ Olga M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 63–64, and pp. 171–81.

⁸¹ Davis, “Sources,” p. 54, n. 24.

⁸² This critic writes: “To give an obvious example, the ghazals of Hāfiẓ exhibit exactly such features [i.e., the relatively frequent use of formulaic epithets and the avoidance of enjambement] with a high degree of density. They are perhaps most fruitfully to be seen as centering on poetry meant to be heard rather than read”; p. 54, n. 24.

⁸³ The almost “formulaic” reference to the so-called *gōsān*, presumably a class of Parthian bards who performed in the “Oral Formulaic” vein, may not be taken too seriously. Almost nothing is known of the *gōsān*’s performance or of his repertoire. Furthermore, even if real information about his art were available, the *gosān* remains irrelevant to the study of New Persian epic tradition, until such time when a nexus of evolution stretching from the Parthian *gōsān* to the storytellers of Ferdowsi’s time may be established.

the existence of a “poetic oral tradition of epic poetry” in Iran. I am, alas, unable to evaluate the validity of Greek or Balkan evidence which falls outside my linguistic competence, and must confine my comments to the evaluation of the peculiar analogy between the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the art of Ferdowsi’s epic.

The authority of Zwettler’s scholarship is often invoked to prove the oral features of Classical Persian poetry by drawing an analogy between Classical Persian and the pre-Islamic Arabic verse. Several important details in Zwettler’s statements that are silently bypassed in the arguments of supporters of the Oral Formulaic Theory will be reviewed here. In *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry* Zwettler uses the term “classical poets” to refer to those Arab poets whose verse was used as illustrative evidence for lexical or grammatical arguments. Many of Zettler’s “classical poets” were *Jāhilī* poets of Arabia who practiced their art in a society that was predominantly illiterate. By contrast, he reserves the term “modern poets” for “poets dating from the early ‘Abbāsid period to the late nineteenth century.”⁸⁴ By Zwettler’s definition, Ferdowsi and Ḥāfiẓ are modern rather than classical poets. The supporters of the Oral Formulaic Theory disregard this crucial distinction, and erroneously equate the Classical poets of the Arabian Peninsula with the Classical Persian poets of the tenth century.⁸⁵ However, as far as Zwettler is concerned, a tenth century poet is not necessarily a “classical poet.” Even poets such as Abū Nuwās or Bashshār, who lived long before Ferdowsi, are considered modern artists, not to mention Ferdowsi and his contemporaries.

Aside from making this crucial distinction between “modern” and “classical” poets, Zwettler goes on to question the possibility of “a continuity in the oral tradition from pre-Islamic times to the period—some two to twelve centuries later—of the literate poets.”⁸⁶ It is a tribute to Zwettler’s good judgement and common sense that he takes the profound cultural differences that separate principally “oral” cultures from predominantly “literary” societies into consideration. In discussing the formulas found in the verse of poets who were close to oral verse production, compared to those discernable in the poetry of the “moderns,” Zwettler writes:

The later “modern” poets were active in environments that were enormously removed—chronologically, geographically, culturally, and linguistically—from that of their Peninsular

⁸⁴ *Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*, p. 48.

⁸⁵ “In this way, classical Arabic textual traditions may be usefully compared with those of classical Persian—as may, to a lesser degree, medieval Irish and French textual traditions, and those of ancient Greece.” Davidson, “The text of Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāma*,” p. 63.

⁸⁶ *Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*, p. 49.

predecessors; and if their work were to be found formulaic to any substantial degree (though I doubt that it ever will be) and if the theory under discussion is sound, such formulas as would be found would correspond to those disparate environments, rather than to that of Imru' al-Qays and Labīd.”⁸⁷

The fundamental distinction between “literate” and “oral” modes of producing verse to which Zwettler draws our attention, was important to Milman Parry who compared the poetic styles of two non-oral poets, namely Apollonius and Virgil, with that of Homer. That is, he tried to see how the literate poet’s use of language differs from that of the oral poet.⁸⁸ In contrast with Parry’s careful approach, no comparative study of the “oral” and the “literary” in Classical Persian is attempted by those who ascribe “orality” to the *Shāhnāma*. No consideration of diction or style in the verses of Ferdowsi’s contemporaries that may shed some light on the question of oral versus literary styles is undertaken, nor is any comparative data from the verse of other composers of epic verse in Persian presented to put the matter in some coherent literary context. Instead, evidence from Greek, French, Serbo-Croatian, and a host of other cultures and languages, the poetry of which has nothing in common with Persian prosody, is offered in abundance.⁸⁹

Consider a recent comparison of Pickens’ edition of Jaufré Rudel’s troubadour songs of the twelfth century AD with the *Shāhnāma*, and the attempt to apply the concept of *mouvance* to the Persian epic. However, before we go on, we need to consider briefly what is meant by *mouvance* and how it relates to the theoretical discussions that rage around the task of editing medieval European texts. I believe that such a brief review will help us understand why the concept of *mouvance* is irrelevant to the *Shāhnāma*. Since I do not have the linguistic competence to

⁸⁷ *Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*, p. 49. Furthermore, Zwettler agrees with Monroe that “the measure of formulaicity in works of later literate poets would be significantly less than that in the bulk of classical poetry, ... [and that] *functional literacy* is probably the decisive reason for the difference” (*ibid.*, *italics in the original*).

⁸⁸ Milman Parry, MHV, pp. 24–36, 166–70, 254–66, 298–301, especially his comparison of several epic poets, pp. 428–31.

