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The Reluctant Warrior: Semiotic Notes on the Story of Zāl in the *Shāhnāme*

Zāl is the embodiment of the heroic culture which shapes and determines the conduct of the Shāhnāme heroes from Manūchīhr through Rustam's death. For Zāl to attain that level of moral authority, the poem semiotically endows him with innate wisdom symbolized by his white hair at birth. By the end of the story, when he is still a relatively young man, he has gained the authority to change the ruling dynasty by choosing and crowning kings at will (e.g. his crowning of Zav and Kayqubād). Zāl's story is thus a tale of transformation that seamlessly fits into the overall narrative of the Shāhnāme. It helps the poem's narrative make the transition from the age of ancient kings in whom heroism, royal authority, and magical potency are combined, to the era of a different line of rulers who govern by royal authority alone. This process moves in two parallel lines: the transfer of the magical wisdom of the primordial kings to the person of a sage who functions as the embodiment of sagacity and prudence, and the transfer of their heroic aspect to a great warrior who serves as the country's "chief hero," its jahān pahlawān. With the exception of Kaykhusraw, whose character has very strong supernatural and religious dimensions, every important legendary king after Manūchīhr has a sage on whose advice he depends (e.g. Zav, Kayqubād and Kaykāvūs have Zāl, Gushtāsp has Jāmāsp, and Alexander has Aristotle). The king also has a warrior who holds the office of the jahān pahlawān (Kaykāvūs and Kaykhusraw have Rustam, Luhrāsp has Zarēr, and Gushtāsp has Isfandiār).

Keywords: *Shāhnāme*; Persian Literature; Zāl; Semiotic Analysis; Narrative Logic

The *Shāhnāme* has paid a penalty for being Iran's national epic—the penalty of being neglected as a literary masterpiece. With few exceptions, most western studies of the poem have been focused on its pre-Islamic or Indo-European aspects, or alternatively on its relationship—real or imaginary—to oral tradition.¹

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¹E.g. Davidson, *Poet and Hero*; Yamamoto, *The Oral Background*. Two notable exceptions are Dabashi, *The Shahnameh*; and Davis, *Epic and Sedition*.

Until recently, most Iranian studies of the *Shāhnāme* were focused on textual criticism, cultural impact, and the biography of its poet. This situation has changed of late and a stream of literary, psychological, and sociological studies of it continue to appear.² But the shadow of pre-Islamic Iran continues to fall heavily on Ferdowsi and his poem.

We believe that as a work of art, *Shāhnāme*'s remarkable aesthetic unity and narrative coherence enables it to stand on its own. It may be understood independent of its background, undeniable cultural influence, national importance, and linguistic and philological significance. Therefore, we intentionally avoid all discussion of the poem's ancient roots in pre-Islamic Iran and limit ourselves to what may be inferred about it as a literary work of art from its own text and from what we know of its immediate source in New Persian, namely, the Abū Maṣṣūrī prose *Shāhnāme* (composed in 346/957).

Ferdowsi's prose archetype was itself a highly organized work of literature.³ Although the poet rendered the text of his archetype into verse quite faithfully, he also imposed his own artistic sensibilities on the text and created a literary masterpiece that the great Arab critic, ʿZiyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (558–637/1163–1239), described in these words: "it is their Qur'ān and all Persian literati are unanimous that nothing more eloquent than it exists in their language."⁴ Because ʿZiyā' al-Dīn was a scion of a respected family of religious scholars—his brother, Majd al-Dīn (d. 606/1210) was a great scholar of *ḥadīth*—he was not one to carelessly compare the *Shāhnāme* to the holy Qur'ān.

A number of scholars since Nöldeke have suggested that some *Shāhnāme* episodes may have been grafted onto it from external sources. These episodes, they claim, are not well integrated into the poem's storyline and may be deleted without disturbing the poem's narrative.⁵ This view has been challenged in several studies that show the *Shāhnāme*'s narrative and literary logic connecting its parts to one another and creating a coherent whole. According to these studies, Ferdowsi consciously strived to achieve artistic and structural unity among all episodes of his poem and his success may be seen in the details of the episodes of Rostam and Suhrāb, the seven trials of Rostam and Isfandiyār, as well as the stories of Furūd, Bīzhan, and Manīzheh, and the demon Akvān.⁶

²Some examples of these that concern the story of Zāl and Rūdābeh are: Raḥmdil-e Sharafshāhī's "Niḡāhī Dīgar," a deconstructive study; Ṭālibīyān and Husainī's "Sākhtār-e Dāstānī," which uses a narratological approach; Joghātā'i and Anṣārī-Pūyā's Jungian and Archetypal "Taḥlīl-e Kuhan Ulḡū'i"; Kordnoghābī et al's "Bar-rasī-ye Taṭbīqī," which is a study of the story based on Monika Ardel's wisdom theory, and Toḡhyānī et al's "Nishāneh Shināsi," which is a semiotic analysis of the narrative.

³See Omidasalar, "Taṣṭīḥ va Tawẓīḥ-e 'Ibārātī."

⁴Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Mathal*, 4:12: *هو قرآن القوم و قد اجمع القوم و فصاحتهم على انه ليس في لغتهم أفصح منه*

⁵Nöldeke, *The Iranian National Epic*, 70; Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Shāhnāme-ye Firdawsī," 163.

⁶These stories are precisely those that have been presented as evidence of the *Shāhnāme*'s disjointed episodes. For a list of essays in which this view is presented see Omidasalar, "Signs of Longing," 253–4, Omidasalar, *Poetics and Politics*, chapters 8–11, Omidasalar, *Iran's Epic*, 144–52.

In our analysis of the story of Zāl, we aim to demonstrate that it too has a definite relationship to the narrative logic of the poem as a whole. But first, we will present the story in outline, with its details to be discussed later. We have included all relevant tale-type and motif numbers from Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* and Uther's *The Types of the International Folktales* in our footnotes.

The Story

A son is born to the hero Sām during the reign of king Manūchihr. The baby is perfect in every respect, except for his head of white hair.⁷ Embarrassed by his son's appearance, Sām orders the infant to be carried away and left in the mountains to die.⁸ The mythical bird Sīmurgh sees the child, takes him to her nest, and raises him as her own.⁹ When the boy has grown to a young man, Sām has several dreams that compel him to go to the mountains in order to recover his son. Sīmurgh, who knows why Sām has come to her domain, carries Zāl to his father and before leaving him with his sire, she gives him one of her feathers and tells him that if he finds the company of men unpleasant, he should light the feather and Sīmurgh will come and take him back to her nest.¹⁰ The boy is thus returned to Sām, who thanks the Sīmurgh, descends the mountain, and rides back to civilization with his son.¹¹

The news of Zāl's discovery reaches the court and the king summons Sām and his son to the capital, where he sees Zāl and is impressed by his noble appearance. He then orders his sages to foretell Zāl's destiny and they say that the young man will be a great and wise lord who will be of much service to the crown. Sām and Zāl leave the court, and shortly after their return, Manūchihr orders Sām to war. Zāl is distraught by his father's plans to leave him again, but Sām calms him, puts the wise men of his realm in charge of his son's education, and leaves.

⁷White hair per se does not have a motif number in Thompson's *Motif-Index*. The closest motifs to it are: F555.2. Silver hair, and F555. Remarkable hair. But the motif of the white-haired newborn is also seen in some of the legends of Noah's birth. See Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1:145; and Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, 151.

⁸Motifs: S147. Abandonment on mountain; S11. Cruel father.

⁹Motifs: S147.1.1. Abandonment on cliff near nest of a bird; R131. Exposed or abandoned child rescued; B535.0.7. Bird as nurse for child; B535. Animal nurse. Cf. motif B535.0.5. Abandoned prince grows up in eagle's nest.

¹⁰B501. Animal gives part of body as talisman for summoning its aid; cf. D1021. Magic feather.

¹¹All references to the text of the *Shāhnāme* are from Khaleghi-Motlagh's critical edition. The volume number is given in Roman numerals, followed by a colon, followed by the page number(s), followed by another colon, which is followed by verse number(s). When verse numbers are left out, the citation refers to the entire content of the page(s). There are a number of verses at this point in which Sām apologizes to his son and promises to grant his every wish. These verses were assigned to the critical apparatus in Khaleghi-Motlagh's earlier editions of the poem (1:173, n. 6). However, they have been adopted, albeit in brackets, in his revised edition of 1393/2014 (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1393/2014: 1:101, verses 151–4).

During Sām's absence, Zāl decides to travel through his father's realm, and in the course of his journeys meets Mihrāb, the ruler of the city of Kāvul. Mihrāb is descended from the dragon-king Zahhāk, who was a mortal enemy of the kings of Manūchīhr's line. Zāl's men tell him of the beauty of Mihrāb's daughter Rūdābeh, and Zāl falls desperately in love with her.¹² During their second meeting, Mihrāb invites Zāl to his castle but Zāl refuses the invitation on the grounds that his father and the king would disapprove. When Mihrāb returns to his castle, he speaks highly of Zāl and Rūdābeh also falls in love with him. Wishing to meet her beloved, she orders her most trusted servant-girls to go to Zāl and arrange a meeting between the two.¹³ The girls tell Zāl to come to Mihrāb's fortress in the evening and climb the walls to meet Rūdābeh.¹⁴ Zāl comes to walls, and Rūdābeh appears on the battlements and casts down her tresses, asking Zāl to use them to climb up to her.¹⁵ But Zāl politely declines and uses his lasso to ascend the walls. The lovers spend the evening feasting and embracing, but they do not lie together.¹⁶ At dawn, they vow to marry only one another, and part.¹⁷

Back at his camp, Zāl reveals his love for Rūdābeh. His companions tell him that, given the girl's descent from Zahhāk, the king will sternly oppose the marriage. They urge him to write to his father and ask him to intercede with the court on his behalf.¹⁸ When Sām receives Zāl's letter, he orders his wise men to forecast what would come of the union, and they say that a valiant hero will be born of this marriage who will be a great asset to the throne.¹⁹ Assured by his sages, Sām sets out for the court in order to personally plead his son's case. But the news has already reached

¹²T11.1. Love from mere mention or description.

¹³This might be considered a variety of the more general motif, T51. Wooing by emissary.

¹⁴T35. Lovers' rendezvous.

¹⁵This is motif F848.1. Girl's long hair as ladder into tower. Khaleghi-Motlagh has noted the similarity between this scene and an incident in the tale of Rapunzel, and has suggested that the two stories may be related (Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Yād dāsh-t-bā*, notes on verse 524 of Manūchīhr's kingship). But the existence of such superficial similarities prove nothing with respect to genetic relationship between narratives. The story of Rapunzel is a version of tale type 310 (Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*; and Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale* under type no. 310), and has no relationship with the story of Zāl at all. The mere sharing of motifs, in this case motif F484.1, does not imply a genetic relationship between the two tales. A motif is "the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition" (Thompson, *The Folktale*, 415). They are indivisible elements or details that may be common to many stories. In other words, "the same simple motif may arise independently in different places ... It is therefore possible to assemble hundreds or even thousands of instances of the same motif from all parts of the earth" (Thompson, *The Folktale*, 383). By contrast, tale types are traditional groupings of motifs that persist in tradition. Therefore, just because Rūdābeh casts her tresses down the walls and asks Zāl to climb them—which he does not—and Rapunzel also casts her hair down from the tower in which she is imprisoned and asks her lover to climb them—which he does—one may not assume any genetic relationship between the two stories. For instance, motif "S31. Cruel stepmother" occurs in tale types 403, 425, 432, 451, 480, 502, 510, 511, and many others. But these tale types are not necessarily related.

¹⁶T35.5. Lover goes to see his beloved in her husband's or her father's house, defiant of danger.

¹⁷*T61.2.1. Parting lovers pledge not to marry anyone else.

¹⁸T131.1.2. Father's consent to son's (daughter's) marriage necessary.

¹⁹M311. Prophecy: future greatness of unborn child.

Manūchihr, who preempts Sām and orders him to attack Kāvul and put Mihrāb and his entire clan to the sword. Obligated to obey the king, the old hero sets out for Kāvul.

The ominous news reaches Zāl and Mihrāb. Beside himself with anxiety, Zāl rushes to his father's camp and piteously pleads with him not to harm the house of Mihrāb. Sām is moved by his son's entreaties and writes a letter in which he tells the king that Zāl has a request that he will convey in person. He gives the letter to Zāl and sends him to the court to plead his own case directly to the crown.

By this time, Sām's forces have surrounded Kāvul. Terrified, Mihrāb unleashes his anger on Rūdābeh and threatens to kill her. But his wife Sīndukht stops her husband and convinces him to let her go to Sām and ask for mercy. Then she comes to the old warlord's camp with a wealth of gifts and pleads for pity. Sām is deeply impressed by the lady and tells her that Zāl has already gone to the court in order to secure the royal permission for his marriage with Rūdābeh. He then vows that he will have Zāl marry Rūdābeh and sends Sīndukht back with a generous grant of gifts and lands. All of this is done before he has received any word from the court about the king's permission for Zāl to marry Mihrāb's daughter.

Meanwhile, Zāl delivers his father's letter to the king, who immediately consents to the marriage and has his sages forecast the future of the union. The wise men assure Manūchihr that the son who will be born to Zāl and Rūdābeh will be a great warrior and a loyal servant of the crown. Later, Manūchihr orders his wise men to test Zāl's intelligence; they pose a series of riddles to him, which he successfully solves.²⁰ The next day, the king tests Zāl's martial abilities and Zāl impresses everyone with his prowess. He then receives permission to leave the court and rushes back to Kāvul. The lovers are married and Rūdābeh gets pregnant soon afterwards. When it is time for her to give birth, the child is too large to be delivered normally and Rūdābeh comes close to dying in childbirth. But Zāl summons the Simurgh by lighting her feather, and the great bird comes and tells Zāl to have Rūdābeh's side cut open and take the child out through the incision.²¹ They do so, and the hero Rustam is born to Zāl and Rūdābeh.

What Does It All Mean?

Great stories, be they part of high literature or folklore, are multivalent. They are layered, elaborate, and prone to multiple interpretations. These interpretations may exist side by side, and need not be mutually exclusive even if they appear contradictory. Stressing the multivalence of such interpretations, the sociologist Philip Slater (1927–2013) wrote:

which interpretation is "correct" ... is equivalent to insisting that a Spanish peasant, a tropical flower, the Hudson River, an oyster, and the fountains of the

²⁰The motives that are relevant to this scene are: H300. Tests connected with marriage, H540. Pounding of riddles, H720. Metaphorical riddles.

²¹T584.1. Birth through the mother's side.

Villa d'Este are identical because they contain H₂O. It is a point in common, yet it hardly exhausts their significance.²²

The story of Zāl and Rūdābeh is certainly multivalent. It may be treated as part of the tale of Rustam's birth according to the traditional pattern that is usually called the *Hero Pattern*, and may be analyzed in that vein.²³ But looking at it as an instance of the *Hero Pattern*, although formally useful, would not shed any light on its meaning. In other words, if the sole point of the story were the birth of the hero Rustam, then there would have been no need for such a long and elaborate narrative that details Zāl's birth, his courtship of Rūdābeh, and his efforts to secure the court's permission to marry a forbidden woman. To make the same point quantitatively, this story, from the moment when Zāl first hears Rūdābeh's name until his marriage to her is told in 1,145 lines of verse.²⁴ Compared to other episodes at the beginning of the *Shāhnāme*, this is quite a long narrative. It is longer than the stories of the rules of Kayūmart, Hūshang, Ṭahmūrat, Zahhāk, and Kayqubād combined. Even the story of Farīdūn's kingship from the time that he ascends the throne through the tale of Īraj's murder and the wars of vengeance that follow that event is told in fewer verses (1,068 lines). Moreover, the story of Zāl takes up nearly 71.5 percent of the verses that are devoted to the entire reign of Manūchīhr (1,608 verses).

Considered from another angle, this story is longer than all other narratives about the birth of heroic children in the *Shāhnāme*. For instance, the story of Suhrāb's birth and fight with his father is told in 1,014 lines (increased to 1,021 lines in Khaleghi-Motlagh's revised edition of the text).²⁵ The tale of Dārāb's birth, abandonment, and reunion with his mother takes up only 308 verses. Even the tale of Kaykhusraw, beginning with his birth in Tūrān and ending with his reunion with his grandfather and appointment as Iran's de facto ruler, is told in 874 verses. Therefore, although the story of Zāl and Rūdābeh may be legitimately considered part of Rustam's story in the context of the so-called *Hero Pattern*, that interpretation addresses only its formal aspects and leaves out its meaning in the context of the poem as a whole. One cannot disregard the fact that Zāl's story is, by any standard, quite detailed and its details *must* matter.

There is almost unanimous consensus among folklorists "that the central subject of the heroic tale—if not storytelling in general—is the process of social maturation."²⁶

²²Slater, *Glory of Hera*, xi–xii. The Swiss literary and folklore theorist, Max Lüthi (1909–91) says the same about fairytales, considering that to be "variously interpretable. One may put more stock in some interpretation than in others; still, they need not exclude one another." Lüthi, *The Fairytale as Art Form*, 11.

²³For an excellent summary and references to the literature on the *Hero Pattern* see Dundes, "The Hero Pattern"; and Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, 329–31, in which additional references to what Dundes provides are presented. For a convenient collection of important studies on the subject in one volume, see Raglan, Dundes, and Rank, *In Quest of the Hero*.

²⁴I:183:286 to I:264:1431.

²⁵Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Rustam va Suhrāb*.

²⁶Nagy, "Fenian Heroes," 162.

Taking that as our point of departure, we intend to consider Zāl's story as the allegorical narrative of the processes of feral Zāl's enculturation and reabsorption into human society. We will also consider the ways that these processes are related to the narrative logic of the *Shāhnāme* as a whole. We are interested in what the story signifies within the context of the poem as an artistic whole, and in the way that its details relate to the flow of the *Shāhnāme*'s narrative. We are concerned with how this tale works in the narrative syntax of the epic. We must, therefore, begin with its context and closely consider its place in the poem's overall narrative.

Narrative Context

The place of the story of Zāl in the *Shāhnāme* and its context are intimately related to its meaning. It occurs in the so-called "legendary" part of the epic at a transitional point when the nature of kingship is changing significantly. This is a time when sorcerer-warrior-kings are replaced by kings who lack any magical powers of their own, and also fall short of the heroic abilities of their predecessors.²⁷ In war, these new rulers primarily depend on their court heroes and especially their "chief heroes," the *jahān pahlawāns*.²⁸ They are also largely divested of their magical powers, which are transferred to a wise man or advisor in a much weaker form. The most prominent of these wise advisors is Zāl, in whom wisdom and magic coexist.

The momentous transition of sorcerer-warrior-kings to monarchs who rule by divine right alone takes place at Manūchihr's coronation. The story of Zāl's early life belongs to the reign of this transitional king. We call Manūchihr a transitional king because it is at his coronation that the process of the divestiture of the king from his magical and warrior functionalities is completed.

Although Manūchihr is halfheartedly described as a warrior and a sorcerer at the beginning of his reign, his sorcery is only alluded to in one verse: "he stopped all sorcery by his counter charms" (همه جادوی ها به افسون بیست).²⁹ There is no mention of him practicing any magic in the rest of his reign. As for his warrior functionality, it is transferred to Sām almost immediately after his ascension. In these respects, he is quite different from the kings who ruled before him.

The *Shāhnāme*'s first king, Gayōmart, is the culture-hero who introduces the idea of kingship into the poem. Gayōmart's son, Siyāmak, is the first warrior-prince who dies in battle against the forces of the Evil Spirit. Siyāmak's son, Hūshang, leads his grandfather's army of fairies and animals against the forces of evil, personally avenges

²⁷For reasons that do not concern us here, Kaykhusraw is the only clear exception. See the references in Akbari-ye Mafākhir, "Rivāyatī digar"; Soroudi, "Islamization."

²⁸We are translating *jahān pahlawān* as "chief hero" although it literally means "the hero of the world" because the person who held the office was considered the most powerful man in the world, and the chief of all other heroes of the court. It will be left untranslated in the rest of this essay. In the so-called semi-historical and historical sections, the kings regain their heroic functionality, as the adventures of Dārāb, Alexander, and several Sassanid monarchs prove.

²⁹I:161:3.

his father, and succeeds his grandfather as king.³⁰ Hūshang's son, Ṭahmūrat, who ascends the throne after his father, is also a sorcerer-king who uses both magic and martial skills in battle:

برفت اهرمن را به افسون ببست چو بر تیزرو بارگی بر نشست ...
ازیشان دو بهره به افسون ببست دگرشان به گرز گران کرد پست

He bound the Evil Spirit by magic
And rode him like as a mount ...
Of the demons, he bound two thirds by spells
And smote the rest with his heavy mace.³¹

Ṭahmūrat's son Jamshīd is perhaps the greatest of the sorcerer-kings, but his arrogance leads to his downfall. He is overthrown by the dragon-king Zahḥāk, who rules savagely for a thousand years. Zahḥāk is eventually overthrown by Farīdūn, who learns sorcery from a mysterious divine being, and is the most heroic of the poem's sorcerer-kings.³² No *jahān pahlawāns* exist to fight for the king during the mythical period. The royals do their own fighting.

Farīdūn's reign sets the stage for the transition that occurs under Manūchīhr. Unlike his predecessors who vanquished their foes and maintained their dominion primarily by magic, Farīdūn relies on his martial as well as political skills.³³ Farīdūn's warrior aspect is shown by the fact that it is he who designs and uses the terrible bull-headed mace that later serves as the main weapon of Iran's *jahān pahlawān*. The political aspect of his leadership is signified by his leadership of a demotic rebellion against the dragon-king, Zahḥāk.³⁴

But in spite of being trained by Farīdūn to use magic, Manūchīhr does not rely on it during the bloody wars that he wages on Farīdūn's behalf in his youth. He is essentially a warrior-prince who functions as Farīdūn's *jahān pahlawān* and, by Farīdūn's order, vengefully kills the king's two rebellious sons, his own great uncles. Throughout these wars, Manūchīhr is the most active warrior in Farīdūn's army. Other heroes such as Qāran, Gashwād, Shīrūy, as well as Sām and Garshāsp, are also present, and epithets such as *razm-zan* "skilled in battle," *sipah-kash* "skilled general," and *mubāriz*

³⁰I:24:55–60.