⁸⁹ The verse of other poets of the Ghaznavī and Sāmānī periods shows that many of them composed in a language that is filled with shared formulas and phrases; a language that for lack of a better term, may be called the literary language of Khurāsān’s poetry. What’s more, this language is employed not only in verse, but also in official court letters and historiography. I have presented data from Bayhaqī’s history, letters sent to the Caliph’s court in Baghdad, and quoted by the secretary, al-Šābī, as well as the verse of the Ghaznavī poets. This evidence shows that they all used the same formulas and expressions to describe scenes of battle and warfare. See “*Zabān-i adabī-yi Khurāsān*,” *Irānshināsī* (1998), and “*Bayān-i adabī ‘āmiyāna dar ḥamāsa-hāyi fārsī*,” *Golestān* 3 (1999): 99–113. Cf. also E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956), vol. 2, pp. 83–89, and vol. 4, pp. 161–63, in which he substantially arrives at the same conclusion.

directly consult the Old French texts, I have relied on the scholarship of Professor Mary B. Speer, who in a number of lucid and brilliant papers has reviewed the matter, and has placed it in its proper historical and intellectual context.⁹⁰

The term *mouvance* is defined as a neologism that denotes “the propensity for change characteristic of any medieval work.”⁹¹ Although Paul Zumthor was responsible for popularizing this term,⁹² he was not the first to connect the verb *mouvoir* with the kind of textual change that the concept denotes. In 1955 Rychner had already used *mouvant*, the present participle of the verb, in order to “describe the instability of oral epic texts subject to continual improvisation by performer-composers.”⁹³ Four years later, in 1959, Martín de Riquer is quoted to have referred to “l’état mouvant des textes des chanson de gestes” in a lecture that he delivered at the Colloque de Liège.⁹⁴ In 1960 Rychner revived the archaic word *muance*, which in Old French meant “change, variation,” this time as a poetic designation for the kind of transformation that renews, yet corrupts a work which once existed as a fixed literary (i.e., written) original.⁹⁵ In spite of all this, none of the editions that were based on the assumption that some medieval texts possess such fluidity⁹⁶ sought to implement a theory, nor did their editors recommend their procedures as a general method. It was left to Paul Zumthor to formulate *mouvance* as a theoretical concept with implications for textual criticism. Zumthor defines *mouvance* as

Le caractère de l’œuvre qui, comme telle, avant l’âge du livre, ressort d’une quasi-abstraction, les textes concrets qui la réalisent présentant, par le jeu des variantes et remaniements, comme une incessante vibration et une instabilité fondamentale⁹⁷

Speer points out a number of important details in Zumthor’s conception of the term *mouvance* as it applies to textual criticism: first,

⁹⁰ Mary B. Speer, “Wrestling with Change: Old French Textual Criticism and *Mouvance*,” *Olifant* 7 (1980) 4: 311–27; see also her comments in “Textual Criticism Redivivus,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 23 (1983): 43–44; and her discussion of the concept in her “Old French Literature,” in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, D. C. Greetham, ed. (New York: MLA, 1995), pp. 402–405.

⁹¹ Mary B. Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 317.

⁹² Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiéval* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972).

⁹³ Jean Rychner, *La Chanson de geste: essai sur l’art épique de jongleurs*, PRF (Geneva: Droz, 1955), pp. 29, 32, 33, 48; cited in Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 317.

⁹⁴ Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 317, n. 14.

⁹⁵ Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 317, and see Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l’étude des fabliaux: variantes, remaniements, dégradations* (Neuchâtel: Faculté des Lettres, 1960), vol. I, p. 131.

⁹⁶ For a list of such works see Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 316.

⁹⁷ Zumthor, *Essai*, p. 507; quoted in Speer, “Wrestling with Change,” p. 317.

that he makes an implicit distinction in his definition between a medieval composition as "*l'oeuvre*," that is, "an abstraction comparable to the Saussurian *langue*, and yet occasionally reminiscent of the Lachmannian Original," and its physical trace, that he calls the "*texte concret*," namely, the written document.⁹⁸ The fundamental difference in approach between the Lachmannian stemmatics and the followers of the *mouvance* school is whereas the Lachmannian editorial technique allies itself with the author and strives to reconstruct the archetype of the surviving witnesses by a process of elimination of errors, *mouvance* unites itself with the scribes, performers and revisers, and purports to stress the creativity of each successive mutation of the text during the process of its transmission. In this scheme, although the chronological priority of some form of "*l'oeuvre*" is implicitly assumed, none is given "esthetic priority."⁹⁹ The work of art is thus detached from its original creator whose individuality and genius disappears in a crowd of faceless performers and revisers and whose voice is lost amid a cacophony of scribal voices.

Speer points out that although Zumthor sought to extend the notion of *mouvance* to all medieval literature, he realized that for his arguments to make sense, he must also "posit different levels of intensity of *mouvance*." Thus, certain genres such as those of *chanson de geste* and fabliaux were more variable and were therefore more tenuously connected with *l'oeuvre*, while others, among which he listed many romances, "departed little from *l'oeuvre*."¹⁰⁰ Be that as it may, the concept of *mouvance* is based on several assumptions: (1) lyric poetry was primarily oral and was also transmitted by oral means, (2) its poetics allowed "variation around a set *registre*," (3) medieval poems do not have ascertainable authors because their authors cannot be located amid the group of performers and scribes who transmitted them. It is clear that none of these assumptions are applicable to the Shāhnāma. But rather than getting ahead of ourselves, let us see how this theory has been applied to textual criticism.

Some editors of Old French texts have preferred to transmit several different versions of a work in order to give a better sense of the variability of the manuscript tradition that *mouvance* tries to address. Following the example of the Italian New Philologists, these scholars emphasize that because medieval texts exist in circumstances of steadily varying contexts, ranging from changes in their manuscript tradition, adaptations, codicological compilations, etc., one must first understand these contexts before one can understand either what the "text" is, or how the text functions. Therefore they find multitext editions of medieval French

⁹⁸ Speer, "Wrestling with Change," p. 317.