³¹I:36:27, I:37:37.

³²I:72:276–8.

³³Generally speaking, the mix of magic and manliness in the poem's early kings is uneven. Some, like Jamshīd, are greater sorcerers than others. But all, even warriors like Farīdūn and Ṭahmūrat, have considerable supernatural powers.

³⁴Although it is the smith Kāveh who starts the popular uprising against the usurper Zahḥāk, he does so in the name of Farīdūn (I: 69:226–35). And although some of the heroes of the *Shāhnāmah* trace their lineage to him, Kāveh never acts as Farīdūn's *Jahān Pahlawān*. He only functions as his propagandist and calls the public to Farīdūn's cause (I:69: 231–2).

“warrior,” *kamīnvar* “surprise attacker,” etc., are used to describe several of them.³⁵ However, none of them is referred to by the title of *jahān pahlawān*. They all fight under Manūchihr’s command.³⁶ It is Manūchihr alone who remains the central and the most active warrior throughout the wars, and although never called by that title, functions as Farīdūn’s *jahān pahlawān*.

The actual title of *jahān pahlawān* makes its first appearance during Manūchihr’s coronation ceremony. It is first applied to Sām and remains in his family until the end of the so-called legendary part of the poem. This first mention is an important event that signals the transfer of the warrior aspect of the king to the bravest and most powerful of his heroes. The scene is rife with meaning. First, Manūchihr gives a coronation speech in which he boasts of his many abilities as a warrior.³⁷ Then, Sām rises to praise the king and in his response redraws the lines that define the duties of the crown and those of the crown’s heroes:

جهان پهلوان سام بر پای خاست	چنین گفت کای خسرو داد و راست ...
زمین و زمان خاک پای تو باد	همان تخت پیروزه جای تو باد
چو شستی به شمشیر هندی زمین	به آرام بنشین و رامش گزین
ازین پس، همه نوبت ماست رزم	ترا جای، تخت است و بگماز و بزم
مرا پهلوانی نیای تو داد	دلم را خرد هوش و رای تو داد
پس از پیش تختش گرازید سام	پیش پهلوانان نهادند گام

Now rose Sām, the *jahān pahlawān*
 And spoke thus: O’ true and just king! ...
 May the whole earth and time itself be as dust under your feet
 May your place be ever the turquoise throne
 Now that you have cleansed the world by the Indian blade
 Sit at ease and feast.
 Henceforth, it is our turn to war.
 Yours are the throne, the goblet, and the feast.
 It was your ancestor [Farīdūn] who gave me chieftaincy over heroes (*pahlawānī*)
 My heart was made wise by grace of your sagacity and good judgment
 Having spoken thus, Sām haughtily left the throne-room
 With all other heroes falling into step behind him.³⁸

³⁵I:140:822, I:138:795, I:138:796 respectively.

³⁶I:132:684–6, I:136:745–6, I:138:790–96, etc.

³⁷I:161–2:5–25.

³⁸I:163–4:30, 36–40. It should be noted that in I:164:40, the word *pahlawānī* is used as a synonym for *jahān pahlawānī*. Sām’s claim that Farīdūn appointed him *jahān pahlawān* is not mentioned in the *Shāhnāme*. The appointment is, however, referred to in the *Garshāsp Nāme* (Asadī, *Garshāspnāme*, 329:19).

Sām's response to the king indicates that the days of royal heroism are over and that henceforth Manūchihr should sit on his throne and leave war to others. Sām drives his point home by leaving before the king can respond. The last word on the subject is his. He simply turns around and walks out, trailed by all of the other heroes of the court. The scene is striking in its expressive simplicity. It signifies that Sām has put the king in his place and has decreed that henceforth kings should leave combat to professionals. Robbed of his warrior aspect, the king is assigned to a life of feasting and ceremony by the man who, in a respectful coup, has assumed all of the crown's martial functions. Ferdowsi's use of the verb گرازیدن "to walk haughtily, to move like a wild boar, slowly but powerfully" is untranslatable, but it conveys the idea clearly. Interestingly enough, Sām, who now claims the title *jahān pahlawān*, personally played no significant role in Manūchihr's earlier adventures.³⁹

This situation has led to interpretations that find the introduction of Sām's wars in Māzandarān and Gurgsārān into the narrative of the poem somewhat abrupt. However, we believe that such understanding of events does not adequately appreciate the importance of Manūchihr's loss of his heroic function, and the transfer of that function to Sām. It is now Sām, not some warrior king, who is responsible for the defense of the realm and the defeat of the king's enemies. Moreover, Zāl's meeting with Rūdābeh and all that results from it can only happen in Sām's absence. The narrative logic of the poem removes Sām from the scene and sends him to war in order for everything else to happen. His absence, therefore, is not as sudden or senseless as it might seem at first glance.⁴⁰

From the time that Sām puts Manūchihr in his place in the *Shāhnāme*, kings are generally prevented from personal combat by their heroes on the grounds that it is beneath the crown's dignity to personally enter the fray. The reason is explicitly stated in various episodes. For instance, when the Tūrānian king Afrāsiyāb challenges Kaykhusraw to a duel in the episode of "The Great War" and the young king is tempted to fight him, his *jahān pahlawān*, Rustam, stops him:

بدو گفت رستم که ای شهریار به دل در مدار آتش کارزار
که ننگست بر شاه رفتن به جنگ و گرچه بود همبردش پلنگ

Rustam said, O' King!
Purge your heart from the fires of war

³⁹The most active warlord during the bloody wars that Manūchihr managed, was Qāran. Sām's name is merely mentioned as one hero among many others who fought under Manūchihr or Qāran's command (I: 132:692, 138:792, 795).

⁴⁰In his fine monograph on the *Shāhnāme*, although aware of Manūchihr's ineffectiveness as a ruler, Hansen finds Sām's campaigns in Māzandarān and Gurgsārān problematic precisely because he does not recognize the narrative importance of the hero's takeover of Manūchihr's warrior functionality. Hansen, *Das iranische Königsbuch*, 36–7, 39, 42–4.

It is a disgrace for a monarch to rush to combat
Even if his foe be a leopard.⁴¹

Later in the story, Kaykhusraw confirms the rule, responding to another invitation to hand-to-hand combat by saying:

تہمتن بہ جابست و گئو دلیر کہ پیکار جویند با نرہ شیر
اگر شاہ با شاہ جوید نبرد چرا باید این دشت پر مرد کرد؟

Rustam is present, and also the brave Giv
Who seek battle with fierce lions
If kings are to fight with kings,
Then what need is there of this host of heroes in the field?⁴²

Kings may fight only under exceptional circumstances, such as when the enemy combatant is either destined to be killed by the king personally, or is only vulnerable to the king's special powers. For instance, Kaykhusraw disregards the objections of his warriors and engages his maternal uncle Shideh in hand-to-hand combat because Shideh refuses to fight an opponent who is not of royal blood, and also because Shideh's armor is magically invulnerable to all weapons except Kaykhusraw's.⁴³

Being a transitional king, Manūchihr's rule is marked by important transitional events and personae. The story of Zāl is one such event. Like Manūchihr, Zāl, with his short tenure as Iran's *jahān pahlawān*, is a transitional hero. He cannot fully commit to serving as a real *jahān pahlawān* because his innate wisdom shrinks from the violence that is inherent to the nature of that service. However, because kings no longer fight and are at least militarily at the mercy of their *jahān pahlawāns*, the narrative logic of the poem dictates that before assuming the post, Zāl would prove himself unfailingly loyal. Zāl's loyalty is semiotically confirmed in the course of the story of his love for Rūdābeh.

Because kingship is divested of its magical and martial aspects during the transitional period, both powers are transferred to someone else. The warrior aspect, as we pointed out, is concentrated in the king's *jahān pahlawān*, and the magical aspect, watered down to wisdom, will be transferred to the crown's wise men and sages. Because the king is no longer his own champion, his *jahān pahlawān* must be unfailingly loyal if the throne is to survive. However, because the office of the *jahān pahlawān* develops before that of the royal sage and counselor, the former must briefly carry out both functions, and have the wisdom to guide the king back to the right path when he strays from it. Sām performs both functions during his tenure. But wisdom and violence

⁴¹IV:270:1555–6.

⁴²IV:271:1575–6. Even when Afrāsiyāb's men find out that their king wishes to engage in hand-to-hand combat with Kaykhusraw, they discourage him for similar reasons (IV:268:1530–35).

⁴³IV:205–6:536–52, IV:209:589–603, IV:212–13:647–55.

are poor partners. Sām's wisdom must split from him and be directed into another vessel. This vessel is Zāl, and we will discuss the process of that transfer later. But the proof for the *jahān pahlawān*'s absolute loyalty to the throne and his ability to function as a source of wise guidance to others is evident in Sām's conduct during the early years of the rule of Nawdhar, Manūchihr's successor.

Nawdhar's despotic abuse of power enrages the magnates who come to Sām and offer him the throne.⁴⁴ But fiercely loyal to the crown, the *jahān pahlawān* rejects their offer, calling it a great sin and adding that he will faithfully serve even if a woman of the line of Manūchihr were to ascend the throne.⁴⁵ He then leads Nawdhar back onto the straight path by dispensing good advice.⁴⁶ Sām's refusal to accept the crown affirms his absolute loyalty to it. But at the same time, he subverts the crown by taking over some of the powers that belonged exclusively to the kings who predated Nawdhar. In doing so, he assigns the rank of the royal counselor to himself and also subjects the king to his will. Prior to this time, except for consulting their generals during war, kings were either advised directly by God or by otherworldly counselors and priests.⁴⁷ Sām upsets this arrangement and usurps the position that previously fell outside the authority of warriors. At the same time, he establishes the groundwork for the future kings' dependence on the advice of his son Zāl, who will serve as the royal advisor par excellence through most of the legendary part of the *Shāhnāme*.

But, as we pointed out before, there is an inherent contradiction in concentrating the attributes of perfect warrior and wisest counselor in the same person. In order to resolve this contradiction, Sām's two characteristics have to decouple. That is why, following his death, his physical prowess is passed on to his grandson Rustam and his wisdom is channeled to Zāl, who keeps a tight rein on the affairs of the state and to whom king and country can turn for advice. The process, however, does not occur abruptly. The logic of the poem's narrative establishes the conditions of Zāl's takeover step by step. In order to better understand this process, we need to consider the semiotic significance of Zāl's birth, education, and marriage.

The Wild Child

Contrary to some scholars' interpretation of Zāl's white hair, he is not an albino.⁴⁸ He does not have the pink skin and other physical characteristics of true albinos. It is

⁴⁴I:287:26–33.

⁴⁵Kings may receive their legitimacy through their mothers. Farīdūn's son Īraj is killed without a male heir. Manūchihr who succeeds Farīdūn is born from Īraj's daughter, Māhāfarīd (I:125:570–81, I:139:802–4).

⁴⁶I:287–9:34–56.

⁴⁷Some of those who were divinely guided were Gayōmart I:24:43–6, Farīdūn I:82:444–7, I:84:476–80; and those who received guidance from otherworldly counselors and priests were Ṭahmūrāt I:36:20–26, Farīdūn I:72:275–80, I:113:375–6.