⁹⁹ Speer, "Wrestling with Change," pp. 317-18.

¹⁰⁰ Speer, "Wrestling with Change," p. 319; and see Zumthor, *Essai*, p. 79f.

works desirable. However, the relatively small size of the medieval French texts makes multitexts editions of them possible. Consider, for instance, the size of *La vie de Sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, of which Dembowski has produced an edition. The oldest and longest manuscript version of this text, namely its version (T), is only 1532 verses.¹⁰¹ This is clearly a far cry from the massive text of the *Shāhnāma* with its nearly 50,000 distichs, which comprise 100,000 lines of poetry. Even Zumthor agrees that presenting all documentary evidence in support of a reconstructed original "would be difficult to apply to long compositions, and that it might not be appropriate for every work."¹⁰² Therefore, the *Shāhnāma*'s bulk automatically rules out the possibility of a multitext edition. But even if the national epic of Iran were not as massive as it is, other considerations would render all attempts to consider it in the light of *mouvance* absurd.

The entire concept of *mouvance* hangs on the presumption of some sign of the oral nature in a work of literature. This oral nature is implied when the manuscript tradition of the work shows such vast textual variations that a single author or a fixed text behind it may be safely ruled out. To put it in other words, if the surviving witnesses of a poetic text differ so vastly and significantly as to imply different "performances" or independent artistic "re-creations" of that poem, then *mouvance* may be relevant. However, if the manuscript variations are small and insignificant, and if they may be explained by recourse to the usual scribal practices, then there is no need to invoke this theory. As we shall presently see, the manuscript tradition of the *Shāhnāma* is so conservative as to be practically immobile, let alone *mouvant*.

The way the implications of the *mouvance* are applied to the *Shāhnāma* is peculiar. It is first revealed that variations in Jaufré's troubadour songs imply a fluid textual tradition that is influenced by *mouvance*:

"Most of the textual variations ... that is, most of the different readings transmitted by the different manuscripts, [of these troubadour songs] are part of a compositional system that goes beyond any individual composer. Medieval texts that derive from oral traditions are not a finished product, *un achèvement*, but a text in progress, *un texte en train de se faire*. No matter how many times a text derived from oral traditions is written down, it will change or move: hence the term *mouvance*."¹⁰³

Immediately, and almost with no warning, we are told that a similar situation prevails in the case of the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts in which the

¹⁰¹ Speer, "Textual Criticism," pp. 40–42.

¹⁰² Speer, "Wrestling with Change," p. 320.

¹⁰³ Davidson, "The text of Ferdowsī's *Shāhnāma*," p. 64.

variae lectiones are the proof that the epic was *un texte en train de se faire*, and that oral poetry must have influenced its transmission.¹⁰⁴ No shred of evidence from any *Shāhnāma* manuscripts has been presented in support of this jump from Old French to New Persian. Yet, the claim that *variae lectiones* in the *Shāhnāma* should no longer be evaluated with regard to whether they are superior or inferior, genuine or spurious, and even right or wrong, is made *ex cathedra*. Once the Iranian national epic is diagnosed as something akin to medieval French lyric poetry, it is proposed that its text should be presented in a “multitext format” in accordance with an ideal plan that will let it imitate French troubadour songs.

Putting aside the fact that the existence of a song culture similar to what is implied by Jaufré Rudel’s work has never been proven for New Persian epic literature, it seems to me that before we can accept the *mouvance* argument, or embark upon a “multitext” editorial project, we must accept that the *Shāhnāma* is a “medieval text.” We must further agree that it was transmitted in a manner similar to medieval French texts. But as we hope to have demonstrated by the cultural evidence presented so far, none of these assumptions are acceptable. However, even if we disregard this evidence, the methods by which some have arrived at the notion that the text of the *Shāhnāma* is sufficiently fluid to justify the application of *mouvance*, are problematic. Generalizations regarding the character of the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts are made based on the evidence *exclusively* drawn from the text of *Shāhnāma* editions. The obvious objection to this approach is that printed editions are different from manuscripts, and those who make the claim that the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts are textually “fluid” cannot prove their point by evidence of the printed editions. Printed editions have their own *variae lectiones* that creep into the text by way of their editors’ misreading, and the typesetters’ daydreaming. Neither the text of the Moscow edition of the *Shāhnāma*,¹⁰⁵ nor that of Professor Khaleghi-Motlagh’s¹⁰⁶ may be passed off as “manuscript evidence.” Printed editions are merely some editor(s) interpretation of the text of an original MS rendered into print. The editor(s) of these editions are in reality scribes of varying competence who produce their copy by conflating the texts of the manuscripts at their disposal.

Scholars who are concerned with manuscript evidence may not reasonably suggest that “the readings of the Moscow edition are readings of the manuscript tradition of the *Shāhnāma*, as sorted out by the Moscow

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 64–66.

¹⁰⁵ Bertels, Y. E. et al, eds., *Ferdowsi: Shāhnāma*, I–IX (Moscow, 1960–71).