⁴⁸For instance, Mukhtārī, *Ustūreh-ye Zāl*, 65–6; Dabashi, *The Shāhnāme*, 30, 221. In his notes on verse 149 of the story of Manūchihr, Khaleghi-Motlagh half-heartedly suggests that Zāl's white hair may indicate that he was an albino. Some early western students of comparative folklore and literature also

only his hair that is white. His eyelashes and eyes are black: سیا‌هش مژ‌ه، دید‌ه ها قیرگون “black were his lashes, and pitch black his eyes.”⁴⁹ Zāl’s only unusual characteristic is his white hair at birth, which as a literary device indicates that he was born “old.”

In the gerontocratic culture of the *Shāhnāmah*, youth is linked with impetuosity and error. The infinitive *javānī kardan* “to act foolishly (lit. to behave youthfully),” is how Rustam describes Prince Isfandiyār’s reckless behavior when the two meet before engaging in a fight that ends in the prince’s death:

مکن شهریارا، جوانی مکن چنین بر بلا کامرانی مکن

Do not, O, Prince, act foolishly (lit. youthfully)!
Do not thus court calamity!⁵⁰

With the exception of princes like Siyāvakhsh and Kaykhusraw, whose wisdom in their youth is rooted in divine inspiration, *Shāhnāmah* considers the young to be rash and foolish. For this reason, Zāl—who serves as the personification of wisdom throughout the rest of the poem—must be born old. The text is quite explicit on this point:⁵¹

کسی سام یل را نیارست گفت که فرزندِ پیر آمد از خوب جفت

None would dare tell Sām
Whose good wife gave birth to *an old child*.

In its ordinary use, the adjective *pīr-sar* signifies “old, aged, wise.”⁵² But when used to describe the young Zāl, it has an additional signification. The color of

confused Zāl’s white hair with albinism, e.g. Krappe, “Albinos and Albinism,” 171–4; Krappe, *Science of Folklore*, 209. See also A. Shapur Shahbazi and Simone Cristoforetti’s entry “Zāl” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, where they refer to “the albino Zāl” at the end of their essay. We do not believe that the white color of his hair had anything to do with albinism, and consider it a literary device instead.

⁴⁹I:173:149. Complaining about his son’s appearance, even Sām criticizes his infant son as having black skin and white hair (I:166:64). However, that description must reflect Sām’s anger at the unusual color of the newborn’s hair and cannot be an accurate description of Zāl’s appearance. It is clear from other descriptions of the boy that he was quite handsome (I:164:47; I:165:54; I:168:89, I:173:148; cf. I:187:342).

⁵⁰V:363:846, and cf. V:362:836–7.

⁵¹I:164:50. Cf. also I:188:367–8. The idea has entered classical Persian poetry. Khāqānī (d. 595/1199) complains that because of his hard life he has “grown old in childhood like Zāl,” Khāqānī, *Dīvān*, 57:

چون زال به طفلی شده ام پیر ز احداث زانست که رد کرده احرام و احباب
And again: گرچه همچون زال ز پیری به طفلی دیده ام “though, like Zāl, I have experienced old age in infancy” *Dīvān*, 258.

⁵²E.g. I:62:117; I:133:708; I:256:1330.

Zāl's hair in infancy not only determines his name, but also anticipates his future rank as the wisest and the longest-living advisor to the crown.⁵³ Therefore, his birth may be interpreted as the birth of natural wisdom. Unlike other men, Zāl does not grow wise over time. His wisdom is innate. It is with him from birth.

A second detail in the story supports our interpretation. Traditionally, after an infant is abandoned in the wilderness, it may be nurtured by any animal.⁵⁴ But it is the Sīmurgh who cares for Sām's quintessentially wise baby and raises him as her own.⁵⁵ Thus, almost as soon as Zāl is abandoned, his inborn wisdom is wedded to the magical powers of the Sīmurgh. Zāl's connection with magic in the *Shāhnāmah* and other classical sources is rooted in this association. The *Shāhnāmah* explicitly calls him *فسونگر* "the sorcerer."⁵⁶ And he is referred to as "Zāl the sorcerer" in a verse that is attributed to Daqīqī (d. circa 365/976) and to Azraqī (d. 465/1073).⁵⁷

The conditions of Zāl's early life were rude and natural. Deprived of human care, he was fed on blood; until his father recovered him, he lived naked in the mountains

⁵³Cf. I:186:335; I:197:492.

⁵⁴Feral children who are nursed by she-wolves (motif B535.0.9), dogs (B535.0.4), cranes, crabs, serpents, and even bees (B531.1). See references under motif B535 in Thompson, *Motif-Index*.

⁵⁵Zāl's legendary wisdom has led some classical Persian poets to use him as a metaphor of intelligence, e.g. زال اندیشه and زال دانش Khāqānī, *Divān*, 896 and 430 respectively, cf. 145, but also of technical skills, *ibid.*, 774:

در ملک نیمروز شبستان تازه کرد

کیخسروی به هندسه زال سیستان

⁵⁶V:397:1239.

⁵⁷In some sources, this verse is attributed to Ferdowsi's predecessor, Daqīqī Lazard, *Les premiers poètes*, II: 155. This attribution has been adopted by Sharī'at in his collection of Daqīqī's verse, Daqīqī, *Divān*, 102, line 1152. However, both Sa'id Nafisi in his edition of Azraqī's *divan*, Azraqī-ye Hiravī, *Divān*, 20, line 501 and Rāstīpour and Khulūshī in their recent critical edition of Azraqī's *divan*, have attributed it to Azraqī, *Divān-e Azraqī*, 31:

نه رخس جادو و زال فسونگر

تو را سیمرغ و تیر گز نباید

See also Mudarris-e Razavī's revision of Qazvīnī's edition of Shams-e Qays's *al-Mu'jam*, 286 and Professor Shamīsā's more recent revised edition of the same text, 307 that also uphold its attribution to Azraqī. Poets of the later periods have also mentioned Zāl's sorcery. See Iqbāl's edition of Mu'izzī's *Divān*, 305, line 7269 and its new edition, 277, line 17:

از دستبرد رستم و زال افسون زر

وهم تو در شکستن خصمان زیادت است

Cf. the same *divan*, Iqbāl's edition 268, line 6455 and the new edition, 247 line 22:

روستم به شد چو سیمرغ اندرو مالید پر

زال کرد افسون و سیمرغ آمد از افسون او

and was even seen running around by passing caravans.⁵⁸ Living with the Sīmurgh, Zāl was not only nameless, but also lacked human language. Some manuscripts of the *Shāhnāme* include a couple of interpolated verses according to which Sīmurgh named him Dastān:

نهادم ترا نام دستان زند که با تو پدر کرد دستان و بند
بدین نام چون بازگردی ز جای بگو تات خواند یل رهنمای

I name you Dastān-e Zand
Because your father treated you treacherously
When you return from this place
Ask that wise warrior to address you by this name.⁵⁹

These verses are certainly inauthentic, but indicate that the story of the Sīmurgh naming her ward certainly existed in the Iranian traditions long before Ferdowsi. By the time our poet had finished his epic, the story had found its way into the poem's manuscript tradition, including those manuscript(s) from which al-Bundārī prepared his Arabic translation between 620/1223 and 621/1224.⁶⁰ But Al-Tha'ālībī (350–429/961–1038), who relied on the same Persian prose archetype from which Ferdowsi produced his poem, makes no mention of it and instead writes that it was Zāl's father who named him after he recovered his son from the wilderness: "Sām named his son who had returned to him from the Sīmurgh's [care], Dastān and he was [later] nicknamed Zāl-e Zarr" (ثم انّ سام سمى ابنه المسترجع من العنقاء دستان و لقب بزال زر).⁶¹ Of course, there is one verse in the scene of the Sīmurgh trying to convince Zāl to return to his father, in which the boy is referred to by the name of Dastān:

به سیمرغ بنگر که دستان چه گفت که سیرآمدستی همانا ز جفت

See what Dastān told the Sīmurgh:
It seems that you have grown tired of your companion.⁶²

But this verse is in Ferdowsi's own voice and proves nothing. It may be safely assumed that although Ferdowsi used both the names Zāl and Dastān "ruse, trickery, strata-

⁵⁸I:167:77–9, 86, I:168:88–91, I:180:236, I:206:623–5, I:228–9:956–62.

⁵⁹I:171:130 n. 4.

⁶⁰"And she had named him Dastān" (و کانت سمته دستان) al-Bundārī, *al-Shāhnāme*, 56. But it must be kept in mind that al-Bundārī sometimes summarized and occasionally introduced external material into his translation.

⁶¹Al-Tha'ālībī, *Ghurur*, 70.

⁶²I:171:134.

gem” for the boy in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, he chose not to include any of the extant stories of Zāl’s naming in his rendition of the story.

Here, we must digress a bit in order to clarify an important point about authenticity of verses and authenticity of traditions in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Any number of motifs or episodes may have existed in oral or textual traditions of Ferdowsi’s era. Some of these may have been part of the epic tradition long before the poet’s time. These may certainly be considered authentic as parts of the Iranian epic tradition. But their authenticity is no guarantee that Ferdowsi included them in his *Shāhnāmeḥ*. In other words, a motif or episode that may be authentic *within* the Iranian epic tradition may be inauthentic in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* because Ferdowsi did not versify it. Because of these items’ authenticity someone else may have versified them and may have added them to the margin of his copy of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. And they may have gradually migrated from the margin to the text and have entered the poem’s manuscript tradition that way. What determines the authenticity of individual verses or episodes in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is the application of established rules of textual criticism to the manuscripts of the poem, *not* whether those motifs or episodes authentically belong to the Iranian epic tradition. A vast number of authentic ancient narratives were left out of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* simply because they did not exist in Ferdowsi’s prose archetype or because he did not include them in his poem. We believe that the question of how Zāl was named is one such tradition and that, in his natural state, the boy was nameless.

As far as the text of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is concerned, Zāl was most often called Zāl and sometimes called Dastān without any explanation of how he got these names. A similar situation exists with regard to the name of Rustam’s horse, Rakhsh. The animal is simply called Rakhsh in the poem. Who named it Rakhsh or why it was given that name are not known. When Rustam first captures his mount from a herd of horses, he asks the herdsman who owns the colt so that he may pay for it. The herdsman responds:

خداوند این را ندانیم کس همی رخس رستمش خوانیم و بس

We know not its owner

We call it Rustam’s Rakhsh, and that’s that.⁶³

In addition to his name, Zāl’s knowledge of language has been a source of confusion and interpolation. According to the text of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Zāl lacked *human* language while living with the Simurgh. Of course, Simurgh did speak with him and convinced him to return to his father. However, the poem does not specify what language she used to communicate with her ward. This has led to an apparent

⁶³I:336:108.

contradiction in the text that some manuscripts have attempted to correct by means of a couple of interpolated verses:

اگر چند مردم ندیده بُد اوی ز سیمرغ آموخته بُد گفت و گوی
بر آواز سیمرغ گفتی سخن فراوان خرد بود و دانش کهن

Though he had never lived with humans
He had learned language from the Sīmurgh
He spoke in the language of the Sīmurgh
He was rich in wisdom and primal of knowledge.⁶⁴

Obviously, a tradition according to which Zāl and Sīmurgh communicated by language existed in the epic tradition of Ferdowsi's time. The poet, Farrukhī (d. 429/1038), who was Ferdowsi's contemporary, writes:

چو کوه البرز آن کوه کاندَر آن سیمرغ گرفت مسکن و با زال شد سخن گُستر

Like mount Alburz, that mountain where the Sīmurgh
Made her home and conversed with Zāl.⁶⁵

It appears the language that Zāl and Sīmurgh used was understood at least by some to be different from human speech. This tradition must have been prevalent until the mid-sixth/twelfth century because Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad-e Ṭūsī also refers to it:

زال سخن وی [= سام] فهم نمی کرد تا روزگار دراز برآمد و سخن آدمی بیاموخت

Zāl could not understand him [i.e. Sām] until after a long time, he learned human language.⁶⁶

In his free translation of Ferdowsi's prose archetype, al-Tha'ālibī confirms that Zāl and Sīmurgh used a different language and that Zāl did not know human language before he was reunited with his father. It was after he came into Sām's care that he learned the human tongue.⁶⁷ Later in his Arabic translation of the prose *Shāhnāmeḥ*, in the story of Rustam and Isfandiyār, al-Tha'ālibī explicitly states that Zāl, who knew the language of the Sīmurgh, had to translate her speech for his son.⁶⁸ Taken together with the *Shāhnāmeḥ* verse that shows Sīmurgh and Zāl conversing, we may

⁶⁴I:171:133 n. 9.