¹⁰⁶ Khaleghi-Motlagh, D. ed., *The Shāhnāma (Book of Kings)*, I–IV (New York, 1988–97). Volumes 6–8 of this edition are still in preparation.

editors.”¹⁰⁷ It is objectively demonstrable that the Moscow editors did not always record the readings of their manuscripts accurately or faithfully. The most glaring evidence of their carelessness is that the Moscow text leaves out all of the story headings of the epic. These headings occur in every known manuscript of the *Shāhnāma*. In the Moscow edition however, stories have been assigned numbers in place of their original titles. This editorial interference violates the design and codicological syntax of the epic. What’s more, the Moscow edition does not record all manuscript variants, nor when it does, does it always do so correctly. In reference to the relative dependability of the Moscow edition, Khaleghi-Motlagh writes:

By my reckoning, only in the episode of Dārā’s kingship, which comprises 453 verses (Moscow vol.6, pp. 381–406), manuscript variants are recorded either incorrectly or inaccurately in more than 200 instances. This, of course, is in addition to the usual typos that are spread rather generously throughout the Moscow text... A number of verses of the London codex have been mistakenly left out by the Moscow editors. For instance, the preface to the story of Luhrāsp, [which] amounts to eleven verses.¹⁰⁸

Critical editions may be good or bad, dependable or unreliable, but they are not manuscripts. All *Shāhnāma* editions are, to various degrees, eclectic compilations of the texts of different manuscripts of the epic into a hybrid narrative. The more enthusiastic editors spared no effort to make their texts grow for fear of neglecting any genuine verses. Thus, even those editors who worked from one “best” manuscript often filled in the “gaps” in the narrative of their *optimus codex*, from verses of other manuscripts, in order to achieve a more “complete” text.¹⁰⁹ The outcome of this editorial situation is that with the exception of the Moscow edition that follows its *optimus codex* more closely than most, all editions of the *Shāhnāma* are longer than most manuscripts of the poem. Given this situation, one can make no judgements regarding the variability of the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts from the data obtained from the published editions of the poem.

The learned editor of Jaufré Rudel’s songs, who has eloquently argued in favor of *mouvance*, based his arguments primarily on a thor-

¹⁰⁷ Davidson, “The text of Ferdowsī’s *Shāhnāma*,” p. 67.

¹⁰⁸ Khaleghi-Motlagh, “Statistics of Omitted and Spurious Verses in Six Manuscripts of the *Shāhnāma*,” *Studia Iranica* 26 (1997): 43–44.

¹⁰⁹ The erroneous belief that the *Shāhnāma* is some 60,000 verses has forced many critics over the centuries to “adjust” the number of verses of their manuscripts by increasing them either from other manuscripts or by their own talent. This has resulted in such horizontal contamination of the text that establishing accurate stemmas for the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts has become virtually impossible.

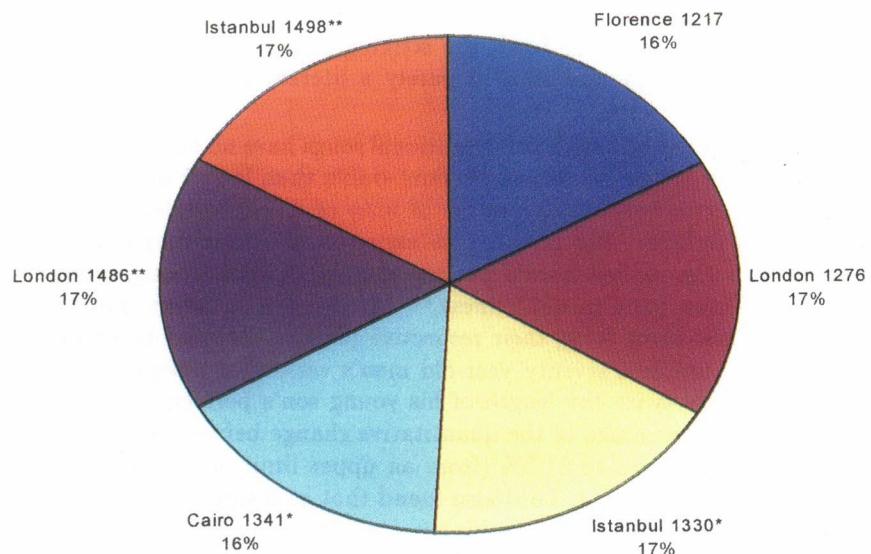
ough evaluation of the forms of the *variae lectiones* in his manuscripts. Therefore, whether one agrees with his opinion or not, his approach is sound. By contrast, those who opine on the character of the Shāhnāma manuscripts by studying the variants listed in eclectic critical editions of the poem, are not merely confusing their p's and q's, but are trying to extract orange juice from apples.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate some of the points that were raised regarding the stability of the epic's text by means of a statistical analysis of fluctuations in the number of verses devoted to the story of Kaykhusrow in six Shāhnāma manuscripts. This tale has been chosen for several reasons. First, it is long, nearly 12,000 distichs (24,000 lines), that make it only slightly shorter than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. Second, it is approximately 24% of the entire Shāhnāma, and may therefore be considered a representative sample of the whole text. Third, it belongs to the legendary section of the poem and is especially rich in ancient lore. Therefore, if the Shāhnāma is based on "oral tradition" evidence of its "orality" is more likely to be found in this tale than in any other.

In order to better quantify my results, I focus on quantitative fluctuation of verses as an example of quantifiable *variae lectiones*. This statistical sample will be compared with similar data on the quantitative fluctuation of verses that Lord reports from different performances of oral epic songs. I hope to show how vastly different the oral performance data is from what can be found in literary epics like the Shāhnāma. In view of this evidence even if the Shāhnāma is an oral poem, its "orality" is not expressed by the same pattern of quantitative change that characterizes oral epics. I will also compare the manuscript sample with a similar sample from four published editions of the epic in order to show the fundamental difference between manuscripts and published editions.