⁶⁵Farrukhī, *Divān*, 68, verse 1319.

⁶⁶Ṭūsī, *Ajāyib al-Makhlūqāt*, 418–19.

⁶⁷Tha'ālibī, *Ghurar*, 70 “و اخذه الى منزله و تلقى الكلام في اسرع مدّة”.

⁶⁸Ibid., 367–8: “و كان زال يعرف منطق العنقاء ... فترجم زال لرستم قولها”.

surmise that Zāl and Sīmurgh did have a distinct language of their own, and that Zāl acquired *human* language after coming into his father's care.

But as an artist, Ferdowsi is not interested in the nature of Zāl's language and treats the issue as a literary device. A master of his art form, he suggests, alludes, and implies, leaving it to his reader to discover his meaning. He uses Zāl's unfamiliarity with human language as a means of communicating something important about the process of the boy's enculturation. Ferdowsi wants to depict Zāl as naked and mute in the wilderness to create a contrast between Zāl's life before and after entering human society.

Riding on Sīmurgh's back, Zāl comes to his father a savage. He is depicted as a wild boy, uncouth and nude, with his disheveled hair flowing down to his waist. Zāl's enculturation begins as soon as he lands, when Sām covers his nakedness with a simple cloak. Later, when they reach his camp at the foot of the mountain, he orders Zāl to be dressed in princely attire and has a horse brought for him to ride back to town. By these acts, Sām transforms the naked and uncivilized Zāl into a finely attired prince:

رسیده به زیر برش موی سر ...	ز پروازش آورد پیش پدر
بپوشید وز کوه بگذاشت پای	تنش را یکی پهلوانی قباى
همان جامهء خسروارای خواست	فرود آمد از کوه و بالای خواست

Flying, Sīmurgh brought him to his father
 With his hair reaching down to his waist ...
 Sām draped a lordly cloak over his body
 And they descended the berg
 Once descended, he called for a mount
 And also, for princely robes.⁶⁹

The clothing of Zāl happens in steps: first a simple robe, and later princely attire. Clothed for the first time in his life, and changing mounts from the Sīmurgh to a horse, the son of Sām crosses from nature into culture.

Without worrying much about what language Zāl knew in the wild, Ferdowsi exploits the idea of language as a means of communicating Zāl's passage from nature to culture in the same way that he contrasts his nakedness with his enrobing and his riding the Sīmurgh with his riding a horse. When he first comes in contact with his father, Zāl is speechless and remains absolutely silent in his first visit to the court in Sām's company.⁷⁰ Ferdowsi skillfully conveys the boy's silence by his description of the visit.

When the two of them arrive at the court, Zāl is presented to the king and his magnates. The scene is quite revealing in its deceptive simplicity. Sām tells the

⁶⁹I:172:144, I:173:151-2.

⁷⁰I:174:163.

king about Zāl's birth, his abandonment, and Sīmurgh's nurturing of the boy.⁷¹ Throughout the whole visit, Zāl himself remains completely silent. He neither speaks nor is spoken to. He stands there mute, an object of curiosity. Ferdowsi creates a contrast between Zāl's passive silence in this scene with the eloquence of Zāl's own son Rustam later in the story, during his first meeting with his grandfather Sām. The poet makes full use of the contrast between the two young boys—the mute Zāl and the eloquent Rustam—and makes one scene evoke the other in the mind of his reader.

When Rustam is eight years of age, Sām comes to visit his grandson for the first time.⁷² Clad in heroic regalia and riding an elephant, Rustam is brought to welcome his grandfather:

یکی آفرین کرد سام دلیر	که تهما، هزبرا، بزی شاد و دیر
ببوسید رستمش تخت ای شگفت	نیا را یکی نو ستایش گرفت
که ای پهلوان جهان شاد باش	چو شاخ تو ام من، تو بنیاد باش
یکی بنده ام، نامور سام را	نشایم خور و خواب و آرام را
همه پشت زین خواهم و درع و خود	همه تیر ناوک فرستم درود
به چهر تو ماند همی چهره ام	چنان چون تو باشد مگر زهره ام
وزان پس فرود آمد از پیل مست	سپهدار بگرفت دستش بدست
همی بر سرو چشم او داد بوس	فروماند بر جای پیلان و کوس
به گورابه اندر نهادند روی	همه راه شادان و با گفت و گوی

The brave Sām called down a blessing upon him, saying:
Live long and happily, O' brave lion!
Lo, Rustam rose and [knelt to] kiss the throne,
And saluted anon his grandsire:
Rejoice O' greatest warrior in the world!
I am your offshoot, be you my root.
I am a servant of the renowned Sām,
Not one for feasting, dozing, nor for rest,
I seek saddle, mail, and helm
I convey my greetings by arrows
I resemble you in appearance,
May my gall be also like yours
He then dismounted the war-elephant
The warlord took his hand in his
And covered his head and eyes with kisses
They left behind the tymbals and elephants

⁷¹I:175–6: 174–84.

⁷²I:270:1518.

And moved toward Gūrābeh
 Conversing and cheerful all the way.⁷³

Rigorously trained in courtly culture, Rostam can express that culture in deeds and courteous words. But raised in the wilderness, Zāl can neither speak nor show any of the common courtesies owed to the crown. By not allowing Zāl to speak in his first visit to the court, Ferdowsi sets up the scene for another contrast that he will create later: the distinction between the silent Zāl of his first visit to the king and the eloquent Zāl of his second visit.

When he rejoins human society, Zāl is pure potential. However, endowed with the natural wisdom that his white hair represents, his mental abilities are as superhuman as are the physical abilities of his father and his son. The intellectual nature of Zāl's powers is repeatedly signaled throughout the story. Although he is told to gather knights (*savārān*) and sages (*mardān-e dānīsh-pīzūh*) around him to learn from them, no mention is ever made of Zāl's training in martial arts.⁷⁴ The goal of Zāl's training is different from that of the other young heroes who are usually assigned to an older warrior to teach them the arts of war and lordly conduct. We are told that he is schooled in astrology, theology, and in statecraft.⁷⁵ His training is designed to make a wise man out of him, not a warrior. Even when his father leaves for Māzandarān, Zāl follows along for two stages in order to learn how to lead an army, which implies an interest in learning about leadership and logistics rather than actual fighting.⁷⁶ Be that as it may, Zāl is enculturated very quickly, and, thanks to his innate intellect, soon surpasses all of his father's sages in learning.⁷⁷ The next important event in his life, namely, his efforts to secure the necessary permissions to marry Rūdābeh, is the test of his successful enculturation.

Love as a Civilizing Force

Descended from Zahhāk, the memory of whose tyrannical rule continues to linger, Rūdābeh is a forbidden woman and Sām and the king are understandably apprehensive about Zāl's wish to marry her.⁷⁸ It is against this background that Zāl's love for Rūdābeh and his overcoming of all opposition to their union must be considered. But let us backtrack a little and look at the events that preceded their affair.

Zāl's encounter with Rūdābeh's father, Mihrāb, sets the whole thing in motion. Their first meeting is replete with semiotically significant detail. Mihrāb visits the young man in his camp and the two are duly impressed by one another. But later, when Mihrāb invites Zāl to his castle, Zāl refuses the invitation, even though it pre-

⁷³I:272–3:1539–46.

⁷⁴I:180:247, cf. I:181:260.

⁷⁵I:181:256–63.

⁷⁶I:181:253.

⁷⁷I:179–81.

⁷⁸I:204:593–4, I:208:655–60, I:221:841–50.

sents him with the perfect opportunity to see the woman whom he desperately loves. He states the reason for his rejection of Mihrāb's invitation: namely, that the king and his father would disapprove of the visit. Zāl's refusal seems somewhat abrupt and even rude. But viewed in the context of his newly adopted culture and the poem's narrative logic, there are good reasons for it. Through his refusal, Zāl demonstrates a profound awareness of the cultural and political contexts of his actions and affirms his loyalty to the values of his newly adopted society. More importantly, he demonstrates his mastery of his instinctive impulses. The invitation may be interpreted as Zāl's rite of passage, and his rejection of it as his successful passing of that rite. For a youth who was running around naked in the wilderness a short time earlier, Zāl displays remarkable self-control. He explicitly justifies his actions on the grounds that the visit would be politically and religiously inappropriate.⁷⁹

It may be objected that since Zāl does secretly visit Rūdābeh at Mihrāb's castle later, he may not be all that concerned about the political implications of his actions. But this objection neglects the fact that Zāl's nocturnal visit is a private affair, which is entirely different from an official visit by the son of the realm's foremost magnate to the castle of a descendant of the crown's deadliest enemy. Zāl realizes that, as Sām's son and representative, his actions have political significations.⁸⁰ Therefore, while a public acceptance of Mihrāb's invitation would be awash in political implications, his secret visit with Rūdābeh would have none.

Zāl's mastery of his instinctive urges, that is, the proof of his civility, is signified when he finally meets Rūdābeh. The lovers spend the night feasting together, but he does not ravish the girl and treats her with love and respect. Compared with the behavior of his own son Rustam, who lies with a damsel who pays him a nocturnal visit when he is a guest at the castle of the girl's father, or with Bizhan's actions during his affair with Princess Manīzheh, and even with the behavior of the magnates who fight over a lone maiden whom they find in the forest, Zāl displays considerable civility and self-control.⁸¹

In his essay on Zāl and Rūdābeh, the poet Naderpour (1929–2000) wrote: "I believe that love cannot be merely a forgetting of the self for the sake of someone else. It is rather a remembering of the self, thanks to [love for] someone else."⁸²

⁷⁹I:185:307–9.

⁸⁰I:179–81:233–6, 256–8.

⁸¹See I:200:540, II:122–4, III:319–21, II:203–5. There is reason to believe that Zāl was sexually experienced by this time because, when his companions praise Mihrāb after he leaves Zāl's camp, the text explicitly mentions that both his male companions as well as the women of his harem lavished praise upon his departing guest (I:185:317):

همان کز پس پرده بودش نهان مر او را ستودند یک یک مهان
All of the nobles praised him [i.e., Mihrāb]
And also, those who were in his harem.

⁸²Naderpour, *Ishqi beh bulandī-ye parvāz-e simurgh*, 458. Cf. Jastrow and Clay, *An Old Babylonian Version*, 19–20.

Falling in love with Rūdābeh helps Zāl to remember who he is in spite of the uncouth circumstances of his early life. Love helps him regain his humanity. His respectful treatment of Rūdābeh signifies his recovery of the world that was stolen from him at birth. Every element of this story serves to confirm something about Zāl's personality while accentuating the narrative logic of the *Shāhnāme* as a whole.

Zāl's fierce loyalty to the throne is demonstrated by his way of obtaining permission to marry the woman he loves. Following his first meeting with Rūdābeh, he gathers his wise men and shrewdly prepares them for the shocking news that they are about to receive. He first argues that marriage and procreation are ordained by God.⁸³ And then informs them of his love for Rūdābeh and asks if they can predict how his father and the king would react to his wish to marry her.⁸⁴ Knowing Rūdābeh's heritage, the sages are stunned and speechless. But Zāl draws them to his side by the promise of riches, and they advise that he should persuade Sām to intercede on his behalf because the king is not likely to deny his *jahān pahlawān* anything.⁸⁵ Zāl follows their advice and writes to his father to ask for his help.

In his letter to Sām, Zāl cunningly manipulates his father. He opens the letter by lavishing praise on Sām and lauding him as *nishānanda-yi shāh bar takht-i zarr* "he who places kings upon their thrones."⁸⁶ He thus implies that the king is too beholden to the old warlord to deny him any request. But he also adds that regardless of what Sām decides, he will not disobey his father's will.⁸⁷ He then plays on the old man's guilt, and reminds him of how he mistreated his infant son, and how he publicly pledged to make up for his cruelty to Zāl by never denying him anything in the future. Zāl then goes on to say that surely Sām is not one to break his promise (*zi paymān nagardad sipahbud pidar*), and ends with: "this is what my heart desires now" (*kunū andar īn ast basteh dilam*).⁸⁸ Zāl's strategy works and Sām decides to personally plead his son's case at the court.

The logic of Zāl's story is reinforced at every turn by the narrative strategy of dropping a hint in one scene in order to evoke a different scene and push the story toward its expected end. For instance, when Sām travels to the court to plead his son's case, Manūchihr, who had already heard of the affair and had decided to forbid the marriage, receives Sām respectfully and asks him about his campaigns. In response, Sām narrates a detailed account of his deeds during the wars in Māzandarān and Gurg-sārān. Sām's exhaustive description may appear digressive, but it is not. The subtext of his report relates to his son's forbidden love and his own wish to obtain the king's permission for Zāl's marriage to Rūdābeh.

Sām tells the king that he killed an enemy warlord during his campaigns who was the grandson of Salm and descended from Zahhāk on his mother's side. Because Salm

⁸³I:202:3:559–83.

⁸⁴I:203:588–9.

⁸⁵I:204:593–600, I:205:607–10.

⁸⁶I:205:619.

⁸⁷I:207:636.

⁸⁸I:207:639–42. Both Manūchihr and Sām have said publicly that Zāl should be treated kindly and should never again be mistreated (I:175:179–81, I:179:221–32).

was the king's great uncle, Sām's mention of his descent evokes Manūchihr's own experience in his bloody wars against Salm, and implies that descent is not the only criteria of loyalty since the enemy whom he recently fought was descended on one side from the king's own line, and on his mother's side, from Zahhāk.⁸⁹ Manūchihr understands what his old warlord is implying and is embarrassed by the unjust nature of his decision to forbid Zāl's marriage to Rūdābeh. That is why instead of ordering Sām to kill Mihrāb and his family directly during their meeting, he waits until the next day and sends his son to convey his orders to his *jahān pahlawān*. Manūchihr certainly preempts Sām, but he does so embarrassed and unable to look the old man in the eye. But Sām has his orders, and, fiercely loyal, he sets out for Mihrāb's territory.

Zāl hears the news, and beside himself with worry, rushes to his father's camp. Sām's chieftains come to the young man to say that his father is upset by his actions and they advise him to correct his ways. But Zāl responds that he is willing to reason with his father, and adds a comment that most scholars have incorrectly understood and translated.

Zāl says that he anticipates no problems if his father decides to be reasonable. But if Sām mistreats him, then he will publicly shame the old man:

پدر گر به مغز اندر آرد خرد همانا سخن بر سخن نگذرد
نگر تا گشاید زبان را به خشم من از شرمش آب اندر آرم به چشم

If my father would be reasonable

There will be no need for altercation (همانا سخن بر سخن نگذرد)

[And] if not (نه گر = نگر), as soon as he speak to me angrily

I will make him cry in shame.⁹⁰

The form نگر is merely an orthographic rendition of two words: نه گر (*na + gar*). This type of orthographic contraction abounds in Persian manuscript tradition. In other words, the spelling نگر should not be confused with نگر, which is the imperative form of the verb “نگردن.” Furthermore, the hemistich, من از شرمش آب اندر آرم به چشم, which has been translated by most scholars as “I shall be , I will be ashamed and cry,” means exactly the opposite of how it has been translated. We take the verse to refer to what Zāl intends to do to Sām: “I will make his eyes to be filled with tears for shame.” The suffix ش in شرمش refers to Sām, who is the

⁸⁹I:224:890–91.

⁹⁰I:228:945–6. Professor Khaleghi-Motlagh has taken this verse to mean “I will cry, embarrassed by him.” *Yaddāshthā*, I:1:275, notes on verse 946. Similarly, Davis renders the verse as: “If my father is wise, he won't bandy words with me, and if he speaks angrily to me, I will be ashamed and weep.” Davis, *The Shahnameh*, 89–90. Both scholars understand that, on the one hand, Zāl is combative and says that his father had better not speak angrily to him. On the other hand, he says that if he does, Zāl himself will cry for shame. The inconsistency in this understanding of the verse is clear.

indirect object of the verb اندرآوردن . Therefore, the verse is a convoluted form of the sentence:

من از شرم او را آب (اشک) به چشم خواهم آورد

I will make tears of shame fill his eyes.

In our understanding of the verse, the subject is Zāl, the direct object is اشک , and the indirect object is Sām. Zāl is telling his father's men that if Sām speaks to him angrily, he will embarrass the old man to tears. He knows that he can do this because Sām had publicly promised never to hurt his son again; if he does, he will have gone back on his word, which would be a cause for shame. As far as we know, only the Warners, and more recently, Professor Ahmad Sadri, have rendered the verse into English correctly. Sadri has translated it as: "Then let him not start a quarrel if he is a man of reason. Let him not speak to me in anger or I will shame him into tears."⁹¹ And the Warners as: "My sire if sane will not unsay his words, / And if at first, he speaketh angrily / Will after weep for shame."⁹² Zāl is saying that he plans to hold his father to his vows and if the old man hurts him by opposing his marriage to Rūdābeh or by attacking her family, he intends to shame him to tears for breaking his promises. But in spite of all this, there is a point beyond which Zāl will not go. Having thoroughly absorbed the values of his father's aristocratic culture, no matter how Sām reacts to his entreaties, Zāl offers no resistance beyond objecting that Sām is breaking his promise to him and proclaiming that he would rather die than see Rūdābeh or her family hurt.⁹³

Like Manūchihr before him, Zāl preempts Sām. He burdens the old warrior with guilt by reminding him of the terrible way that he treated his infant son (I:228–9:949–65).⁹⁴ Then, before Sām can respond, he adds:

یکی یار چون مهتر کاولی	هنر هست و مردی و تیغ یلی
ابا رای و با داد و تاج سران	ابا گنج و با تخت و گرز گران
نگه داشتم راه و پیمان تو	نشستم به کاول به فرمان تو
درختی که کشتی به بار آیمت	که چون کینه جویی بکار آیمت
، هم از گرگساران بدین تاختی،	ز مازندران هدیه این ساختی
چنین داد خواهی همی داد من؟	که ویران کنی خان آباد من؟
تن بنده خشم ترا داده ام	من اینک به پیش تو استاده ام
ز کاول میبماید با من سخن	به ارّه میانم به دو نیم کن

⁹¹Sadri, *Shahnameh*, 120.

⁹²Warners, *The Shāhnāma*, I:293.

⁹³I: 227:929–30.

⁹⁴I:228–9:949–65.

I have skill, valor, and the blade of the brave
And an ally in the lord of Kāvul.
Possessed of wealth, of chieftaincy, and a heavy mace
Possessed of good counsel, justice, and crown of lordship.
I stayed at Kāvul by your command
Faithful to your will and ways.
So that if you make war, I may aid you
And like a tree that you planted; I may bear fruit for you.
Is this the gift that you bring me from Māzandarān?
Is this why you rushed hither from Gurgsārān?
To bring ruin to my thriving home?
Is this how you make it up to me?
I stand before you now
Exposing my meek self to your wrath
Saw me in two if you must
But contend not with me about Kāvul.⁹⁵

Zāl stresses his intent to observe all boundaries of proper conduct. He reminds his father that although Mihrāb and his considerable means are at his disposal, and although he can resist, he keeps to his duty of fidelity toward his sire and will not defy Sām. Thus, Zāl contrasts his own fidelity with his father's faithlessness, highlighting his honorable conduct as superior to Sām's, especially if he breaks his promise to his son. The significant outcome of this exchange is that Sām understands that his son is no longer the silent boy whom he once took to the court but an eloquent and wise man who is perfectly able to plead his own case. That is why he decides to send Zāl to the court with a letter in which he only suggests that the king should do what he sees fit:

چنان رفت پیمان که بشنید شاه	ز بس رنج کو دید بر بی گناه
چن آمد بنزدیک تخت بلند،	گسی کردمش با دلی مستمند
ترا خود نیاموخت باید خرد	همان کن که با مهتری درخورد

Because of the many pains that he innocently suffered
I promised him what the king has surely heard
I send him now with his heart afflicted
When he comes to your lofty throne
Do that which befits your nobility
None need teach you wisdom.⁹⁶

⁹⁵I:229:966–73.

⁹⁶I:235:1052–4.