The story of Kaykhusrow's rule in Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition has 11,618 verses. The number of verses devoted to it in six authoritative MSS of the poem may be represented as follows:

Manuscript	Number of Verses
Florence MS 614/1217	11,749
London MS 675/1276	11,622
Istanbul MS 731/1330	11,899
Cairo MS 741/1341	11,060
London MS 891/1486	11,560
Istanbul MS 903/1498	11,577



The bulkiest MS in this group, i.e., Istanbul 731/1330, has only 839 verses more than the smallest one, Cairo 741/1341. In other words, in an episode of close to twelve thousand distichs the text of our most massive MS is only slightly larger than that of our smallest codex. Thus, fluctuation in the number of verses of these two MSS is between 7.1% to 7.6% for the whole episode. The average quantitative difference is no larger than 7.35%. The quantitative similarity is even more striking for the codices that are closest in bulk, namely, London MS of 891/1486 and the Istanbul MS of 903/1498. These are only 17 verses apart and the quantitative difference between them is merely 0.2%. The average for these two extremes may be computed to be no more than 3.77%.

If manuscript variance in the *Shāhnāma* represents a different “oral traditional performance” then the numbers generated from our sample should be roughly similar to the comparable data on oral performances of epic tales in Iran. Sadly, here we run into a problem. A sung poetic oral tradition in Persian language neither exists, nor has any remnant of it ever been isolated in the extant corpus of Classical Persian literature. We must therefore rely on data from other cultural and literary traditions.

In *The Singer of Tales* (see n. 7), Lord has provided data of interest to us. When the numbers obtained from our literary sample are compared with those of Albert Lord, the striking difference between what is genuine oral poetry and what is purely a literary creation becomes manifest.

Lord found that although oral traditional songs have no one “correct” version, shorter songs are relatively more stable than longer ones,¹¹⁰ in most cases fluctuation in the number of lines of a song’s different performances is notable. For instance an experienced singer may expand the size of a less skilled bard’s performance of the same song nearly three folds (from 2294 to 6313 lines).¹¹¹ Even when a father and his son perform the same song, their respective performance differs significantly. For example a seventy year-old man’s version of a song at 445 lines, was nearly twice the length of his young son’s performance (249 lines).¹¹² The percentage of the quantitative change between these two performances averages to 61.5% (from an upper limit of 78.8% to the lower boundary of 44.1%). Lord also found that as a singer grows older and more experienced he may double the size of his song in performances that are only a year apart. One such singer increased the length of his song from 154 to 279 lines.¹¹³ The upper and lower limits of percentile change in this example are 81.2% and 44.8% respectively, for an average fluctuation of 63%.¹¹⁴ In a more extreme case that was encountered in Bulgaria, Lord found the same song rendered in performances that were seven years apart to be so vastly different that “it was impossible to

¹¹⁰ ST pp. 100–101.

¹¹¹ ST, p. 103, and compare the contrast between the length of a song book version of a tale (11 lines) and the much longer performance of it by a skilled singer (ST, pp. 107–108).

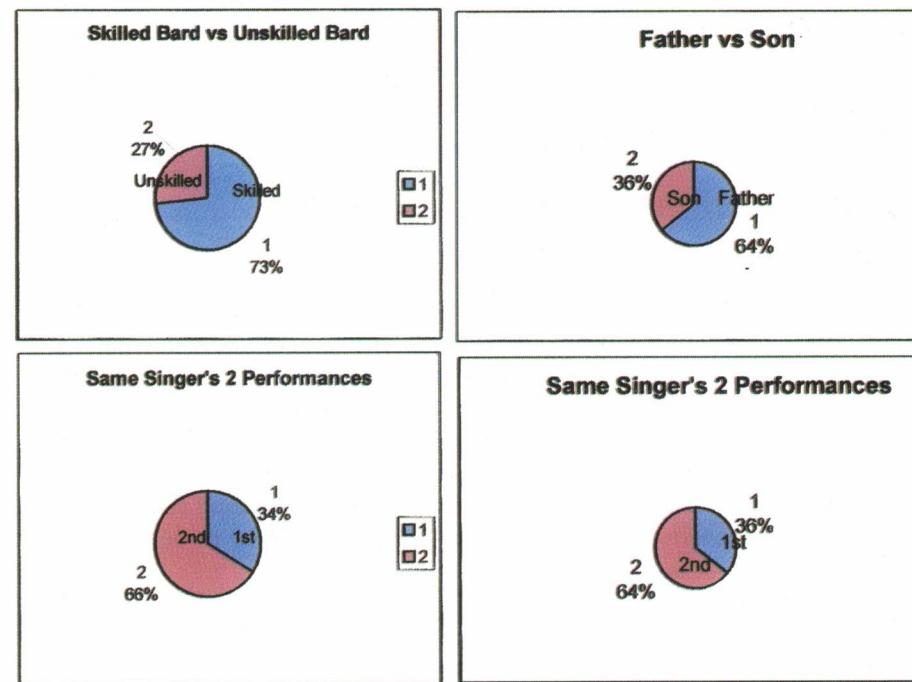
¹¹² ST, p. 109.

¹¹³ ST, p. 113.

¹¹⁴ Lord presents evidence of great discrepancy in a song performed by the same singer in two performances, which were separated by some 16 years. The earlier singing, recorded by Parry in the spring of 1935, was 464 lines; the later one, recorded by Lord himself in June of 1950, had no more than 209 lines. (ST, pp. 115–116). The range of variance for this song is between 55% and 122% for an average of 88.5%. However, since in his 1950 performance, the singer “was in a hurry to finish and depart,” his performance was rushed, and this evidence may not be fairly utilized for our purposes.

follow the written text" of the song's previous recording.¹¹⁵

Oral Performances			
Performances	Lines	Fluctuations	Average%
Skilled bard	6313	4019	119.50%
Unskilled bard	2294		
Father's song	445	196	61.50%
Son's song	249		
Same Singer I	698		
Same Singer II	1369	671	72.70%
Same singer 1	154		
Same singer 2	279	125	63%



¹¹⁵ ST, p. 119. By contrast, in another instance, a singer's two performances of the same song separated by some 16 years differed only in 63 lines. This is a range of 7.2%-7.8%, for an average change of only 7.5%. Naturally, the song was also changed in ways beyond mere length. However, since the present author does not have the linguistic competence to appreciate or properly tabulate those changes, he has left it out of his consideration.