As we pointed out before, Ferdowsi contrasts Zāl's two visits to Manūchihr's court. The silence of Zāl's first visit is contrasted with his dazzling mastery of language and his clever solving of riddles that the king's sages posed to him. During his first audience, Zāl remained completely silent because he lacked both language and culture. The king and his courtiers spoke about and around him, but never to him. The new and wise Zāl of the second visit evokes the mute boy of the first to create a meaningful whole from the contrasting images. But there is much else that differentiates the two events. To understand them better, we must also compare what Sām writes to Manūchihr in the letter that he has sent with Zāl, detailing his verbal account of his wars in Māzandarān that he related to the king during his first unsuccessful attempt at obtaining royal permission for Zāl and Rūdābeh's marriage.⁹⁷

In his letter, Sām gives a detailed account of his slaying of a dangerous dragon, evoking his earlier verbal report of his fight with a descendant of the dragon-king, Zahhāk.⁹⁸ Putting aside the introductory and other irrelevant material (fourteen verses) Sām's account of his dragon-slaying (thirty-eight verses) takes up most of his letter.⁹⁹ Sām's detailed description of his fight with the dragon is meant to put Manūchihr's mind at ease and assure him that Mihrāb's descent from the dragon-king is of no importance because Zāl comes from a family of dragon-slayers. This implication is supported by the fact that Garshāsp, who was Sām's great uncle,¹⁰⁰ was also a dragon-slayer.¹⁰¹

By mentioning in the letter his mistreatment of Zāl and his promise to his son, Sām implies that he plans to honor his promise to the boy and expects the king to go along with his decision. That is why during his meeting with Mihrāb's wife, Sīndukht, Sām acts as though Manūchihr has already consented to the union of Zāl and Rūdābeh. Sīndukht visits Sām's camp to plead for mercy, in spite of the fact that Sām has received no official word about the king's decision; when he realizes that Sīndukht is Rūdābeh's mother, he consents to the union and promises Sīndukht that he will harm neither her nor her family.¹⁰² He then asks the lady to let him see that "dragon's child" who has so enchanted his son.¹⁰³ Sām and Sīndukht part amiably with the old hero bestowing a great wealth of gifts upon the lady and sending her back with an escort of his own men.¹⁰⁴ Given the fact that Sām is

⁹⁷Compare I:231–5:982–1055 and I:223–5:880–913.

⁹⁸I:224:890–91.

⁹⁹I:231–5.

¹⁰⁰Although Garshāsp and Sām are considered to be the same person in some early sources, e.g. Al-Bīrūnī, *Āthār al-Bāqīya*, 104, in others, they were considered to be two different people. In these, Garshāsp was Sām's great uncle. See Asadī, *Garshāspnāme*, 328, 432.

¹⁰¹The stories of Garshāsp's dragon-slaying were prevalent in Ferdowsi's time and written accounts of different versions of them existed in literary form. See Asadī, *Garshāspnāme*, 59–61, 165. See also Khatibī, "Garshāsp," 402, 404, 407.

¹⁰²I:238–41:1080–39.

¹⁰³I:243:1158.

¹⁰⁴I:244:1173–9.

still under orders to kill Mihrāb and his entire clan, his conduct is a clear case of disobedience to the crown.

Sām's disregarding of Manūchihr's orders about massacring the house of Mihrāb, his consent to the marriage of Zāl and Rūdābeh *before* receiving the king's consent, and his willingness to visit Mihrāb's castle reminds readers of Zāl's earlier rejection of Mihrāb's invitation.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to his son's refusal to visit Mihrāb's castle, Sām practically invites himself by asking Sīndukht to show him that "dragon's child" (I:243:1158):

یکی روی آن بچہء اژدها مرا نیز بنمای و بستان بها

Show that dragon's child
To me and take the price.¹⁰⁶

The contrast in the behavior of Sām and Zāl is all the more noticeable because when Zāl met Mihrāb he had no orders to deal with Mihrāb one way or another. By contrast, Sām had come to Kāvul with specific orders to kill Mihrāb and his entire family. Sām's casual disregard of the royal decree is contrasted with Zāl's strict observation of political proprieties. Thus, Zāl's rejection of Mihrāb's invitation earlier in the story, a rejection that appeared callous and even rude at first, is tightly connected to the progression of events in the story by means of the scene of his father's encounter with Sīndukht. It establishes Zāl's conduct as politically and culturally more appropriate than Sām's and highlights the younger man's successful enculturation.

Riddles of Time

After Zāl delivers his father's letter to Manūchihr and obtains a royal decree that allows him to wed Rūdābeh, the king orders his sages to test Zāl's knowledge and intelligence.¹⁰⁷ The sages pose a series of riddles about time, astrology, and philosophy to Zāl, and he successfully decodes all of their enigmatic questions. Zāl spends the night at the palace, and is quite anxious to leave in the morning. But the king tells him to be patient and orders him to demonstrate his martial skills to the assembly. Zāl does so, and the king gives him a letter addressed to Sām in which he has granted his permission for marriage to take place, and Zāl returns to his father. It is only after Zāl's mental abilities are tested that the king asks him to

¹⁰⁵I:185:308–9.

¹⁰⁶I:243:1158. Sām is referring to the custom of the groom's family giving a gift to the family of the bride when she is first seen by them. This is called رونما in Persian. See Katirā'i, *Az Khisht tā Khisht*, 195–6.

¹⁰⁷I:245:1190–94.

demonstrate his skills as a warrior. The order of these tests betrays their relative importance. Rather than first testing the martial abilities of the man who is destined to succeed his most important warlord, Manūchihr has Zāl's intelligence examined first. It is as though Zāl's intellectual abilities are more important to the crown than are his abilities as a warrior. The testing of Zāl's intellect is narrated in fifty-eight verses.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, the section that deals with his martial skills is disposed of in nineteen lines (I:254–5:1290–309).¹⁰⁹

No other hero in the *Shāhnāme* is ever tested in this manner. Warriors are always tested for their martial abilities because those abilities matter most. One expects that because Zāl is destined to succeed Sām as the country's *jahān pahlawān*, his skills in war should take precedence over his mental talents. The order and details of Zāl's examination at the court signify that in contrast to Sām, who is the embodiment of physical power, Zāl is an intellectual and moral force embodying innate wisdom. As such, his intellectual talents are more important than his physical abilities. For that reason, they are tested first. His heroic abilities, as his life-story in the rest of the poem prove, are inconsequential.¹¹⁰ In fact, following Sām's death, it is not really Zāl who succeeds his father as the *jahān pahlawān*, but Zāl's son, Rustam. Zāl merely functions as a caretaker hero whose short tenure in the office is quite unsuccessful. Compared his father and his son, Zāl fails miserably as the country's *jahān pahlawān*.

¹⁰⁸I:247–53:1217–75. The motifs that are related to this scene are: H300. "Tests connected with marriage"; H540. "Propounding of riddles"; H720. "Metaphorical riddles." The following questions are posed to Zāl: (1) What are the twelve tall cypresses each of which has thirty branches the number of which never changes among the Persians? (The answer is the Solar calendar and the relevant motifs are: H721. "Riddle of the year"; H721.3. Riddle: twelve cypresses with thirty boughs each; cf. H721.1. Riddle: tree with twelve branches, each with thirty leaves, black and white). (2) What are the two swift horses, one black and one white, that shall never catch up with one another no matter how swiftly they gallop? (Night and day. Cf. motifs H722. Riddle of the day and night; H722.2. Riddle: black and white horses chasing each other). (3) What are the thirty horsemen who ride in front of their king; one appears to be missing, but when they are counted again, their number will be thirty? (Days of the month). (4) What are the two tall cypresses grown in the middle of a turbulent sea and the bird that nests upon them. When it flies away from one, the tree withers and when it lands on the other, it blooms fragrantly? (Firmament and the stations of the sun in heaven. Cf. motifs H725.1. Riddle: bird nests on top of one cypress in the morning, on top of another in evening. (5) What is the meaning of a lush field to which comes a man bearing a scythe and mows down everything tirelessly? (Humans and death). (6) What is the meaning of a people who lived in a city upon the mountain and who descend onto a thorned and thistled field where they establish their city and society. Suddenly an earthquake wipes out their town and they remember their old residence? (The descent of human souls from the spiritual to the material world, death, and their longing to return to their original home).

¹⁰⁹I:254–5:1290–309.

¹¹⁰Zāl's heroic exploits are very briefly mentioned in the *Shāhnāme*. They are later channeled into his son Rustam, who in appearance and heroism is a more faithful rendition of his grandfather Sām (I:269:1496–7, I:271:1520, I:272:1544), and is therefore better equipped to succeed him.

The Hesitant Hero

One must exert an almost heroic effort to apply the title of *jahān pahlawān* to Zāl with a clear conscience. Although quite unfit for the office, Zāl succeeds his father as Iran's *jahān pahlawān*, and holds the office for a short time during which he performs quite poorly. At best, Zāl may be thought of as a caretaker, who fills the post for less than twelve years between the long tenures of Sām (120 years) and Rustam (180 years).¹¹¹ His brief time in the office is especially striking because he lived longer than Sām and Rustam combined. In fact, there is no mention of his death in the *Shāhnāmeh* at all. He succeeds the poem's grand old soldier, and at the end, to quote another old soldier, simply fades away.¹¹² Soldiering is neither the point, nor the purpose of his long life—a fact that a mere glance at his career as the country's chief warrior proves.

Zāl inherited the office of the *jahān pahlawān* after Sām's death, in the middle of Nawdhar's reign. At the time, Iran was under attack and the king was forced to personally lead an army against the Tūrānian invaders.¹¹³ Although the Iranians were outnumbered four to one, Zāl stayed out of the foray.¹¹⁴ His excuse was that he was busy burying his father.¹¹⁵ Emboldened with Zāl's absence, the Tūrānians defeat the Iranians, and even capture the king.¹¹⁶ Zāl's failures in this instance are especially damning because Sām had already declared at Manūchihr's coronation that kings should leave warfare to warriors and that the person of the king should no longer be exposed to dangers of battle.¹¹⁷ True to his words, Sām did not allow Manūchihr to fight and personally led the king's forces to Māzandarān and Gurgsārān. By contrast, Zāl left Nawdhar to go to war, deprived of his *jahān pahlawān*'s help. In a real sense, the king's capture and execution by the Tūrānians were the direct results of Zāl's absence. This absence is especially damning because Prince Afrāsiyāb, who led the Tūrānian forces at the time, was acting as Tūrān's *jahān pahlawān*.

¹¹¹Rustam and Zāl withdrew from the court after Kaykhusraw appointed Luhrāsp as his successor. However, Rustam remained the nation's *jahān pahlawān* through Luhrāsp's reign of 120 years (V:7:48–9; V:13:144). But because of his voluntary retirement, we have not included these years as part of his service in the office. If we were to include them, Rustam would have held the office more than 400 years.

¹¹²Zāl's death is only mentioned in extra *Shāhnāmeh* sources. The *Mujmal al-Tawārikh wa al-Qiṣaṣ*, 92, quotes a verse from the *Bahman Nāmeh*, according to which Zāl died during the reign of Bahman:

به هنگام بهمن بشورید حال برون شد ز گیتی جهان‌دیده زال

However, this verse does not exist in the surviving *Bahman Nāmeh*, and must have either been lost from the book's manuscript tradition, or must be from a different *Bahman Nāmeh* that has not come down to us.

¹¹³I:293–4; I:113–25.

¹¹⁴I:294:130–32.

¹¹⁵I:294:127, I:295:137, I:309:360.

¹¹⁶I:294:125–, 135–6, I:295:137, I:306:319–23.

¹¹⁷I:163:37.

wān.¹¹⁸ In other words, although the Tūrānians were fighting under the command of their own *jahān pahlawān*, the Iranians were deprived of theirs. The Iranians' lack of a *jahān pahlawān* in these wars had another significant outcome.

In the *Shāhnāmah*, the *jahān pahlawān* is not only the protector of the throne, but also the guarantor of order among the warriors' ranks. After Manūchihr's death, the nobles grow rebellious because of the unjust conduct of his successor. But Sām quickly imposes order and stabilizes the political situation in spite of the fact that the dissatisfied magnates had offered him the crown.¹¹⁹ Without Sām's swift management, Manūchihr's son Nawdhar could not have continued to rule. By contrast, under Zāl, the disarray in the ranks of the nobility is left unchecked. When the tide of battle turns against Iranians, military discipline completely disintegrates; despite the royal command to stand their ground, the Iranian warriors abandon the king and leave him to be captured and eventually killed by the enemy.¹²⁰ Such chaos would have been unthinkable under Sām, and never happened under Rustam.

Following Nawdhar's murder, the Tūrānian Afrāsiyāb sits upon the Iranian throne.¹²¹ But even the takeover of the country's throne does not stir Zāl to action. He remains away from the foray until the slain king's sons come to him and plead for his help. This finally stirs Zāl to action, albeit insipidly. Rather than personally commanding a counter-attack against an enemy who has killed the king and taken over the throne, he asks for a volunteer to lead the assault.¹²² This reaction is typical of him as a warrior. Throughout his long life, Zāl rarely rides out to rout an enemy as his father Sām and son Rustam did time and again. Generally, he prefers to tend to the administrative side of things. For instance, after Nawdhar is slain, Zāl is primarily concerned with the political problems of choosing the right successor rather than with avenging the king's murder.¹²³

We pointed out that Zāl's excuse for staying out of the wars of Nawdhar's tumultuous reign is that he is busy with his father's burial. Although hardly acceptable as an excuse, his explanation does have an important signification: Zāl is not only burying his father, he is also burying his responsibilities and duties as the holder of the office of the *jahān pahlawān*. Endowed with innate wisdom, Zāl lacks that brutal and mindless frenzy that a *jahān pahlawān* must be able to summon. Consequently, after Sām's death, Zāl buries the office, and it stays dormant until his son Rustam comes of age and assumes it as it should be assumed. But let us backtrack a bit and consider the reaction of the Iranians to Zāl's conduct of the office.

Following Nawdhar's murder, Zāl's ineffective performance as the *jahān pahlawān* continues through the reign of Nawdhar's octogenarian successor, Zav. Zāl launches a

¹¹⁸I:290:70.

¹¹⁹I:285–9.

¹²⁰I:303–5:281–305, I:304:294–6, I:314–15:428–37.

¹²¹I:316:453.

¹²²I:317:454–75, I:320:520–12.

¹²³I:322–3:546–59. The only exception is when his own fiefdom of Zābulistān is attacked. Only then, he is forced to ride out and take part in a small skirmish that ends in his killing of two minor Tūrānian warriors (I: 312:399–415).

feeble attempt to avenge Nawdhar, but it ends in a fragile peace treaty and he returns home.¹²⁴ After a few years, Zav dies of old age and the Tūrānians renew their attacks. This time, the Iranian warriors, who have had quite enough of Zāl's ineptitude, come to him and:

که گیتی بس آسان گرفتی به مشّت	بگفتند با زال چندی درشت
نبودیم یک روز روشن روان	پس از سام، تا تو شدی پهلوان
که شد آفتاب از جهان ناپدید	سپاهی ز جیحون بدین سو کشید
که آمد سپهد به تنگی فراز	اگر چاره داری مر این را، بساز

They addressed Zāl harshly, saying
 You manage the world too laxly!
 After Sām, since you became *pahlawān*,
 We have not had a day of ease.
 A great host has crossed hither over the Oxus
 That has covered the sun by its dust
 If you have a remedy, apply it now
 For the foe looms near.¹²⁵

Zāl's response reveals his attitude toward being the *jahān pahlawān*. After a pathetic defense of his indefensible record, he claims that he has grown too old to serve effectively, but adds that his son Rostam is ready to take over his duties:

نتابم همی خنجر کاوی	کنون چنبری گشت پشت یلی
نماندم جهان بی جهان پهلوان	من ار بازماندم ز تاب و توان
برویر برآزد کلاه مهی	کنون گشت رستم چو سرو سهی

Now my manly back is bent
 I wield no more the Kāvulī blade.
 Yet, though I am hindered of action
 I do not leave the world without a *jahān pahlawān*
 Now Rostam has grown tall as a cypress
 And the helm of lordship befits him.¹²⁶

Zāl's excuse that his old age prevents him from discharging his duties deserves closer examination because he could not possibly be as old as he claims.

Zāl was born toward the end of Manūchīhr's reign.¹²⁷ He spent his early life with the Sīmurgh, and was probably in his early teens when he left the Sīmurgh to join his

¹²⁴I:327-8:6-17.

¹²⁵I:331-2:52-5.

¹²⁶I:332:61-3.

¹²⁷I:164:43, I:169:111, cf. I:231:992-3, I:234:1038-41.

father. When he came into Sām's care, he was young enough to be called *kūdak*, "child" or *javān* "youth."¹²⁸ He met Rūdābeh shortly afterwards when he was still quite young.¹²⁹ When he pleaded with his father not to attack Kāvul, he is referred to as *bachcha-yi narra shīr* "the lion's cub."¹³⁰ Zāl and Rūdābeh get married shortly after Zāl returns from the court, and Rustam is born quite soon after their marriage. Finally, when Sām comes to their home to visit his grandson, Rustam is only eight years of age.¹³¹ Assuming that Zāl married Rūdābeh in his mid-twenties and had Rustam shortly afterward, by the time he succeeds his father in the middle of Nawdhar's reign, he must have been in his mid-thirties at most. He continues to serve through the five years of Zav's rule, which means that the entire duration of his service as the *jahān pahlawān* was less than twelve years. Therefore, at the time when he was whining about his old age, he must have been in his late thirties or early forties.

Zāl's claim of being too old seems absurd in chronological terms, but it does make sense as a literary device. Born already old with his white head of hair, it is his wisdom that is the essence of his character and the point of his being is not his martial prowess. This fact is obvious to everyone, even to his son Rustam, who when boasting to Isfandiyār, brags about his grandfather Sām's bravery and his own valor, but only mentions Zāl's wisdom, knowledge, and prudence.¹³² As far as Rustam is concerned, his father's distinguishing characteristics are wisdom and virtue, not heroism. Viewed in this light, Zāl's claim that he is too old to discharge the duties of his office is not as odd as it might initially appear. Zāl is not old because he has lived a long time; he is old because he was born old.

Let us conclude by pointing out that, like every other episode in the *Shāhnāmah*, the story of Zāl is logically connected to what happens before and after it. It is a part of a unified literary whole and reinforces the narrative logic of that whole. The way it is integral to the literary structure of the poem's overall narrative is as follows. Manūchihr's reign in the *Shāhnāmah* is a time of transition that stands between the end of the era of the kings in whom the qualities of the perfect warrior, the sage, the sorcerer, and the perfect ruler were fused, and a time when kingship was stripped of its magical and heroic aspects. The early kings could temper the enormous force of their heroic violence by their wisdom and their divine inspiration. That is why Farīdūn can stop himself from slaying the defeated Zahhāk when an angel tells him not to kill the monster.¹³³

Beginning with Manūchihr, the magical powers and wisdom of the kings are transferred to and are concentrated in some sage or wise man who is associated with the crown. Zāl is the first manifestation of this transfer. The reason he cannot discharge

¹²⁸I:168:88–9, I:170:125, I:172:147, I:178:216; cf. I:180:237.

¹²⁹I:198:509, I:203:580.

¹³⁰I:227:933, cf. I:245:1188, I:253:1287.

¹³¹I:265:1432, I:270:1518.

¹³²V:346: 649–50, I:347:665–8.

¹³³I:82:444–9, I:84:475–79.

his duties as a *jahān pahlawān* is that, unlike his father and his son, he is not designed for the job. Zāl's innate wisdom recoils at the thought of the violence that the *jahān pahlawān* is often prone to commit.

Manūchihr's reign also marks the beginning of a second transfer, namely the transfer of the warrior aspects of kingship to the *jahān pahlawāns*. This transition takes place at the coronation of Manūchihr, when violence and war are put almost completely into the hands of the crown's *jahān pahlawān*. The transfer not only deprives the king of his warrior aspect, but also deprives the potential victims of war from the mercy and pity that the ancient kings could show to the vanquished. The personification of the ancient kings' martial and heroic aspects, namely the *jahān pahlawān*, is not given to care or compassion. Brimming with the warrior's pride, and lacking the divine wisdom of ancient kings, he is unable to control the vast reservoir of rage inherent to his enormous physical force.

The *jahān pahlawān*'s bloodlust may surface quite suddenly, and when it does, neither reason nor pity can control it.¹³⁴ An instance of this may be seen in Rustam's behavior during the wars of vengeance that follow Syāvakhsh's murder. Tūrān has already been subdued, and Rustam is peacefully ruling there. A number of Iranian warriors go hunting and take along a native Tūrānian guide. The poor Tūrānian makes the mistake of pointing to a meadow where Syāvakhsh used to hunt; this rouses the dormant wrath of the warriors who had come to Tūrān to avenge the prince. They first cut the poor fellow to ribbons, and then go to Rustam and reawaken his vengeful anger. The hero unleashes his wrath upon innocent Tūrānian civilians, and a vast number of men, women, and children are put to the sword.¹³⁵ During another outburst of heroic rage, Prince Isfandiār, who serves as his father's *jahān pahlawān*, orders the slaughter of the surrendered forces of a slain enemy ruler. He does not stop there, and has an entire region set ablaze and its inhabitants massacred.¹³⁶ Even Isfandiār's father, Gushtāsp, who is hardly a paragon of virtue, recoils from his son's senseless violence and cruelty.¹³⁷ None of the ancient kings who were endowed with heroic wisdom ever committed this kind of senseless violence because their great physical power was tempered by divinely inspired prudence.

Throughout *Shāhnāme*, Zāl and other sages operate as a counterweight of wisdom and prudence to the unchecked physicality and brutishness of the *jahān pahlawān*. In the story of Rustam's fight with Isfandiār, Zāl advises his son to either surrender to the invulnerable prince or withdraw to some secluded area where he can avoid the fight.¹³⁸ When Rustam refuses on the grounds that his heroic honor

¹³⁴Examples of this uncontrollable heroic rage are also found in the Middle Persian story of Garshāsp who attacks the god of fire (Williams, *Pahlavi*, Pt. II, 39–43). In other heroic traditions, one may point to the Irish hero Cúchulainn, who, when angered, went through a severe physical deformation called "Cúchulainn's war-rage" or "war-spasm" that monstrously distorted his appearance, Kinsella, *The Táin*, 131, 152–3.

¹³⁵II:408–9:366–90.

¹³⁶V:279–81:729–47.

¹³⁷V:283–4:775–84.

¹³⁸V:372:960–61 and V:372:954–5.

does not allow him to do so and claims that he can treat the prince gently during battle, Zāl shakes his head and ridicules his son's simplemindedness.¹³⁹ Similarly, when Isfandi-yār's sage brother, Pishawtan, advises him against fighting Rustam, the hero rejects his brother's advice and engages Rustam in a fight that ends badly for both of them.¹⁴⁰ We believe that the story of Zāl semiotically signifies the process of the transfer of ancient kings' warrior aspects to the *jahān pahlawān* and their magical wisdom to the sage. This story helps achieve the transfer smoothly and without creating a rift in the logical unity of the epic's narrative flow.

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¹³⁹V:374–5:985–7, 992.

¹⁴⁰V:368–9:907–14.

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