These numbers show that compared to the changes in different performances of the oral traditional epic songs quantitative changes in various *Shāhnāma* manuscripts are negligible.¹¹⁶ But if this is the case, then why do some still believe that textual variation in the *Shāhnāma* reflects an “oral tradition of formulaic composition” for this book?¹¹⁷

There is little doubt that those who rely on evidence from printed editions of the *Shāhnāma* for their assessment of its manuscripts tradition will almost inevitably come to the conclusion that textual variations of different editions may represent different “performances.” However, as I have already pointed out, editions of a work are not the same as its manuscripts. Therefore generalizations about the nature of the *Shāhnāma* manuscripts on the basis of evidence obtained from its different editions are bound to be wrong no matter how carefully they are evaluated. A comparison of the statistical evidence pertaining to the number of verses in our sample of six MSS with similar statistics taken from different *Shāhnāma* editions might make the point more clearly.¹¹⁸

Edition	Number of Verses
Moscow	11,680
Barukhim	12,100
Mohl	12,100
Dabīrsiyāqī	12,700
Ramizānī	13,400

The quantitative discrepancy between the largest and the smallest editions for the story of Kaykhusrow is 1720 verses or $(14.8\% + 12.9\% \div 2 =) 13.9\%$. This is almost four times greater than the quantitative discrepancy of our manuscript sample that was only 3.77%. Now, if we drop the two codices that stand at the two extremes of our sample group, and consider only the evidence of the remaining codices, we find that the average difference in the number of verses in our sample

¹¹⁶ The same may be said of variant readings of verses and individual words of the epic, almost all of which may be readily explained in standard paleographic terms.

¹¹⁷ According to one recent suggestion “the variant readings of different *Shāhnāma* manuscripts result from a system of formulaic variation typical of oral poetics.” Olga M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 175. These views are restated in *JAOS*, “Burden,” pp. 63–68.

¹¹⁸ The data for the comparison of the various editions of the *Shāhnāma* is quoted from Siyavash Rūzbihān, “Kayfiyyat-i afzāyish wa kāhish-i riwāyāt va abyāt-i *Shāhnāma* [The Quiddity of the Fluctuation in *Shāhnāma* Episodes and Verses],” *Sīmurgh* [The Journal of the *Shāhnāma* Foundation], 3 (2535/1976): 73–84. I have had to adjust Rūzbihān’s results downward. Mr. Rūzbihān subtracts the verses of the Moscow edition from those of the bulky Ramizānī text ($8452 - 7025 = 1427$). He then calculates a percentage using this number and the smaller Moscow edition ($142700 \div 7025 = 20.4\%$). I have used both the Moscow edition and the more voluminous Ramizānī text to compute my percentages (16.9% and 20.4% respectively), for which I have calculated an average percentile difference ($16.9 + 20.4 = 18.7\%$). In that respect my results are more conservative.

of four manuscripts is no more than 0.95%.¹¹⁹ This is a far cry from discrepancies of different published editions of the poem. Nothing in this evidence justifies the assumption that the epic shows a great variation in its manuscript tradition, or that the differences in our various manuscripts imply various performances of an oral traditional nature.

It may be argued that many important differences in readings of the *Shāhnāma* witnesses involve non-quantitative features. That is, two manuscripts with nearly equal number of verses may have vastly differing texts. My experience in editing the text indicates otherwise. Almost all of the non-quantitative differences of the sixteen manuscripts collated for Professor Khaleghi-Motlagh's new critical edition may be explained in standard paleographic terms, and as far as these MSS are concerned there is no need to invoke the authority of some presumed "oral tradition" behind their variant readings. Therefore, the recent suggestion that what Zumthor has called *mouvance* has any relevance to the *Shāhnāma* is not supported by statistical or manuscript evidence. But let us put these technical reasons aside for the moment and consider the practical problems of producing a "multitext" edition of the *Shāhnāma* that seems to be desired by Zumthor's followers. First I would like to place the concept of the "multitext" in context within the general history of textual criticism.

If we put aside scholars who produce eclectic editions, most editors of medieval texts generally fall into one of two dominant schools. The first is that of Karl Lachmann, that approaches the text "scientifically" by laboriously establishing the genealogical relationships of its surviving manuscripts. The second, most closely associated with Joseph Bédier, is called the "best-manuscript" school.¹²⁰ Lachmannians seek to arrive at a fixed state of the text somewhere back in its history. Ordinarily this is that stage in the text's history which is represented by what is called its "archetype." The archetype is not the same thing as the author's fair copy. It is merely a hypothetical form of the text that may be reconstructed from its surviving manuscripts (witnesses.) Lachmannians assume that although the archetype is not identical with the author's fair copy, it is relatively closer to what he wrote and intended to circulate. Therefore, their approach and assumptions make them the author's allies. They seek to get close to, and approximate his very words. By contrast, editors who follow Joseph Bédier's editorial technique assume that the author's original work is unrecoverable and all attempts at reconstructing its archetype are methodologically flawed. Instead, they

¹¹⁹ This average has been derived from a maximum discrepancy of 1.7% and the minimum discrepancy of 0.2%.

¹²⁰ Bédier's position, as Greetham points out, is clearly traceable to the theoretical assumptions of the Pergamanian school of textual criticism in the ancient period. See Greetham, *Textual Scholarship* (N. Y.: Garland, 1994), pp. 324-5.

prefer to concentrate on a surviving manuscript that on codicological, historical, or linguistic grounds is determined to be the best manuscript of the work and seek to present it as an authentic medieval document. In other words, these editors aim to faithfully transmit the text of a scribe's rendition of an author's work with as little interference as possible. In doing so they ally themselves with the scribe. The Bédierists' "best manuscript," or alternatively, what Peter Dembowski has cleverly called "the least bad manuscript," is reproduced only with correction of its glaring errors.

The proponents of the multitext editions, a relatively recent development in textual scholarship, differ from the Lachmannians and the Bédierists in that they seek to preserve and pass on a whole array of scribal productions by means of reproducing the texts of the various manuscripts of a work as accurately as possible. In doing so, they give voice to the way a multitude of scribes present an author's work and focus neither on the author nor on a specific scribe, but on the process of transmission. However, closer examination of the format in which most multitext editions are presented reveals that most editors of multitext editions "retain in their structure or notes the hierarchical notion of a preexisting authorial model that may be irretrievable."¹²¹ For instance Rupert Pickens' edition of *The Songs of Jaufré Rudel*, the very text that has been held up as the example of a multitext edition worthy of emulation by Shāhnāma editors, follows a hierarchical ordering of the different versions of Jaufré's poems. This hierarchical ordering "suggests in a general way a trend toward decreasing probability of full personal intervention by Jaufré, which cannot be measured or evaluated absolutely."¹²²

In the course of editing Jaufré's songs, Pickens who originally started to work as a Lachmannian, realized that his manuscript tradition was too complicated to yield to the standard Lachmannian approach. Each transmission turned out to be an "authorized" version of a prime creator's art. Thus, he concluded that various transmissions of Jaufré's songs were all "authentic" after a fashion. But Pickens did not stampede through the manuscript tradition carelessly, nor did he rely *only* on printed editions in order to evaluate Jaufré's manuscripts. Instead, he produced "a detailed description of the manuscript traditions of the individual *cansos*, then separate editions of all redactions of each poem with facing translations."¹²³ For every *canso*, Pickens proceeded to arrange the different redactions "in an order that reflects decreasing degrees of

¹²¹ Mary B. Speer, "Old French Literature," p. 402.

¹²² Rupert T. Pickens, ed. *The Songs of Jaufré Rudel. Studies and Texts 41* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), p. 49, cited in Speer, "Old French Literature," p. 402.

¹²³ Speer, "Textual Criticism Redivivus," p. 43.

authorial authenticity, from the re-creations most directly influenced by Jaufré to those farthest removed from him.”¹²⁴ At the end, he produced seven *cansos* that survive in this convoluted manuscript tradition, in a multitext format that included up to eleven versions of a single poem. This was “an ingenious solution for a limited corpus ... judged resistant to the Lachmannian and Bédierist methods.”¹²⁵ In spite of Pickens’ ingenious approach and clever application of the concept of *mouvance*, both the concept and the manner of its application remain far from universally accepted.¹²⁶

In the course of producing reasonable critical editions, one can no longer rely merely on the unrecoverable supremacy of an author’s original work, nor can one accept all manuscript variants at face value by recourse to the elusive *mouvance* or some supposed oral tradition behind their texts. Neither manuscripts nor scribes should be viewed as sacred cows. Not every scribal error is an expression of *mouvance* for the simple reason that scribes are bound to make mistakes. Professor Speer expresses the matter eloquently:

In establishing a critical edition, the editor must consider the scribe(s), the author, and the reader. Recent trends in literary theory have enhanced the role of the scribe as interpreter and rewriter in such a way that the author is often obscured. For certain works and manuscript traditions this is a reasonable point of view, if only because the complexity of the tradition makes retrieving the authorial original an impossible task. For other works however, particularly those of masterly authors ... most surviving manuscripts must still be seen as flawed unreliable copies of a better text, now lost, rather than as valuable re-creations of a relatively unimportant archetype.¹²⁷

Ferdowsi is one such masterly author. One may not reasonably assume that some scribe or worse, a mere country yokel yodeling some “oral” yarn can even begin to approach Ferdowsi’s art, let alone be mistaken for him by a native speaker of Persian.

The Practical Problems of a Multitext Edition of the Shāhnāma:

Producing multitext editions may be practical for small texts. They are, I fear, not possible for texts like the *Shāhnāma*. First, the sheer size of this epic makes a multitext edition of it impossible. The *Shāhnāma* exists in more than 1000 massive manuscripts. Even if the required multitude

¹²⁴ Speer, “Textual Criticism Redivivus,” pp. 43–44.

¹²⁵ Speer, “Old French Literature,” p. 402.

¹²⁶ Speer, “Textual Criticism Redivivus,” p. 44.

¹²⁷ Speer, “Textual Criticism Redivivus,” p. 47.

of qualified scholars who are willing to undertake a multitext edition of it could be found, the final product will be so colossal that no publisher could afford to publish it. But let us assume that providence decides to endow our discipline with such a publisher. Even then, no scholar could afford to purchase it. Therefore the plan of producing a multitext edition of the *Shāhnāma* may be safely dismissed as mere musings of those who have no first hand experience with the practical problems of editing, or with publication of original editions. But even if in spite of all indications to the contrary, a multitext edition of the *Shāhnāma* is undertaken, one runs into other practical obstacle that concerns classical Persian orthography. A faithful reproduction of scribal spellings requires the development of such a confusing system of diacritical marks that would make the end result unintelligible. Moreover, the editor is often forced to impose his interpretation upon the scribal tradition. For instance, the words *bar* “upon, bosom, side,” *par* “feather, wings,” *tar* “wet, fresh, skillful” are spelled in exactly the same manner by scribes who use diacritical marks sparingly. The scribe of the oldest complete MS of the *Shāhnāma* is one such copyist. When multivalent readings are present it is the editor who must choose a reading that makes better sense to him. The presence of various possible readings, which often hang upon a diacritical dot or two, results from the inherent vagaries of Persian scribal practices not the variability of some “oral tradition” behind the text.¹²⁸

It is almost impossible to reproduce the exact text of any *Shāhnāma* manuscript without recourse to extensive modification and expansion of available fonts. Nor is a faithful rendition of most of its manuscripts feasible without the creation of a sophisticated set of diacritical marks especially designed to show the various spelling habits and quirks of its different scribes. How would one render into print the texts of those MSS in which the name *Sikandar*, “Alexander” is spelled with three indentations attached to the diacritical mark that distinguishes the letter “k”? How does one represent various scribal shorthand signs that show

¹²⁸ Occasionally these different readings are hotly debated. For instance see the discussion between myself and Professor Mahdav-yi Dāmghānī on the readings *par* vs. *bar* in a verse of the *Shāhnāma* in: M. Omidsalar, “A Note on the Influence of Qur’ān on Persian Poetry,” *Golestan: A Quarterly of the Council for Promotion of Persian Language and Literature in North America* 1 (1997): 95–115, and Professor Mahdavī-yi Dāmghānī’s response in the same issue, pp. 110–111, to which I responded in “*Bāz ham dar bāra-yi par gustardan*,” *Golestan* 3 (1997): 238–242. One of the foremost textual scholars of our day doubts the validity of placing too much emphasis on the “oral” errors in textual criticism. Greetham, who acknowledges that orally explained errors may creep in medieval European texts because of the habit of reading aloud during copying, also points out that “it is certainly the case that far greater number of errors can be traced through paleography (e.g., the confusion of minuscule c and t in several gothic scripts) than by an appeal to oral methods.” See Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, p. 58, and cf. p. 197 for other examples of orthographic confusion.

where certain verses were left out by mistake, or that others were adopted from collation with another manuscript? These types of scribal signs are not uncommon in many codices of the epic.¹²⁹

Direct consultation of manuscripts or manuscript facsimiles has at least two additional benefits. The first is that the ranks of those who theorize on textual criticism without direct knowledge or experience with the actual problems of editing will be thinned out. Hopefully this would reduce the number of those scholars content to "remain theorists rather than practitioners."¹³⁰ The second is that a greater number of *Shāhnāma* specialists will gain first hand knowledge of the manuscript tradition of this text; and in the course of their practical education will discover that empirical knowledge in itself might not be entirely undesirable. For instance, they may understand in the fullness of time, that "paraphrasing" Pasquali's dictum that "what is *lectio difficilior* for one period in the history of a text may be *lectio facilior* for another"¹³¹ may not be substituted for proof. Pasquali supported his contention by many examples taken from the classical texts with which he worked. Not every insight deduced from the behavior of classical European literature may be applied to an alien textual tradition like Persian. In order to show that Pasquali's dictum works in Persian one should cite an acceptable number of specific examples taken from Persian literature. Italian New Philologists like Pasquali consider the context and history of their textual traditions very carefully. In his *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo*, Pasquali insists on this point. He recommends that editors should study the history of all the witnesses in which the text is preserved, the history of the language in which the text is composed, its genre, the scriptoria where it was produced, and when possible, the cultural personality of its scribes.¹³² By contrast to Pasquali, the adherents of the Oral Formulaic Theory are willing to dismiss all of this in the name of some unverifiable "poetic oral tradition."

Practical experience in editing quickly teaches that there is no single principle adherence to which protects the editor from error. Every case is special, and must be evaluated in terms of the existing evidence and witnesses. Reliance on oral tradition as some magical panacea, or indiscriminate borrowing from the experience of alien languages and cultural traditions should not be substituted for experience. As far as classical Persian textual tradition is concerned, not a single instance to which

¹²⁹ Their existence naturally puts another logical burden on those who argue for the so-called "oral" origin of the *Shāhnāma*. Naturally if the scribes are signaling collation with, or copying from other written sources, then they are probably not at the same time working from the "oral tradition," or merely "recomposing in performance."

¹³⁰ Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, p. 4.

¹³¹ Davidson, "The text of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāma*," p.64.

¹³² Paolo Cherchi, "Italian Literature," in *Scholarly Editing*, p. 440. See also similar statements by Barbi and Contini cited in Cherchi's paper.

Pasquali's "dictum" may be applied has ever been found. This of course does not mean that the rule is wrong, only that its applicability has not been demonstrated for Persian textual tradition. Textual criticism depends, above all, on a catalogue of specific examples of orthographic and semantic changes that most careful textual scholars will do well to collect. To say that *lectio difficilior* may change to *lectio facilior* in the course of the life of a manuscript tradition is one thing; to demonstrate this claim by specific examples is another.

To sum up, in order to prove that the *Shāhnāma* is either orally derived or orally composed, one needs much more than mere faith in the Oral Formulaic Theory. Formulaic density, even if it could be shown for the *Shāhnāma*, is no longer a litmus test of orality. All classical Persian poetry, and not a little of its prose, is formulaic. Those who seek to carry the banner of orality in Persian studies should pay greater attention to pertinent cultural, historical, and textual evidence. It is their burden to demonstrate how Ferdowsi's language is "oral" by evidence from Persian culture, and not by piling up a hodge-podge of irrelevant analogies drawn from linguistically, culturally, and historically disparate societies.

Whereas originality is valued in scholarship, scholars should not try to be original even at the cost of making sense, nor should they confuse their personal opinions with empirically verifiable facts. Remarks can rarely pass for evidence—no matter how emphatically one makes them. To say that Ferdowsi is an oral poet or his meticulously crafted verse is orally derived is not right. If I may borrow from Wolfgang Pauli's wit, "it is not even wrong."